

Understanding the atheism phenomenon through the lived experiences of Muslims: An overview of Malaysian atheists

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Little is known about the background of atheism in Malaysia and how Muslims respond to the phenomenon, although provocations by Malaysian atheists often take place on social media. This study addressed the gap by exploring the atheism phenomenon in Malaysia's ethnoreligious-oriented society. Data were collected from in-depth interviews and content analysis using the qualitative method. All data were analysed thematically using the software for qualitative analysis, ATLAS.ti. The resulting superordinate themes that emerged from the analysis include the phenomenon of Malaysian atheism, the factors for becoming atheists and the theme of arguments. The study's findings are three-fold. Firstly, atheism started in Malaysia after globalisation began. Secondly, most Malaysian atheists were influenced by internal factors based on emotional-psychological elements rather than being scientifically oriented. Last but not least, the main themes of Malaysian atheist arguments are 'God's justice', 'the problem of evil' and 'science rationalism'. As a response, Muslims counter the atheism phenomenon by providing an effective approach to preserving social cohesion and harmony in an ethnoreligious society.

Contribution: This article suggests that although atheism is regarded as a challenge to society since Malaysia is an ethnoreligious-oriented society, atheism needs to be countered through proper education as early prevention, besides encouraging healthy discussions.

Keywords: atheism; Islam and atheism; agnosticism; Muslim experience; religious philosophy; God.

Introduction

In August 2017, a Malaysian group known as the Atheist Republic Consulate of Kuala Lumpur held its annual gathering. One member declared:

It was such a blast! Atheists from all walks of life came to meet one another, some for the very first time ... each sharing their stories and forming new friendships that hopefully will last a lifetime! We rock! (Atheist Alliance International 2018)

The provocative action caught Malaysian authorities' attention. In response, Malaysia's deputy minister in charge of religious affairs at the time, Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, stated, 'Atheism has no place in Malaysia as it contradicts the first principle of the Rukun Negara [National Principles], which is belief in God'. The deputy minister also warned against atheism and stressed that the government would commit to combating atheism, which opposes the Islamic creed, particularly Sunni Islam (*Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah*), Malaysian Muslims' majority creed. He told reporters, 'If it is proven that Muslims are involved in atheist activities that could affect their faith, the state Federal Territory Islamic Religious Departments (JAWI) could take action' (New Straits Times 2017a).

Subsequently, a published photo of the young atheist group 'having a blast' went viral. Malaysian cabinet minister, Shahidan Kassim, suggested hunting down atheists because Malaysia has no place for them. Sharing a similar view with Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, he highlighted that such groups go against the Federal Constitution, which states that Islam is the official religion while others are free to practice their faith (New Straits Times 2017b; Shagar 2017). These polemics have been covered by *The Diplomat*, a premier international current affairs magazine for the Asia-Pacific region, in an article entitled 'Intolerance rising: Atheists at risk in Malaysia' (The Diplomat 2017). The article criticised modern Malaysia by accusing the nation of being intolerant towards atheists because Muslim conservatives and fundamentalists had singled out the government. According

to one of the present study's respondents, Malaysia is shifting towards more rigorous and political Islamic practice because of the Salafism influx. Nevertheless, the influence of Salafism and the increasing Islamic awareness against Western ideologies contrary to the country's identity also contributes to the issue. Thus, publicly declaring oneself an atheist is difficult, particularly in this ethno-religious-centric country.

In terms of ethnicity, the 2020 Malaysian population is estimated to be 32.4 million. The composition of *Bumiputera* (indigenous people, literally translated as son of the soil) rose 2.0% to a record high of 69.4% in 2020 compared to the 67.4% recorded in 2010. Nevertheless, the Chinese and Indian populations declined to 23.2% (24.5% in 2010) and 6.7% (7.3% in 2010), respectively, while other races decreased by 0.3% to a record low of 0.7%. In terms of religion, the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020) reported that Islam was the most widely professed religion in Malaysia, with 63.5%. As a multiracial nation, other religions embraced in Malaysia were Buddhism (18.7%), Christianity (9.1%), Hinduism (6.1%), other known religions (0.9%) and no or unknown religions (1.8%). From the official statistics, if it remains unchanged, Islam has grown by 2.2% of the country's 32.4 million population today, while other religions have decreased. Interestingly, the percentage of no or unknown religions increased by 0.1%, leaving a small minority of 1.8% or about 584 052 Malaysians belonging to the category of no religion or those adhering to atheism.

The finding was not far from a survey involving 500 respondents in Malaysia conducted by TNS Malaysia, commissioned by the Worldwide Independent Network (WIN)–Gallup International, from 27 October 2014 to 15 November 2014. The survey found that 3% of Malaysians were 'convinced atheists', while another 20% were not religious (WIN–Gallup International Survey 2014). Of the total composition of the atheists, those involved were aged 18–34 years (7%), 35–54 years (6%), employed (3%), students (5%) and had higher education (4%) and secondary school (3%) backgrounds. In addition, the study reported that 72% of the respondents in Malaysia adhered to particular religions, while the other 6% did not know their beliefs. Based on the results, although the percentage of atheists in Malaysia is small-scale, the phenomenon is worrying. It has the potential to worsen if not viewed seriously by all parties.

As for the connection between ethnicity and religion, Ibrahim (2007:157) asserted that both are often considered one 'package' in Malaysia. For example, the Federal Constitution refers to a Malay person as someone who speaks the Malay language, practices the Malay culture and professes Islam as their religion. Similarly, Chinese people are identified as Buddhist, Taoist or a folk religion and Indian people as Hindu or Christian. In this respect, culture is considered a heritage, fixed and never changing. Although the Malaysian Constitution declares Islam to be the country's official religion, other religions are provided freedom of practice in

peace and harmony in the Federation (Haque & Masuan 2002; Mohd Sani & Abdul Hamed Shah 2020; Walters 2007).

Islamisation during the 1980s significantly provided the Muslim society with a deeper Islamic understanding and a stronger Islamic identity, placing Islamic practice under closer government control and protection. The wave of Islamisation in the country coincided with changes in the country's political and social context, particularly with the rise of Islamic movements (Saat 2012:136) and Islamic events globally, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia. The Islamisation initiatives were made by promoting Islamic values in Malaysian society through Islamising economic, educational, medical, political and cultural fields (Hamid 2007:458; Nor 2011:24; Ramli, Awang & Rahman 2020:94). Nevertheless, less acknowledged within academia has been the fragmentation of society resulting from the revitalisation of religion on the one hand and emerging secular, irreligious identities in large cities on the other. The latter is seldom considered in recent developments in Malaysia, as they seem to be marginalised in everyday life and politics. The new conservatism also tremendously affects the politicisation of religion, daily practices and internalised moral values of a large part of Indonesian society (Goh & Holden 2009:8).

Nevertheless, there are many liberal enclaves. Religion often does not play a role in the everyday practices of liberals and secularists (Baxstrom 2008:10; De Run et al. 2010:25). It is only practised when required by their social environment (Awang, Ramli & Rahman 2021:1). Young people significantly develop a critical stance towards religion, as they observe how it is easily politicised and utilised for anything but noble purposes. News about terrorism and the so-called Islamic State has sown doubt in the minds of many young Malaysians about the benefits and legitimisation of religion. The official narrative claiming that terrorists are not real Muslims is convincing to some. There are many atheists among the young generation of secular Malaysians. Most of them prefer to remain incognito, while some seek out fellow atheists to exchange ideas, find friends to spend leisure time with or explore the possibilities of social practices beyond the narrow frame set by the religious and increasingly conservative social environment.

Atheist identities are precarious in contemporary Malaysia. For example, the first pillar of the National Principles (*Rukun Negara*) ideology reads '*Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan*' [belief in God], and the lyrics of the national anthem (*Negaraku*) state '*Tuhan kurniakan*' [with God's blessings]. Similarly, the National Education Philosophy (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2008) stresses:

Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God ... (p. ix)

Hence, atheism is often perceived as opposing the Malaysian spirit and even as a threat to Malaysian identity.

Definition of atheism

The term 'atheism' is etymologically derived from the classical Greek 'a' (typically meaning 'not' or 'without') and 'theos' (God) (Bullivant 2013:11; Bullivant & Lee 2016; Milem 2019:336). The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2021) defines an atheist as a person who does not believe in the existence of a God or any gods. Nevertheless, ancient Greece's original meaning differs from its later meanings (Alexander 2020:254). Originally, atheism was defined as 'someone who has lost faith in the gods, someone who is "godless" or "godforsaken" in the archaic English senses'. In the classical period of Athenian democracy, the 4th and 5th centuries BCE, it gained another meaning, closer to the modern sense, which is 'a lack of commitment to belief in the gods'. Hence, the meaning of atheism was not always simple, even in ancient Greece.

The meaning of the word cannot be derived solely from the word's Greek origin. Although the word first appeared in English in the mid-16th century to describe various theological views during the Reformation, it was not until the end of the 16th century that anglophone writers started to make atheistic claims. According to Malik (2018:286), the term 'atheism' in the Western world changed from identifying heretics to those who denied Christianity's God. A growing number of 'atheists' confronting all religions were only observable in later modernity. Some so-called 'modern atheists' continue the general rejection of all religions.

Atheism in Islamic thought

In Islamic tradition, atheism is etymologically defined as *al-ilhād*, originating from *al-ḥa-da*, which means deviation. Terminologically, atheism is a belief in the nonexistence of the God who created nature (Al-Ihsaie 2020:8). In the holy Qur'an, the term *al-ilhād* that connotes the meaning (*yulhidūn*) is repeated twice:

And to Allah belong the best names, so invoke Him by them. And leave [the company of] those who practice deviation concerning His names. They will be recompensed for what they have been doing. (Q. 7:180)

And:

Indeed, those who inject deviation into Our verses are not concealed from Us. So, is he who is cast into the fire better or he who comes secure on the Day of Resurrection? Do whatever you will; indeed, He is Seeing of what you do. (Q. 41:40)

Malik (2018:vii), when distinguishing between atheism (*ilhād*) and disbelief (*kufr*), stated that the latter is perceived and understood within Islamic theology. Disbelief in Islamic theology denotes the personal denial or rejection of any of the six fundamental beliefs: belief in God and his oneness, in God's angels, in the divine revelations, in God's prophets, in the day of judgement and preordainment. The rejection of any or all of these would bring one outside the fold of Islam.

Such behaviour is referred to as *kufr* in Arabic. In contrast, atheism is known as *ilhād* and is a subcategory of the former.

Instead of *al-ilhād*, the holy Qur'an also uses the term *al-dahr*, subject to the eternity of time. The holy Qur'an stated:

Have you seen he who has taken as his God his [own] desire, and Allah has sent him astray due to knowledge and has set a seal upon his hearing and his heart and put over his vision a veil? So, who will guide him after Allah? Then will you not be reminded? And they say, There is not but our worldly life; we die and live, and nothing destroys us except time. And they have of that no knowledge; they are only assuming. (Q. 45:23–24)

Because of the relation with time, the *Mucjam lughah al-Fuqaha'* (Muhammad Rawas Qal'aji 1996) refers to the term *al-dahriyyun* to those who deny the judgement day and its elements of resurrection, reckoning, reward and punishment. The definition of atheism, referred to as *al-dahriyyun*, is not far from what has been proposed by classical (Al-Ghazali 2013; Al-Shahrastani 1992) and contemporary Muslim theologians (al-Hasnawi 2019; al-Qaradhāwī, 1996; Malik 2021; Soleh 2016). For example, Al-Shahrastani (1992) and Al-Ghazali (2013) define the *dahriyyun* as materialists, a group of ancient philosophers who denied the Creator of the universe and believed that the universe had existed for eternity.

In this regard, Al-Shahrastani (1992) also related the term *al-dahriyyah* as a philosophy that relies on organ sense. This group does not recognise something only the intellect can reach, and they do not have specific rules. The *Dahrīyah* are portrayed as naturalists and materialists who deny the existence of anything that the senses cannot perceive in Islamic theological literature. Nevertheless, in scholarly circles, a great deal of confusion exists regarding the origin and precise doctrines of the *Dahrīyah*. Al-Ghazali (2013) traced their origin to ancient Greek philosophy and distinguished them from the naturalists (*tabī'īyūn*), who speak of a creating deity, while the *Dahrīyah* recognise only natural laws. Others described them as believers in a supreme power but not in souls or demons and angels. Based on the discussion, Islamic theology relates atheism with *al-ilhād* and *al-dahriyyah*. The meaning refers to those who do not believe in God's existence because everything is perceived from a materialist view (Adamec 2009; Ahmed 2013; Malik 2018).

Materials and methods

This study adopted a qualitative methodology to understand the atheism phenomenon from the Muslim perspective. The research design used in this study was in-depth interviews, content analysis and observation. In terms of in-depth interviews, the sample in this study was selected through purposive sampling among Muslim respondents from prominent nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). The NGOs involved are Modern Daie, Global Unity and Multiracial Reverted Muslims, which have experienced atheism for more than 10 years. An in-depth five-question interview was conducted, and the participants were interviewed online through Google Meet. The interview was

to gain further insights into the Muslim experience of encountering Malaysian atheists. The interview also uncovered the atheism phenomenon, the theme of arguments and factors for atheism. The interview session was recorded for analysis. Observations were undertaken from social media accounts of Malaysian atheist societies. Each interview was coded holistically, descriptively and thematically using ATLAS.ti software. The study's findings offer useful suggestions for policymakers, NGOs, researchers and educators, enabling them to understand the key aspects of the approaches towards atheism.

The phenomenon of Malaysian atheism

The phenomenon of Malaysian atheism began with a crisis in the globalisation age. The early Malaysian atheism phenomenon can be traced back to 2013 from a blog posting several entries questioning the existence of God and religious teaching. At least five Malaysian atheists' blogs have been identified, namely *Aku Seorang Bekas Muslim, melayuatheist* (Wan Izzuddin 2013) 'TANYA DAN LAWAN!', *Mulhid Melayu* and *Empirical Retrospection*. Although most atheist blogs are no longer active, a blog entitled *Aku Seorang Bekas Muslim* (I am an ex-Muslim) by Abu Yusuf Malizi is still active in publishing writings that are provocative against religion, particularly Islam. Based on his blog, the author claimed to have been an atheist since 2013. Previously, he was interested in current religious conflict and geopolitics issues before becoming an apologetic atheist.

The second blog, *Malaysian Humanist*, claimed to be hosted by a Malay girl who became an atheist after having a crisis about her religious identity. The remaining three blogs, 'TANYA DAN LAWAN!', *Mulhid Melayu* and *Empirical Retrospection* (Ken Faris 2014), are suggested to be administered by the same person and interrelated with each other because of a shared contributor list, the active period and the method of writing. The blog, dated in 2014, was created by an account under the names Ken Faris and Mulhid Melayu, which was eventually used on 19 November 2014 with the entry 'Menjadi Ateis: Satu Langkah Menuju Kebenaran' (Becoming an atheist: A step to the truth). Nevertheless, the first entry on 10 January 2014, a new blog, *Empirical Retrospection*, was created by Ken Faris (2014) with similar remarks used in his previous blogs.

Subsequently, after the transition of social interaction from a private blog to social media, many Facebook Malaysian atheist accounts have been created, either in private or public. The currently active Malaysian atheist Facebook groups are *Warung Atheist* and *Atheist Malaysia*. Both groups are private and exclusive for those accepted as group members by the admin. Thus, only members can view the group members and their posts. Nevertheless, there are other public groups created by some Malaysian atheists, such as *Malaysian Atheists*, *Freethinkers*, *Agnostics*, and *Their Friends* (MAFA). This public Facebook group contains 2885 group members and is administrated by three admins. The 'About' section

describes the account as a medium for Malaysian atheists. Besides this Facebook page, there are other Malaysian-based pages associated with atheism, namely *Atheist Malaysia* (Nosttonir 2017) and *Atheist in Malaysia* (2021). However, only one page, *Atheist in Malaysia*, is still active.

Concurrently, the *Atheist Republic*, known as the international atheist movement with thousands of subscribers, lasted almost a year before it stopped in December 2020. According to research, most atheists were young people (Bainbridge 2005:3; Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011:9; Johnson 2012:55; Reisner 2018:63; Tomlins 2015:118) between the ages of 20 and 35 (Duile & East 2018:163). A group of Malaysian atheists in Malaysia also includes other ethnicities, such as Chinese and Indian. Since social media is very close to the majority of the young generation (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010:59), it allows users to interact opportunistically and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others (Carr & Hayes 2015:50; Van den Beemt, Thurlings & Willems 2020:35).

Factors involved in becoming an atheist

The atheism phenomenon in Malaysia indicates two types of atheists. Firstly, the scientific-oriented, and secondly, the psychological-emotionally oriented atheists. Participant 1, from Modern Daie, was one of the three interviewees who gave explicit views on factors regarding atheism. From an Islamic perspective, a human, at the beginning of his nature, is to believe in God's existence, as the Qur'an (Q 7.172) states, regardless of generation and background. Nevertheless, in the process of affirming God's existence, certain questions are triggered in some people (e.g. the problem of evil), and they start to criticise what they believe.

Some people who are brought up in religious families will often find the answers. Otherwise, they will ignore the question, particularly when asked by their religious parents or the *imam*, monk or priest as the doctrine of *credo ut intelligam*. Nevertheless, some are unsatisfied with the answers and always eager to obtain better ones. Beginning from the growth of the Internet in 1996 in Malaysia, much information can be easily accessed through the Internet. Eventually, this generation tried identifying answers on the Internet and found certain answers, leading them to atheism or being a strongly religious follower. Thus, many Malaysian atheists spend their time on social media expressing and sharing their thoughts in public or private spaces.

The finding was not far from what Participant 2 from Global Unity and Participant 3 from Multiracial Reverted Muslims highlighted. Most atheists came from higher education or elite schools and had critical thoughts. Since they were exposed to scientific and philosophical disciplines in social media, the exposure has shaped their thoughts and understandings, including the metaphysical aspects. In contrast, Participant 3 from Multiracial Reverted Muslims

asserted that atheism has nothing to do with having critical thoughts, as these are also encouraged by religion. It occurs when critical thought encounters unhealthy thoughts on understanding religious doctrine. The second type is psychological-emotional. This type usually emerges from those who have personal problems with God and misunderstand religious doctrines. Participant 1 and Participant 3 noted several cases of atheists who have bad experiences with their parents and teachers who associate with religious people believing in God. As a way of blaming the abuser, they mix their feelings by blaming anything related to the person, including their religious identity. They simply assume that the act was probably motivated by their religious doctrine. There are also cases of atheism among those who have lost their beloved person, failed in examinations or cheated in business. However, they were good religious followers who believed in God. To them, it is unfair to receive a bad fate from God; God is bad for letting their beloved die, and God did not prevent bad things from happening to his servant. Thus, they start to blame God and turn to atheism.

For example, Abu Yusuf Malizi (2015) attempted to justify the reason he became an atheist. He was not satisfied as God did not intervene in human actions, particularly in helping oppressed people and upholding justice. He questioned the Palestine-Israel conflict:

Why does God not help the Palestinians? Most Muslims will answer that it is a test for the Palestinians. However, why do we need to interrupt God's test if it is a test? It is better to let the Palestinians be killed if it is God's will to test them. Besides, if God is so powerful, why He did not support the Muslim armies to defeat the Jews? Why did God prefer to help the Zionist Jews instead of the Muslims and the Palestinians?

The Palestine-Israel conflict was not the real issue. Another incident Abu Yusuf Malizi (2016) experienced that led him to lose much money contributed to his conversion to atheism. He prayed to God and tried to reobtain the money, but his efforts were futile. To him, God has ignored him, although he had prayed a lot. Thus, by justifying his atheism, he outlined several points related to contentious issues in religious doctrine, rationally and morally. The same situation was highlighted by another atheist, the author of the *Malaysian Humanist* (2013) blog. During her childhood, she had a bad experience with her religious school teacher, which led her to look down on religious people (Malaysian Humanist 2013). She further argued that some Islamic doctrine is contrary to rational thought. The factor for being an atheist was not far from atheists in the social media, as in the *Malaysian Atheist* (2021) Facebook private group. Based on the discussion, atheists usually expressed that they ultimately gave up religion, despite having religious convictions as a teenager.

The primary reason for becoming an atheist is the contradiction between science and religion, particularly in proving God's existence. A longstanding assumption is that several atheists, raised in a religious tradition, claimed

to abandon their faith because of exposure to scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, as observed, their journey away from religion involved personal reflections on religious teaching and psychological factors (Ecklund & Johnson 2021; Participant 1 [online interview] pers. commun., 30 June 2021; Participant 2 [online interview] pers. commun., 13 July 2021; Participant 3 [online interview] pers. commun., 05 September 2021). For example, Abu Yusuf Malizi (2015) claimed that he became an atheist because God did not help the oppressed, besides questioning religious teaching. The fact is that he became too emotional after losing his money. Participant 1 ([online interview] pers. commun., 30 June 2021) noted a similar case study where a practising Muslim family was scammed and lost much money. One of their children who observed the situation questioned why his father received such a bad fate. Although he is an honest person in business, a pious person, he ended up suffering a significant loss.

Another case highlighted is a student who studied hard and prayed a lot for his success in the examination. Unfortunately, he did not succeed or pass the exam. In their understanding, they are good Muslims who practice according to religious teaching and perform good deeds. Hence, God must grant their requests. However, they received different results. Subsequently, they started to blame God because he failed to grant their prayers, and they ended up being atheists. The same argument reflects the blog author of *Malaysian Humanist* (2013), who had a bad experience with her religious school teacher. Since then, she has blamed religion and looked down on religious people.

In order to justify their atheism, the atheists support their decision with other secondary arguments by criticising religious teaching, in particular the existence of God and the polemics in religious teaching, which have been well discussed in religious sources. Sociologists suggest that several factors may influence why an individual whose childhood socialisation emphasised religious faith ultimately rejects the identity, practices and beliefs they once embraced. Sociologists have long studied such transitions among the public. Their research points to how life events such as getting married, having children or particular educational trajectories lead individuals towards or away from religious faith (Ecklund & Johnson 2021). Thus, the discussion in the social media atheist groups is limited to provocation against and mocking religious teaching instead of having healthy discourse with religious societies. The Malaysian atheists were emotionally oriented or exhibited God-blaming behaviour instead of having healthy discourse with religious societies. The Malaysian atheists were disappointed with their beliefs, particularly after experiencing a bad situation such as being abused during childhood, being sick, becoming bankrupt, experiencing unanswered prayers or after observing unfortunate events such as war or natural disasters. Resultantly, they express secondary arguments related to the rationale for discussing religious teaching.

The main theme of the arguments

In general, there are six famous arguments by atheists disapproving the existence of God, namely the problem of evil (Gale 2013), problems with the concept of God (Rundle 2013), the problem of religious language (Nielsen 2013), problems with theistic arguments (Parsons 2013), science rationalism (Grünbaum 2013) and the sociobiological account of religious belief (Ruse 2013). Nevertheless, since Malaysian atheism is scientific-oriented, where part of it is psychological–emotionally oriented, the common theme of the arguments is the problem of evil, God’s justice and scientific rationalism. According to Participant 1, Participant 2 and Participant 3, the science rationalism theme usually emerges after the atheist faces difficulties in understanding the problem of evil and God’s justice. Additional arguments exist, such as religion and violence, religion and morality, religious pluralism and others, but they are not essential as the main themes.

The problem of evil

The problem of evil (Almeida 2018; Beaty 2021; Lorkowski 2021; Mcbrayer & Howard-Snyder 2013; Nagasawa 2011; Walls 2021) has been constantly pointed out by atheists when refuting the existence of God, including Malaysian atheists. In discussing the problem of evil, atheists regard the existence of God as incompatible with the degree and amount of evil that exists in the world. The problem of evil is referred to as the ‘immovable boulder of atheism’ by George Büchner, a German atheist and poet. During a debate in 2013 titled ‘The Origin of Life: Evolution or Design’, atheist Michael Ruse unequivocally stated that the problem of evil was the single basis for his denial of believing in God.

In a recent study, Americans were asked, ‘If you could only ask God one question and knew He would answer it, what would you ask?’ Unsurprisingly, ‘Why is there pain and suffering in the world?’ was the most frequently asked question (Elshinawy 2019). In line with these arguments, Bishop and Perszyk (2011) and Blackburn (2018) argue that it is logically inconsistent to believe both God and evil exist. If God is omnipotent, God can avoid any evil he intends to avoid, and if he is morally perfect, he wants to avoid any evil possible. A world created by an omni-God would contain no evil. Nevertheless, evil is a reality. Hence, a God who is omnipotent and morally perfect does not exist. Stenger (2018), a philosophical naturalist and sceptic, asserted that to have a particular kind of God who is very selective in answering people’s prayers is impossible. If God does not answer their prayer, it does not make sense for them to stick with that God.

God’s justice

The argument of God’s justice originated from an exclusivist perspective in religious doctrine towards religious pluralism. For example, the Malay atheists who were previously

Muslims understood that salvation only could be achieved through Islam. As noted by Participant 1 and expressed by Abu Yusuf Malizi, Malaysian atheists usually question:

If Islam is the true religion, why God did not create all humans born as Muslims, although they came from a different religious background? Why has God created many religions? Why the Muslim only Islam accepted? Why, in the Islamic teaching, non-Muslims are condemned eternally to hell although they do good for their whole life, while the Muslims, despite the many evils they committed, after being punished in hell, can enter paradise eternally?

The argument of Malaysian atheists is not far from what has been pointed out by previous prominent atheists. The argument stated:

[I]f God is just and omnipotent, why did He not create humans all in one type – as all wealthy, healthy, happy, and genius? However, there are a group of people who are poor, sick, suffering, and unwise? (Dein, Swinton & Abbas 2013:194; Francis, Croft & Pyke 2012; Ibrahim 2010:i)

Science rationalism

In terms of scientific arguments, atheists regard the polemics in religious sources as justifying the inauthenticity of religion, leading to the rejection of religious teaching as discounting God’s existence. For example, when discussing *Isra’* and *Mi’raj* (the night journey of Prophet Muhammad) as part of the Islamic doctrine, atheists regard it as contradicting rationality (Ibn Warraq 1995). In the *Isra’* part of the journey, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have travelled on Buraq’s back to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. As his journey is a miracle, atheists argue that this event defies all laws of physics, astronomy and parapsychological phenomena. Thus, atheists regard religions as contradicting science rationalism. According to Participant 3, the problem is not about the polemical doctrine but how Muslims discuss the topic comprehensively. Islam does not restrict people from questioning and discussing their belief system. There are certain aspects in Islamic doctrine can be discussed rationally as urged by the Qur’an, but there are certain aspects that need to be believed completely – related to the metaphysical. Furthermore, the human mind and senses that are the source of science rationalism are limited, and science itself is not absolute.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this article is to explore the background of atheism in Malaysia by analysing the phenomenon and the factors of becoming an atheist and the themes of their arguments. In terms of the phenomenon, atheism emerged parallel to the progress of the Internet, which provides a vast space for people to discuss religions critically. The scenario led to the creation of two types of atheists who are scientifically and emotionally–psychologically oriented (Tzortzis 2020; Lorkowski 2021:254). In terms of factors that lead an individual into atheism, two factors were identified. The first factor is having a wrong understanding of religious methods

of thought while an individual has been exposed to scientific methods. Thus, they understand everything only through the scientific method. Secondly, having a bad life experience such as losing beloved people or being abused by a person affiliated with a certain religious identity pushes an individual into atheism. Each factor leads to the arguments of 'God's justice' and 'the problem of evil' portrayed with scientific rationalism. In justifying their views, some of them engage in certain acts of provocation and mocking religious doctrine on social media.

In countering atheism, Muslim respondents provided strong and good responses to the paradox created by the atheists. The strategy has been focusing on 'the problem of evil' arguments by reconstructing the misconception of evil in this world by providing the right concept of God's justice in Islamic theodicy. Muslim respondents could provide scientific arguments that support the existence of God while dealing with scientific rationalism. Thus, the respondents fully engage in the 'Malaysian atheism phenomenon' where it has been proven that a minority group in this country embrace atheism in private spaces, as they realise it contradicts the spirit of this ethnoreligious society. Instead, atheists are aware that the authorities face difficulty recognising them as part of society. Thus, they try to influence others to gain more followers, hoping they will be recognised as part of society in the future. However, this will not happen if society has a solid understanding of theology, regarded as fundamental in religious teaching. This understanding is then strengthened with comprehensive knowledge of scientific rationalism. This will enable them to preserve harmony in society towards the atheism phenomenon.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The research was carried out by A.F.R with collaboration of M.R.S., N.H.Y. and S.A.M.Z.

Ethical considerations

The Research Ethics Committee of Sultan Idris Education University approved this project (ref. no. 2021-0326-01).

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.R., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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