

## The Method of Studying the 20 Attributes of Aqidah and Its Impact on Social Harmony in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Among the *Ilahiyyat* debates found in Islamic aqidah is one regarding the attributes of Allah s.w.t. Previous scholars had compiled a methodology for studying the 20 Attributes of Aqidah based on *naqli* (revealed) and *aqli* (conventional) knowledge to make it easier for the community to identify and appreciate Allah s.w.t. The breakdown of Allah s.w.t.'s attributes includes the *nafsiah*, *salbiah*, *ma'ani*, and *ma'nawiyah* attributes. The 20 Attributes of Aqidah has become the venerable and authoritative *manhaj* of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* scholars in Malaysia. This method is also taught to the community through various approaches to identify the obligatory (*wajib*), impossible (*mustahil*) and permissible (*mubah* or *harus*) attributes of Allah s.w.t. The aim of this qualitative study is to examine the method used to study the 20 Attributes of Aqidah and its impact on social harmony in Malaysia. The literature review design was adopted and data were collected using the documentation technique. Data were then analysed using the content analysis method based on deductive, inductive and comparative techniques to obtain the findings. Findings of this study indicate that the 20 Attributes of Aqidah methodology according to the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* is a moderate method that is either insufficient (*tafrit*) nor excessive (*ifrat*). On a similar note, the 20 Attributes of Aqidah is capable of countering or rejecting arguments by deviant Islamic groups, as well as their teachings and thoughts based on *naqli* and *aqli* knowledge. Therefore, the study of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah can create social harmony in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Aqidah, Studies, 20 Characteristics, Social Harmony, Methodology

### Introduction

Aqidah is the belief in Jazam, which is a total belief in the perfection of Allah s.w.t based on all His essence, attributes and good omens or actions (*af'al*). Therefore, faith (*aqidah*) is the most important element in the life of a Muslim as it guides him daily in this world and in the afterlife. Hence, in order to identify with Allah s.w.t, previous scholars have compiled a methodology for identifying the 20 Attributes of Aqidah that can be easily taught to the community. The 20 Attributes of Aqidah include the debate on the *nafsiyah*, *salbiah*, *ma'ani* and *ma'nawiyah* attributes. This approach has been used until today, especially in Malaysia, in various ways presumed appropriate with the community's degree of acceptance. This methodology plays an important role in defending the faith of contemporary Muslims against

the threat of deviant teachings that is becoming increasingly prevalent. The use of *naqli* and *aqli* knowledge also encourages the community to differentiate between what is right and wrong. Thus, the strength of this methodology, which is a method used by the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* from the past until today, is its ability to create social harmony in Malaysia.

### History of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah Development in Malaysia

The discussion on divinity in the Islamic faith is an important topic that all Muslims must believe in without any reservations whatsoever. Therefore, on the topic of *Ilahiyyat* (divinity), previous scholars have compiled a *manhaj* of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah that discusses the obligatory (*wajib*), impossible (*mustahil*) and permissible (*mubah* or *harus*) attributes of Allah s.w.t. Imam Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari is the pioneer of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah, but he only focused on 13 attributes, excluding the spiritual attribute (Abd. Latif & Mohd Azhar, 2018). In the meantime, around the 9th century, there was a formalistic structuring of monotheism (*tauhid*) by Imam al-Sanusi through his book *Umm al-Barahin*. The perfect structuring and the number of attributes (20 Attributes of Aqidah) is ascribed to him and includes debates on the *nafisah*, *salbiah*, *ma'ani* and *ma'nawiyah* attributes (Wan, 2014).

The 20 Attributes of Aqidah methodology has become a venerable and authoritative methodology used by *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* scholars around the world. Development of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah, especially in Malaysia, has drawn various scholarly views (Wan, 2014; Latif & Azhar, 2018; Bukmayr, 2017) stating that according to Yahaya (1998), the 20 Attributes of Aqidah first arrived in the Malay States in the 15th century but there is no documented evidence to support this claim. Meanwhile, Abd Rahman Haji Abdullah said that this method appeared in the 17th century, as mentioned in the book *'Umdah al-Muhtajin ila Suluk Masak al-Mufarridin* by Sheikh Abdul Rauf Singkil.

However, Shaghir Abdullah rejected this view in 1991 because he believed that the 20 Attributes of Aqidah began to expand in 1622 after Ahmad bin Aminuddin Qadhi wrote a scripture (without a title) on monotheism. This belief was supported by Daudy (1983) but he believed that the 20 Attributes of Aqidah first appeared in 1658 after al-Syeikh Nur al-Din al-Raniri wrote *Jawahir al-'Ulum fi Kasyf al-Ma'lum* and *Hidayah al-Iman bi Fadl al - Mannan*. The poor mastery of Arabic among the community encouraged scholars to write books on this topic in Jawi, such as *Bidayah al-Hidayah* by Sheikh Muhammad Zain and *al-Durr al-Thamin fi Bayan 'Aqa'id al-Mu'minin* by his student Sheikh Daud al-Fathani.

Around the 18th century, this methodology continued to develop based on *Umm al-Barahin*, as well as other books, such as *Zahrah al-Murid fi Bayan Kalimah al-Tawhid* by Sheikh 'Abd al-Samad al-Falimbani, *Zari'ah al-Yaqin* by Sheikh Nawawi Bentani and *'Aqidah al-Bayan* by Tok Syihab al-Din Palembang. This effort continued to flourish in the 19th century through Sayyid 'Uthman Ibn Yahya al-Betawi and his book *Ini Kitab Sifat Dua Puluh*, Muhammad Zayn al-Din bin Muhammad Badawi al-Sambawi with *Siraj al-Huda*, Sheikh Muhammad Zayn al-'Abidin bin Muhammad al-Fatani with *Aqidah al-Najin* and Sheikh Daud bin 'Abd Allah al-Fatani with *al-Durr al-Thamin*.

Development of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah by Muslim scholars in the Malay States was led by Haji Wan 'Abd al-Samad bin Wan Muhammad Salih or aka Tuan Tabal through his work *Kifayah al-'Awwam fima Yajib 'alayhim min Umur al-Islam*, while in Kedah, Muhammad Tayyib bin Mas'ud al-Banjari propagated this concept in his book *Miftah al-Jannah*, followed by Uthman bin Abdullah bin Yahya al-Batawi in his book *Kitab Sifat Dua Puluh*. Sheikh 'Abd

Rahman al-Kelantani, or aka Tok Wan Ali Kutan, also debated on the 20 Attributes of Aqidah in his book *Zahrah al-Murid fi 'Aqa'id al-Tawhid*.

In conclusion, the 20 Attributes of Aqidah perfected by Imam al-Sanusi in *Umm al-Barahin* has become the preferred methodology used until now by *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* scholars in Malaysia. This *manhaj* was easily propagated to the community and thus, continued to spread through the Malay States together with the help of literary works of previous scholars that debated on divinity. These efforts were intended to safeguard the faith of Muslims by cultivating a strong belief in Allah s.w.t.

### The Method of Learning The 20 Attributes of Aqidah in Malaysia

Teaching the 20 Attributes of Aqidah in Malaysia has developed over time, initially through the *pondok* institution and now through to the use of contemporary mass media channels. Around the 18th century, the 20 Attributes of Aqidah approach was first introduced in *pondok* schools and boarding schools through the use of the al-Sanusi scripture, namely *Umm al-Barahin*, along with interpretations and lectures on the subject. Among the earliest Islamic scholars who lectured using this scripture was Faqih Jalal al-Din al-Ashi in *Bidayah al-Hidayah*, which was a scripture that was comfortably accepted by the Malay community at that time. This was followed by Sheikh Abd al-Samad al-Falimbani in 1764 through his book *Zuhrah al-Murid fi Bayan Kalimah al-Tawhid* (Ali, 1994).

Efforts of previous Islamic scholars to protect the faith of Muslims through the study of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah have been continued by contemporary scholars to this day. For example, the 20 Attributes of Aqidah methodology is still used by *pondok* students in Malaysia, such as in Pondok Lubuk, Tapah and Pondok Bakriyyah, Pasir Putih. According to several studies (Wan, 2014; Dahalan, 2011; Wazir, 2020; Manan, 2021), some of the literary works on the 20 Attributes of Aqidah by previous scholars that are used by *pondok* students are:

1. *Matn Umm Al-Barahin* by al-Imam Ahmad al-Sanusi.
2. *Jawharah al-Tawhid* by Ibrahim Burhan al-Din al-Laqqani
3. *Tuhfat al-Murid* by Ibrahim al-Bajuri
4. *Aqidah al-Najin* by Tuan Minal
5. *Bahr al-Lahut* by 'Abd Allah 'Arif
6. *Aqidat al-'Awam* by Sayyid al-Marzuqi
7. *Kitab Sifat 20 (dua puluh)*, two books by Sayyid 'Uthman b. Abd Allah b. Yahya al-Alawi
8. *Al-Durr Al-Thamin fi Bayan 'Aqa'id al-Mu'minin* by Syeikh Daud bin Abdullah al-Fathani.
9. *Sifat Dua Puluh* by Sayyid Osman bin Abdullah bin Aqil bin Omar bin Yahya al-'Alawi.
10. *Khulasah Sifat Dua Puluh* by Abdullah Abu Bakar bin Ismail.
11. *Risalah al-Misbah al-Munir Fi Ma'rifah Allah Al-Qadir* by Abdul Aziz bin Ismail al-Fatani.
12. *Faridah al-Fara'id Fi 'Ilm al-'Aqa'id* by Syeikh Ahmad bin Muhammad Zain bin al-Fatani.
13. *Risalah al-Bahjah al-Saniyyah Fi al-Aqa'id al-Saniyyah* by Syeikh Daud bin Abdullah al-Fatani.
14. *Mizan al-Dharari pada Terjemah dan Menerangkan Kitab Tijan al-Darari bi Syarh Risalah al-Bayjuri* by Ismail bin Omar.
15. *Risalah al-Tawhid* by Abdullah bin Abdul Rahman.
16. *'Aqidah al-Najin Fi 'Ilm Usul al-Din* by Syeikh Zainal Abidin bin Muhammad al-Fatani.

17. *Risalah Persediaan Bagi Sekalian Mukalaf* by Tuan Guru Haji Abdullah bin Haji Abdul Rahman.
18. *Taqrib al-Ikhwan Fi Ta'allum 'Aqa'id al-Iman* by Abdul Qadir bin Wangah.
19. *Bakurah al-Amani Syarh bagi Tabsirotu al-Adani* by Syeikh Ismail bin Abdul al-Qadir al-Fatani.
20. *Bidayah al-Hidayah Syarh Umm al-Barahin* by Syeikh Muhammad Zain bin Faqih Jalaluddin al-Asyi.
21. *Siraj Al-Huda pada Menyatakan Akidah Ahl al-Taqwa* by Syeikh Muhammad Zainuddin bin Muhammad Badawi al-Sumbawi.
22. *Hidayah al-Mutafakkirin Fi Tahqiq Ma'rifah Rabb al-'Alamin* by Syeikh Husain Nasir bin Muhammad Taib al-Mas'udi al-Banjari.

Development of the mass media has made it easier for people to learn the 20 Attributes of Aqidah. For example, *Nasyid 'sifat dua puluh'* by the nasyid group Raihan had appeared on their debut album in 1996 and it is popular among the community until today. This method is suitable when applied in teaching children to identify and appreciate Allah s.w.t through songs and music (Bukmayr, 2017). This was also supported by Wahab et al (2018), who said that children as young as seven years old should be exposed to the teachings of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah even if it is only memorizing the attributes. When these children become old enough, then they can be taught to use *naqli* and *aqli* knowledge in their arguments on the subject of divinity.

Lessons on the 20 Attributes of Aqidah are also included in the school syllabus at the primary, secondary and university levels. At the pre-school level, the subject of faith has become part of the syllabus and students are taught about the pillars of faith (*iman*) as well as the obligatory (*wajib*), impossible (*mustahil*) and permissible (*mubah* or *harus*) attributes of Allah s.w.t (Dahalan, 2009). Meanwhile, the methodology is taught at the secondary school level using the 'logic of reason' arguments based on the al-Quran and al-Hadith in order to understand divine faith. At the tertiary education level, for example at Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UniSZA), the 20 Attributes of Aqidah is taught more comprehensively using various Arabic scriptures, such as *al-Kubra al-Yakiniyat*, *Faridat al-Faraid*, *Jauharah al-Tauhid* as well as through debates on the science of *Mantiq* (logic) and *Kalam* (theosophical dialectic).

The informal teaching of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah is implemented through lectures, seminars or religious programs in mosques or surau. This method is suitable for the general public and can be easily made available. Moreover, lectures through the mass media (online etc.) are also given by scholars who are fervent in teaching this subject matter, such as Ustaz Engku Ahmad Fadzil bin Engku Ali, Maulana Ihsan bin Abu Bakar and Ustaz Muhadir bin Haji Joll. Likewise, this method has been introduced through the works of contemporary scholars too. There are various literary works about the 20 Attributes of Aqidah, such as the book '20 Attributes: A Basic Introduction' by Ustaz Muhadir Haji Joll, and 'History and Approach to the 20 Attributes of Aqidah' by Nik Muhammad Syukri Nik Wan.

After all, learning the 20 Attributes of Aqidah, which is one method of identifying and appreciating Allah s.w.t., has been propagated throughout the Muslim community until today. Various approaches have been used; beginning with the *pondok* institution, informal schooling in surau and mosques, use of the mass media and literary works. The methods highlighted here are methods that are comfortably accepted by the community in its efforts to understand divine faith, beginning with the general public right up to those in specialized

fields. The significance of the methodology is evident as it has been studied and taught from generation to generation with the sole intent of protecting the Muslim faith

### **The 20 Attributes of Aqidah Help Cultivate Social Harmony in Malaysia**

Social harmony in Malaysia is being increasingly threatened by external and internal forces. An external threat is an action, such as murder, vandalism, moral decay and so on, that has obvious consequences. However, an internal threat, such as the influence of deviant teachings or thoughts in Islam, is usually not realized by the society. Hence, Muslims need to safeguard their spirituality by adhering to true faith, which will affect their outward behaviour. This is important as it will ensure that social harmony is always sustained and safeguarded.

Believing in true Islamic faith based on the 20 Attributes of Aqidah can guide Muslims to better understand divine faith. This methodology can put forth arguments against deviant teaching and thinking in Islam based on *naqli* and *aqli* knowledge. This approach is consistent with the aim of Imam al-Sanusi in his study on the 20 Attributes of Aqidah, which was to purify the Islamic faith so that it differs far from the philosophical elements that are consistent with the method adopted by the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (Wahab & Omar, 2011). Furthermore, the *wasatiyyah* approach adopted by *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* scholars, namely being either *tafrit* (excess) nor *ifrat* (insufficient), can create harmony since the debate on the 20 Attributes of Aqidah is easily understood when based on *naqli* and *aqli* knowledge.

Debating the attributes of Allah based on the elements of *tafrit* (excess) and *ifrat* (insufficient) can be confusing. Hence, every debate concerning the 20 Attributes of Aqidah should be carried out in a simple manner in order to counter and nullify deviant teachings or thinking in the Islamic faith. Syed Ali in Al-Juwaini (1965) and Sukriyah (2022) when discussing the attributes relevant to Allah s.w.t's existence, had rejected extremist groups, such as the al-Dahriyyah and Atheists, who do not believe that a force had created the Earth. Meanwhile, nature is a creature whose existence is permissible (*mubah* or *harus*), hence, it might or might not exist. Therefore, everything that is permissible (*mubah* or *harus*) and new should be subjected to the 'determinator' (*mukhassis*), who is the Supreme Creator, Allah s.w.t. The al-Dahriyyah group claimed that nature has no beginning, whereas Allah s.w.t's *qidam* (pre-eternal) attribute asserts that it is impossible for a new thing to be *qidam* (pre-eternal) because it is characteristically not permanent and always changing, just like nature.

The *Mukhalafatuhu Lil Hawadith* attribute asserts that Allah s.w.t is dissimilar to other creatures in terms of substance (*zat*), nature and actions (*af'al*). This contradicts the Salafi-Wahhabi aqidah when discussing the monotheism element in the *Asma' wal* attribute, which asserts that the Names and Attributes of Allah s.w.t mentioned in the al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah are without explanation or elaboration. For example, in the Mutasyabihat verse, they believe that Allah s.w.t has 'hands' but it does not mention its shape and does not equate Allah s.w.t with creatures. Similarly, it also mentions that Allah s.w.t has 'legs', 'face', 'eyes', 'calves' and various attributes without explaining their shape (Atabik, 2016). Meanwhile, Ashairah, in reference to the Mutasyabihat verse, had used the *tafwid salaf* method, which maintains the existing verse that mentions "*yad*" "*ainun*" "*istiwa*" and others. Meanwhile, the *khalaf* uses the *takwil* method by attaching a meaning that is suitable with Allah s.w.t but denies the same for creatures, for example, "*istiwa*" meaning "to master" (Firdausi, 2015).

Atabik (2016) stated that the Wahdaniyyah attribute in Allah s.w.t draws similarity to the Christians who believe in the existence of three entities in one God (Godhead), namely God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Allah s.w.t had exhorted:

...لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا آلِهَةٌ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا

Surah al-Anbiyaa' (21): 22

*Meaning: Had there been other Gods besides Allah in the heavens or the earth, both 'realms' would have surely been corrupted. So, Glorified is Allah, Lord of the Throne, far above what they claim....*

The Qadariyyah group had denied the existence of *qudrah* (power), *iradah* (intention) and *ilmu* (knowledge) attributes in Allah s.w.t. It denied Allah s.w.t's *qudrah* (power) attribute by saying that Allah S.W.T does not have the *qudrah* (power) to create, as well as to determine and dictate the actions of His servants. It denied Allah s.w.t's *iradah* (intention) attribute, which is tantamount to denying that Allah s.w.t knows all the actions of His servants. It also denied the *ilmu* (knowledge) attribute in Allah s.w.t, which means denying Allah s.w.t knows every action of His servants (Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). According to al-Sanusi, the *qudrah* (power) attribute is the after-effect of Allah s.w.t's *iradah* (intention) attribute on everything that is *mumkin* (voluntary submission to Allah s.w.t). Allah s.w.t's *qudrah* (power) and *iradah* (intention) attributes are related to His *ilmu* (knowledge) attribute, which includes everything that is obligatory (*wajib*), impossible (*mustahil*) and permissible (*mubah* or *harus*) (Wan, 2021).

Munir (2016); Munawir (2016) stated that Allah s.w.t's life (*hayat*) attribute can counter the assertion made by Nietzsche's advocates that "God is dead". Proof that Allah s.w.t is alive is evidenced in the material existence of this world. Thus, if Allah s.w.t is not living then He does not have *qudrah* (power), and this is impossible because it reflects the weakness of Allah s.w.t and hence, He would not have been able to create the Universe. The fact that this world truly and comprehensively exists indicates the existence of a powerful Creator. They also claim that the Quran is Allah s.w.t's new *Kalam* (theosophical dialectic), while Allah s.w.t's *Kalam* mentioned in the al-Qur'an refers to *qadim* (eternity), namely *kalam nafsi* (inability to speak), which is the meaning in the text. And in reference to the voice, the text in the al-Quran is a new *kalam lafzi* (lettered speech) (Darlis, 2017; Harun & Noor, 2021).

Similarly, the 20 Attributes of Aqidah approach, which is the manhaj of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, can create social harmony when this method is initially adopted by educational institutions and then propagated to the general public. This is because the most important aspect of Islamic aqidah is to identify and appreciate Allah SWT by professing to the first Pillar of Faith (*Rukun Iman*), which is to believe in Allah SWT based on the guidance of the al-Qur'an and al-Hadith as well as according to the consensus of the *Ahl Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* scholars. This is important because the Muslim community's belief in religion can guarantee national harmony. Therefore, it is common for people to follow their leaders' belief. Thus, if the leader is a follower of the *Ahl Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, then the people will also follow the same belief (*Selangor Islamic Religious Council*, 2015).

Overall, deviant Islamic teaching and thinking can easily infiltrate society's thinking, resulting in innumerable religious crises, especially in relation to the study of faith, as well as threatening social harmony in Malaysia. Hence, learning the 20 Attributes of Aqidah acts as a *manhaj* for the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* aqidah, which inherently aims to create harmony. This is because debates on each of the 20 Attributes of Aqidah can counter and

nullify the arguments adduced by deviant Islamic groups. In addition, true belief in Allah s.w.t can also mould good behaviour. This method has its own strengths when debated based on intellectual (*aqli*) arguments that can be rationally accepted by those who possess a sane mind.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* scholars have compiled the 20 Attributes of Aqidah methodology for the purpose of debating divine faith, which will make it easier for people to identify and appreciate Allah s.w.t. This method, which was perfected by Imam al-Sanusi in his book *Umm al-Barahin*, was further enhanced by religious scholars in the Malay States through sermons, talks and the translation of his book. This effort aimed to ensure that society's Islamic faith is always safeguarded. Similarly, various forms of studying the 20 Attributes of Aqidah were highlighted and taught to the community through the *pondok* schools, vernacular schools, universities, literary writings, nasyid, as well as sermons in mosques and suraus. The 20 Attributes of Aqidah approach was also able to create social harmony when the country's leadership strengthened the *Ahl Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* aqidah method and propagated it to the community. Arguments based on *Naqli* and *aqli* knowledge used when debating the 20 Attributes of Aqidah were also able to create harmony and a better understanding when each of the debates on the respective attributes successfully countered and nullified the arguments adduced by the deviant Islamic groups.

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