Traditionalist and Salafis Method of Argument in the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’ah School Of Thought in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Islamic faith involves beliefs, emotions, practices and behavior. The Islamic creed is more than emotions because it involves certain confidence of reward and punishment in the hereafter. It is also becoming the backbone of Islam. Clinging to the Islamic faith means to maintain the belief system about the concept of God, which is very virtuous and straight. Talking about the divinity that is pure and lawful in order to understand Islam from the sectarian context cannot run away from discussing the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’ah. This approach is prevalent in the Muslim world since the early days of Islam. The two approaches which are dominant now within the group of Ahlus Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah in Malaysia are the Traditionalist and the Salafis groups. Both groups are representing the Asyairah and the Salafis. Yet, both of these sects sometimes are at loggerhead when it comes to strengthening and extending their influence in Malaysia. Based on that, the paper seeks to analyze the method of argument from both groups. The paper highlighted its findings based on the methodology and arguments and based on a deductive and inductive argument in the Ahlus Sunnah Wal-Jama’ah school of thought in Malaysia. The methodology used in the study is qualitative with emphasis on content analysis. The data were also collected through interviews. The findings show that the difference in the methods of the two groups is small. The argument methods of both groups are based on deductive and inductive methodology of logic. Traditionalists used a deductive method, while Salafis utilized an inductive method. This study presents a way of understanding the methods of both parties in an effort to avoid the blaming of both parties against each other.

Keywords: Islamic faith, Ahlus Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, the Traditionalist movement, Salafi movement, and Malay ethnic.

Introduction

Islamic faith or Islamic creed is a virtue that is really significant to the Muslim’s society because it can provide various effects either to an individual or to the Muslim community. The effects on individual faith are like positive emotions, good practices and conduct. (Shukri, 2011). In fact, the impact of the Islamic faith also involves a belief system over rewards and punishments from the God. In addition, the belief in Allah also gives a great impact on the Muslim community for their unity and brotherhood. This is because the Islamic faith will bring unity to the same believers, and of course, in the context of Islam, the faith of Islam can unite the Muslims who believe in one God. However, the differences of faith also
can trigger hostility, misunderstanding and conflict. Many conflicts are caused by differences in terms of faith. In fact, the conflict also occurs within the religious believers due to differences in approach and understanding the content of such religion. However, many other factors are also contributing to the conflict in the society nowadays. It is such as an economic, social and oppression factors. For Muslims, faith is considered very important. The most popular group in Islam is the Ahlus Sunnah sects. This popular sect is practiced by most of the Muslims all over the world and has become a great contribution to the unity and harmony of the Muslims society over the years.

**Definition of Islamic Faith**

The faith in Islam is a belief about God and associated with Him (Shukri, 2011). In other words, the Islamic faith is a belief in God and everything that connected with God, the Prophet and the unseen beliefs which are based on the teachings of the Quran and al-Sunnah. The faith of Ahlus Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah refers to an approach to understand the faith of Islam and Islam is a comprehensive, balanced religion and based on the source of revelation given by God to the Prophet Muhammad to all humanity (Shukri, 2011). Meanwhile, al-Mahdali (1993) named the Ahlus Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah as those who follow the school of the Salaf al-Salih’s thought, adhering to the Quran and the traditions.

**The Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’a’ah School of Thought in Malaysia**

There are two main divisions that claim to represent the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’ah school of thought which both of them are on many occasions have debated this concept and seems to go against each other. In Malaysia, both of them are so dominant in representing ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah. They are called the Traditionalist and the Salafis groups. These groups seem to represent previous sects in Islamic schools of thought, which both of them claimed that their teaching is based on the Quran and al-Sunnah (Abdul Fatah, 2003). The Traditionalists are representing the Al-Ash’ari (260H/873M-324H/935M) and al-Maturidi (870H/1465M-944H/1537M) schools of thought. While the Salafis movement represents the Salafis schools of thought. The first group is still influential in Malaysia nowadays and has resided in the most states of Malaysia. It was established in the Malay world since the 15th century. While the second sect of Sunni is growing up in Malaysia and resided in Perlis, despite not having a strong influence before in the Malay Archipelago. The Salafis movement began to influence in Malaysia since the Saudi government has adopted the Muhammad Abdul Wahhab school of thought. Then, after several centuries it started to encroach into Muslim minds in Malaysia through the educational system and modern technologies. In Malaysia, some opponents of this group name them as Wahhabism.

The differences approach of interpreting Islamic theology between both parties often drags them in criticizing each other. The discussion of attribution of God is the most significant aspect that creates criticism from both sides. Analyzing the conflicts that exist in both parties, the composition of this paper is performed to study the rules and procedures that cause the differences of opinion, especially in Malaysia. In addition, this paper will also outline the results of the study related to the difference of thought from both groups. Later on, this paper will describe briefly a methodology in shaping the standards for setting the underlying conflict between the two groups. With that, it is hoped that any concerned parties can benefit from this study in evaluating the status of both groups in Malaysia.
The History of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah in the Malay Archipelago

The Islamic faith has entered the Malay archipelago which basically is the Ahlul Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah school of thought and became the most influential stake in the Malay world. The Islamic scholars from Arab, Yaman, and India have brought this doctrine to the Malay world. Since then, this trend has grown up to become dominant in understanding the religious beliefs in this region (Shukri, 2011). The Islamic traditional schools in the Malay Peninsula, such as Pondok, Pesantren, and Dayah have adopted the doctrine of Ashairah wa al-Maturidiyyah.

Since the 15th century AD, the books of Islamic faith in the Malay world were written in Malay words using the Asyaairah and Maturidiyyah school of thought (Abdul Rahman, 1998). The study was also known as studying the “twenty attributes of God” which combines the basics of logic and arguments of the Quran and Hadith and become a catalyst for the integrity of the faith in the Malay World (Shukri, 2011). This position was considered the most authentic approaches because Muslim scholars in Malay world need to convince non-believers about Islam. So that, they have used various arguments and been set properly by using the logic argument and an intellectual curiosity approaches (Abu Bakr Hanafiyah, tt).

The melting Pot of the Tradionalist in the Malay Archipelago

Makkah and Madinah are often called the Haramayn (two lands of the Haram). Both are very important places for the development of Muslim intellectuals and their development of scholarship, especially since the 15th century AD. The Mecca becomes the direction for the Muslims during prayer and also for pilgrimage. While Medina also has a great relationship with Islam too. It is a place of Islam in the early stage of development and a place where the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w was buried. The treaties of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, al-Hijaj al-Mubayanah: Al-Makkah Tafdil Bayna wa al-Medina (1985) has described the advantages of the two holy places in detail. It is very significant to mention here that the Haramayn becomes the intellectual center and melting pot of the Islamic world, where scholars, Sufism, philosophers, poets, businessmen and Muslim historians have met together and used to exchange information and knowledge (Azyumardi, 1994).

Due to the position of Mecca and Medina, which is so important to the Muslims, almost all Muslims intended to visit them, especially for the pilgrimage. These situations also happened in the Malays archipelago, where many of them come to the Mecca and Madina for pilgrimage since the 16th century AD. It is becoming more active when the political and trade relations between Indonesia and the Middle East reached the peak (Azyumardi, 1994). Malay pilgrims began to flock to the pilgrimage to Mecca, which in the 17th century and most significantly in the last quarter of the 19th century (Gulick 1987; Sharifah Zaleha, 1985). While the main actor that were responsible for bringing the Malay pilgrims to the Holy Land of Mecca in the 19th century or around the year 1860 to 1909 was the British, the British in Malaya and the Ottoman Empire (McDonell, 1986).

Through this pilgrimage occasion, the relationship between Malay scholars and the other scholars in Haramayn became intact and very close. Some of them after performing the pilgrimage, do not go back to their homeland, but stayed in Haramayn for study. Then, for several years afterward they became scholars and some of them stayed in Mecca to become the teacher in Haramayn. While some others return to their hometown in the Malay peninsula in order to establish educational institutions of traditional that was called "Pondok". Since
then, the prevailing scientific relations happened between the Malay world with Haramayn. The impact of scientific relations between the Malay world with Haramayn is strong, so that any change of Islamic thought in Southeast Asia, including Malaya is associated with scientific tradition in Haramayn. CS Hurgronje, who lived in Mecca for six months told that there is a relationship in terms of ideas and thoughts among pilgrims from Southeast Asia with a population of Makkah (Horgronje, 1931).

Based on this relationship, new idealism about Islam has sparked in Southeast Asia (Horgronje, 1931). Hurgronje, when he was in Makkah, quoted the words of a scholar that comes from Lampong, North Sumatra as follows “The Pan-Islamic movement was not without influence on our Sheikh and all Lampong in Mekka was touched by the same hope” (Horgronje, 1985: 70). This situation was also indicated by McDonell and Hasan saying that the ideological and intellectual of Makkah has flowed into Southeast Asia through writings, fatwas, Hajj, Sufi orders and ideas of scholars who become teachers in Makkah (McDonell, 1986; Hasan, 1999). The school of thought that has prevailed in Haramayn is the Ashairah and Maturidiyah’s group.

**Traveling for knowledge of the Haramayn Institutions to the Al-Azhar Institutions**

In the 20th century AD, the Haramayn role became a melting pot of Islamic education and has been taken over by the al-Azhar institution. Earlier, in the 19th century, it was the center of producing traditional ulama for the Malay world. The Haramayn also became the catalyst of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah which was based on the Ash’arites and Maturidiyyah schools of thought. However, when there is a trend of transitions among students of Muslims world who migrate from Haramayn to al-Azhar in Egypt in the early 20th century, al-Azhar became the new student center and then took over the role of Haramyn until the late 20th century all over the Muslim world. Since then, the notion of belief in Islamic faith no longer bounded by the Asyairah and Maturidiyah school of thought, but started to open to the various opinions and views from the other schools of thought, including Ibn Taymiyyah school of thought.

Indeed, the intellectual relations between the Malay students at al-Azhar has happened since the 18th century. In fact, in the 19th century up to the beginning of the 20th century, the Malay ulama who were educated from al-Azhar had traveled to Haramayn to become teachers. For example, Djan Tayeb, a graduate student of al-Azhar in 1924 and had moved from Al-Azhar to Mecca, where he was appointed as a teacher in Masjid al-Haram. In Makkah, he also taught at Madrasah al-Makkiyyah Indonesia, which has been operating for forty years (Abaza, 1993). Azyumardi says that the century before the rise of Islamic modernism, al-Azhar and Haramayn became the same intellectual characteristics of the Muslim scholars which bring the schools of thought of “Neo-Sufism” by focusing on the religious sciences in accordance with the traditional perspective (Azyumardi, 1999).

The most important angle of the relationship between the Malay world and both Haramayn and al-Azhar is the relationship of the idea of the Islamic faith. The studies at Haramayn is using a collaborative approach among jurists and Sufi orders. Through this approach, the scholars have merged the practices of Sufism and the practices of Islamic law. This approach is called as a neo-Sufism in accord to the al-Ghazali school of thought.

Among the scholars of Neo-Sufism in the Malay world is Abd al-Samad al-Palimbangi, Muhammad al-Banjari, and Muhammad Daud Abd Allah al-Fatani. They were claimed to be founders of Neo-Sufism according to al-Ghazali school of thought in the
archipelago (Azyumardi, 1994). In other words, the idea of belief in Islamic thought that dominates the Malay world and was developed at an early stage is Asyairah and Maturidiyyah the school of thought in the area of Ahlus Sunnah Wa Jamaahir.

Sheikh Daud b. Abd Allah al-Fatani was among the most famous traditional ulama who wrote the Jawi literature in many fields and represented the Sunnis school of thought. Among the highly valued books written by him in the field of jurisprudence is *Furu’ al-Masa’il and Bughyat al-Tullab*. In all of his work in jurisprudence or theology, he emphasized the idea of Ahl Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah. This idea, according to him must be referred to the Ashairah and al-Maturidiyyah school of thought and it was explained well in his treatise, namely *Jawahir al-Sunniyah*. According to al-Fatani those who reject the sect of Ahl al-Sunnah wa Jama’a’ah is considered as a religious innovation and misguided (Wan Mohd. Sagheer, 1990). Apart from his work there are other scholar who wrote many books in many fields of Islamic literature and were widely read by the Malay traditional scholars. Among them is Sheikh Muhammad b. Ismail b. Muhammad Zayn al-Fatani who wrote the book named *Matla’ul Badrayn wa al-Majmu’a-Bahrayn*, (completed in 1303 H / 1886 AD). Like al-Fatani, works of Shaykh Muhammad b. Ismail also stressed Asyairah’s thought.

In the 20th century, within the Malay-Muslim community in the Malay peninsula there were two schools of thought in Sunnis movement and popularly been called the Traditionalist and the reformist. Researchers in the historical development of Islam about Malaya like Roff (1985), Thomas (1973), Yegar (1979) named the two groups as a traditionalist and reformist group. At times, they named this traditional as the older group and the second as the young group. Rolf, in this case, mentions this group as follows; “To be youth came to mean espousal of modernism in any form; to be the old was to be in favor of all that was traditional, unchanging and secure” (Roff, 1985: 123) The group of Traditionalist is continuing to establish in many states in Malaysia until now and call themselves as Sunni group by following the Ashairah and Maturidiyyah school of thought.

**Salafis Movement in Malaysia**

By the 21st century, the reformist or Salafis movements started to dominate the Muslims thought in Malaysia. The Salafist doctrine can be summered up as taking “a fundamentalist approach to Islam, emulating the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers – al-salaf al-Salih, the ‘pious forefathers’. They expect to reject religious innovation or bid’ah, and support the implementation of sharia (Islamic law). This movement is associated with the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah which were developed in Arabia in the first half of the 18th century and it advocated a return to the traditions of the “devout ancestors” (the salaf). Some scholars define this movement as Modernist Salafism. This group is associated with a movement that act to prioritize Quran and hadith rather than logic and put the al-Quran and al-Sunnah than logic as well (Abdul Fatah, 2003). The method of their study is also different with the traditional group. They are currently associated with the movement of Wahhabism that came from Saudi Arabia, but Salafis consider the term "Wahhabi" to be derogatory. The Salafi movement opposes any practice that is considered a form of idolatry and considered it as heresy, such as worshiping of the grave, *tawassul* or using intermediaries in supplication to Allah and ask for help from the dead and the practice. They also refuse to recognize any practice of Sufis movement. The nickname given to them is a Wahhabi, which is said to be attributed to the followers of Muhammad Abdul Wahhab (1201H-1787M).
Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) was the one who supports the idea of Ibn Taymiyyah in the matter of faith. Abdul Wahhab has developed this movement in two dimensions, the first dimension is to purify the faith than anything that is considered heresy and invented polytheism. The second dimension focuses on efforts to solve the socio-political problem in the Arab community (Hilole, Mohamed Hersi, 2012). The religious dimension of faith involves holding three principles of unity, the oneness of Allah in Tauhid Rububiyyah, Tauhid Uluhiyyah, and Tauhid Asma wa al-sifat. Through the social-political dimension, Muhammad Abdul Wahhab gave political power to Muhammad Ibn Saud to propel the purpose of purifying the faith founded on the principles of monotheism. In Malaysia, the Salafis movement was declared formally to be the official religion of the state of isPerlis, a state that is situated in the northern Peninsular of Malaysia. However, the followers of this movement are also increasing in number all over Malaysia.

The debate over some of the issues regarding Islamic teaching has continued in the Muslim mind. However, the group's name has changed. Most of the movement toward Salafi’s school of thought names themselves as the Salafis. While the second group names themselves as the Traditionalist. Among the issues that have been debated are related to divine aspects, heretical practices, tawassul (use of a way to arrive favor of Allah), Sufism, morals and innovations. However, the divine issues are the most dominant aspect of the discussion. Most Traditionalist supporters are comprised of religious groups from the traditional Islamic education system. They call themselves the supporters of the Asyairah wa al-Maturidiyah, the back benches of Sunni group, Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’ah or (ASWAJA). While the Salafis groups are also composed of young supporters of Sunni-Salafi, who serve as preachers and most of them have been educated in Saudi Arabia and Republic of Jordan. The group named themselves as the Salafis movement.

The Divine Issue

The divine issue is the core aspect of the difference between two groups of the Ahlus Sunnah Wal-Jamaah. However, both of them have the same fundamental beliefs about God. First; both parties acknowledge that Allah is the creator of all creatures and possesses the substance and nature of worthiness for him. They believe that all the attributes of God are perfect and infinite. While the Qur'an and al-Hadith explain the traits of perfection. Second; the two sects admit that God is totally different from the beings. In other words, there is no equality of God with the same beings.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper was based on a qualitative approach with an emphasis on content analysis. The data was also collected through interviews in detail on a small group of respondents which is based on sampling method aims. In addition, it also uses some other instruments such as unstructured interviews and observation. Brain storming as well as formal and informal medium, method of "Triangulation" is fully utilized to improve the reliability of the study.
Findings

Based on the overall fundamentals of the ASWJ methodology, there are similarities and differences between the Traditionalists and the Salafis groups. The similarities and differences are presented in the form of mapping matrices in the diagram below. The diagram below shows there are 11 basic ASWJ methodologies. (Figure 1) There are only a few differences in both groups in the aspect of Sufi practice and divine aspects. This difference does not come to the level of infidelity. Traditionalist strives to explain the attributes of God in allegorical interpretation (Ta’wil) in order to avoid indescribable mistake and blunder about the attributes of God and the similarities with His creatures. While Salafis takes the approach of glorifying Allah by giving up and setting the true meaning of the verses about the nature of Allah (mutasyabihat) to Allah

Figure 1
Basic Mapping of ASWJ Methodologies and Differences Methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mapping Matric of Methodology ASWJ</th>
<th>ASWJ (Tradisionalist)</th>
<th>ASWJ (Salafis)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritize Al-Quran dan Al-Sunah</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting al-Quran with al-Quran</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting al-Quran with al-Hadis or al-Sunnah</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the opinions and words from al-sahabat and al-tabi’in</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ijma’ ulama</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritizes the Arabic rules and the use of its own “uslub”.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the al-Quran on the meaning or intentional meaning which can not be transferred to another but with proof.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To familiarize the (sacred) al-Tanzih and al-Taqdis with the interpretation of his verses, showing the likeness and equality of Allah with the attributes of the beings</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become familiar with Isbat’s opinion of the verses which reveal it, showing the likeness and equality of God with the attributes of the creature</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul purification is through the concept of akhlaq</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul cleaning is through the concept of akhlaq and tasawuf</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deductive argument of traditionalist versus Inductive Argument of Salafis
Deductive argument, also deductive logic, is the process of reasoning from one or more statements (premises) to reach a logically certain conclusion (Sternberg, R. J., 2009). It differs from inductive argument. Inductive argument (as opposed to deductive reasoning) is reasoning in which the premises are viewed as supplying strong evidence for the truth of the conclusion (Copi, I. M.; Cohen, C.; Flage, D. E., 2007). If we examine the method of argument used by both parties, the Traditionalist and Salafis, we determined that both groups use their argument based on either deductive or inductive reasoning. The Traditionalist groups that support Ashairah and Maturidiyah emphasize deductive methods which are based on logical philosophical argument. The use of the science of law or the law of reason becomes the core argument of this trend. In other words, the use of the method is more on the logical premise. The traditionalist started from the premise of logic, which begin from the esoteric or metaphorical interpretation (ta'wil) in order to align with the text which is on the bottom. (See figure 1). Any verse or text of the Qur'an and Hadith regarding the attribute of Allah that can cause misunderstanding about the nature of Allah and the beings must be aligned with the premise of reason. To put it in other words, the use of reason must be preceded by the deductive method of logical philosophy.

On the other hand, the second group has used the inductive methods in reinforcing the concept of divinity. The inductive argument determines that the nature of God is stated in the Qur'an and al-Hadith and it is strong. This method is based on the premise of the message of authenticity, reliability and strong evidence, especially from the Qur'an and al-Sunnah. The inductive method actually was used by Imam Malik (d. 179) whenever he was asked about "how did Allah make istiwa' on the throne". Imam Malik has used reliability of the Quranic statement about the attribute of Allah in order to support his argument. Imam Malik replied, "Istiwa' is not unknown (ghayru majhul), the modality of it, is inconceivable in the mind, but belief in it is obligatory, and inquiring about it is a heretical innovation. (Anas Burhanudin, Retrieved January 2018) (https://muslim.or.id/56-sifat-istiwa-allah-di-atas-arsy.html). So that, the method of argument used by Iman Malik was relying on the reliability of evidence.

Both of these sources are really the strongest authorities that must be believed by all Muslims. Clearly, the nasal texts are inductive arguments concluded to achieve the truth. Hence, the use of logic is no longer considered valid in understanding the nature of God. These groups may be considered using the top-down method (see Figure 1). They accept the text of the prophecies about the nature of God without any description of logic or reason. They used logic arguments just for strengthening the idea of the text. The model below illustrates the position of both groups and the method used.
Towards a Model of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah in Malaysia

Based on the data that was collected through some literatures, interviews and observation, it can be summed up the differences between both groups is a matter of misunderstanding about using the method of argumentation. There are two main sources used by both parties, namely the logic and the text argument. Those who follow the logic school utilize metaphorical interpretation, while the other group leave problematic texts interpreted, believing that the reality of their meaning should be left to the one who told them, implying their unknowability. Both of these sources are important and acknowledged by each of them. The traditionalist uses the Jawi books in aqidah, which is more on logical argument. Their influence is more on the student of the traditional Islamic institution. While the pro-tajdid groups are mostly using the textbook and more influence in the Islamic School and the higher learning institution. Both are considered as the Ahl Sunnah Wal Jamaah groups, even both sides used to denounce each other. The model below shows the differences and the similarities of both groups.( see figure 2)
Conclusion

There are two main divisions that claim to represent the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah schools of thought which both of them are on many occasions have debated and seems to be against each other. In the 20th century, within the Malay-Muslim community in the Malay peninsula there were two schools of thought in Sunnís movement and popularly have been called the Traditionalist and the reformist. Today, these groups are called the Traditionalist and the Salafis groups. It is admitted that the Traditionalist and Salafis groups are representing the Sunnah Wal Jamaah group. Both groups have never rejected the nature of God and claim that God resembles a creature in the totality. The differences between these two groups are only the corners of the method of submitting. In many cases, they have equality of characteristics and criteria as the Sunnah Wal Jamaah.

References


Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti


