

# The Integration of Exoteric and Esoteric: Towards a More Holistic Islamic Practice

## *Islam di Malaysia: Mencari Keseimbangan di antara Dimensi Eksoterik dan Esoterik*

Arfah Ab Majid<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jabatan Pengajian Kenegaraan dan Ketamadunan, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia;

### Article Progress

Accepted: 25 July 2022

Reviewed: 23 November 2022

Published: 30 November 2022

\*Corresponding author:  
Arfah Ab Majid, Jabatan  
Pengajian Kenegaraan dan  
Ketamadunan, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia;  
Email: am\_arfah@upm.edu.my

**Abstract:** In recent years, Malaysian Muslims seem to have experienced an upsurge in religious awareness and practices. The increasing religious trends could be seen from the mode of dressing especially among the Muslim women such as the wearing of hijab and niqab; the use of Arabic words to replace the Malay words in daily conversation and greeting such as solat to replace sembahyang, iftar to replace buka puasa and Eid Mubarak to replace Selamat Hari Raya and the mushrooming of religious programs and events such as World #QuranHour and Malam Cinta Rasul. Unfortunately, despite these inspiring Islamic awareness and practices, issues related to morality, crimes, discrimination, corruption and other unethical conducts associated with the Muslims are also on the rise. This is due to the fact that what seems to have increased are only the exoteric dimension of the religion i.e. the exterior rules, regulations and visible practices, not the esoteric part i.e. the interiority and the spirituality. This paper aims at exploring the phenomenon of the pervasiveness of the exoteric aspect of religion compared to the esoteric aspect and assessing the consequences of the imbalance between these two dimensions. The expression of exoteric dimensions solely without the cultivation of the esoteric part has rendered bad impression and misinterpretation of the true Islamic teaching. A holistic Islamic practice that encompasses both exoteric and esoteric dimensions is essential for producing the best ummah.

**Keywords:** Exoteric, esoteric, Islam, Malaysia;

**Abstrak:** Dalam beberapa tahun kebelakangan ini, umat Islam Malaysia nampaknya telah mengalami peningkatan dalam kesedaran dan amalan agama. Tren keagamaan yang semakin meningkat dapat dilihat daripada cara berpakaian khususnya di kalangan wanita Islam seperti pemakaian tudung dan niqab; penggunaan perkataan Arab bagi menggantikan perkataan Melayu dalam percakapan dan sapaan harian seperti solat menggantikan sembahyang, iftar menggantikan berbuka puasa dan Eid Mubarak menggantikan Selamat Hari Raya serta peningkatan program dan acara keagamaan seperti World #QuranHour dan Malam Cinta Rasul. Malangnya, di sebalik kesedaran dan amalan Islam yang memberi inspirasi ini, isu-isu berkaitan moral, jenayah, diskriminasi, rasuah dan kelakuan tidak beretika lain yang dikaitkan dengan umat Islam juga semakin meningkat. Ini disebabkan oleh hakikat bahawa apa yang kelihatan meningkat hanyalah dimensi eksoterik agama iaitu peraturan luaran, undang-undang dan amalan yang boleh dilihat, bukan bahagian esoterik iaitu dalaman dan kerohanian. Kertas kerja ini bertujuan untuk meneroka fenomena keluasan aspek eksoterik agama berbanding aspek esoterik dan

menilai akibat ketidakseimbangan antara kedua-dua dimensi ini. Ekspresi dimensi eksoterik semata-mata tanpa penyemaian dimensi esoterik telah memberikan tanggapan buruk dan salah tafsiran terhadap ajaran Islam yang sebenar. Amalan Islam holistik yang merangkumi kedua-dua dimensi eksoterik dan esoterik adalah penting untuk melahirkan ummah yang terbaik.

**Kata kunci:** Eksoterik, esoterik, Islam, Malaysia;

## Introduction

Recently, religious awareness among Malaysia's Muslim community appears to be increasing tremendously. This can be witnessed by the lifestyle of the Malaysian Muslim community which has becoming more Islamic. Examples of such lifestyles include the wearing of *hijab*, *jubah* and *arbaya* among Muslim women, the use of Arabic words to replace Malay words in daily conversation such as *Assalamualaikum* for greetings, *iftar* for *buka puasa*, *solat* for *sembahyang*, *Eid Mubarak* for *Selamat Hari Raya* and many more (Asma Abdullah, 2015).

Apart from these, a more Islamic lifestyle can be seen in the active implementation and participation of the Muslim community in Islamic activities and events such as *Majlis zikir*, viewing and subscribing religious channels on YouTube, and sharing religious posts in WhatsApp groups. Local TV stations also seem to be influenced with this trend whenever religious programs become more prevalent. There are also television channels such as TV Alhijrah and Astro Oasis that are more Shariah compliance in terms of program's content and human resource.

The Islamic preachers and religious figures are becoming more popular and recognized by the community as many of them have been conferred with certain orders of honour. The glory of these religious figures has attracted the attention of TV stations to produced reality programs to promote the field of dakwah and new preachers. However, does the increase in quantity of religious trends is consistent with the quality? Is there any improvement in the esoteric dimension whenever there is development in the exoteric dimension? If there is a balance in the rise of exoteric and esoteric dimension, why are the issues of religious insults more prevalent in our society today?

The exoteric dimension refers to the exterior rules and regulations, a code of moral conduct and psychophysical practices or also known as the Shariah. The esoteric aspect on the other hand, is related to the interiority and the spirituality which is identified as Tasawwuf or Sufism (Bayman, 2003). Among Muslims, exoteric is commonly known as *zahir* while esoteric is

known as *batin* (Ralph Sloten, 1977). The exoteric and esoteric Islamic dimensions therefore, are two entities that complement each other, which mean that the *zahir* cannot exist without its *batin* counterpart and the other way around. Islam as Henry Bayman (2003:200) puts it, is "the law plus Sufism."

Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi a prominent contemporary Muslim scholar, provided a slightly different definition for the Shariah. He defined Shariah as "the detailed code of conduct or the canons comprising ways and modes of worship, standards of morals and life, laws that permit and prohibit and rules that judge between right and wrong." (Khurshid Ahmad, 1980:95). Maududi further explained that Fiqh and Tasawwuf are actually part of Shariah and both complement each other in fulfilling the Shariah. Therefore according to Maududi, Fiqh signifying the exoteric while Tasawwuf representing the esoteric.

He then explained how Fiqh and Tasawwuf complement each other in Shariah. "Fiqh deals with the apparent and the observable conduct, the fulfilling of a duty in practice. The field which concerns itself with the spirit of conduct is known as Tasawwuf. For example, when we perform *solah*, Fiqh will judge us only by the fulfilment of physical requirements such as cleansing, facing towards the Kaabah and the timing and the number of rakaahs. Tasawwuf, on the other hand, will judge our prayers by our concentration, devotion, purification of our souls and the effect of our prayers on our morals and manners. Thus, the true Islamic Tasawwuf is the measure of our spirit of our obedience and sincerity, while Fiqh governs our carrying out commands to the last detail" (Kurshid, 1980:97).

According to Maududi, an ibadah that is perfectly done in terms of procedure but devoid of spirit is just like a good looking man that is ill mannered. While an ibadah only applied in spirit without the practical execution is just like a noble man but lacks physical appearance.

The combination between Fiqh and Tasawwuf forms a true Muslim. A true Muslim must have an intense love of Allah S.W.T. and the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. and +++that intense love which will lead to a strict obedience to the commands of Allah S.W.T. as enshrined in the

Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. A person who fails to carry out the command of Allah S.W.T., is presumably fails to demonstrate his love for Allah S.W.T. and His messenger.

This paper will dismantle the extent to which the awakening of religiosity has encompassed the esoteric and exoteric dimension in the following realms:

1. Contemporary dakwah methods
2. The wearing of Hijab among Muslim women
3. Islamic branding and labelling
4. Unequal weighting in religious practices

To achieve the aims of this study, six Malaysian Muftis were interviewed. Among the Muftis were:

1. Mufti of Penang Datuk Dr. Wan Salim Wan Mohd Nor
2. Mufti of Perlis Dato' Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin
3. Mufti of Pahang Datuk Seri Dr. Abdul Rahman Osman
4. Former Mufti of Federal Territory Datuk Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad Albakri
5. Mufti of Melaka Dato' Haji Abdul Halim Tawil
6. Former Mufti of Perak the late Tan Sri Harussani Haji Zakaria

### **Contemporary dakwah methods: Quantity vs. quality**

In the field of dakwah, there has been a growth of the exoteric or the external dimension instead of the esoteric or the internal dimension. The exoteric dimension of dakwah is reflected in the methods of dakwah itself while the esoteric dimension referring to the values and knowledge internalized from the dakwah programs.

The basic methodology of dakwah as applied by the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. can be traced in surah al-Nahl, verse 125, "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious."

The methodologies are, *al-Jidal bil-lati hiya ahsan, al-maw'izah al-hasanah and al-dakwah bi al-hikmah* (Shehu, 2017). The first method is *al-Dakwah bi al-Hikmah* (the invitation of others to the way of Allah with wisdom). For instance, in the early years of dakwah in Mecca, the Prophet S.A.W. conveyed the Islamic messages to his relatives by inviting them for a meal. Second, *al-maw'izah al-hasanah* (beautiful preaching or delivering of the message). This method required a *da'i* (preacher) to convey the teachings of Islam in "a polite and moderate manner, and awakening of the feelings with the intention of good advice and counselling" (al-

Baarudee, 1987: 24). Third, *al-jidal bil-lati hiya ahsan* (argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious). The goal of *al-Jidal* is to allow a debate or discussion to take place in a peaceful and friendly manner (Shehu, 2017).

The contemporary dakwah method is no longer limited to formal religious talks or lectures in the *surau* or mosque only. The method of dakwah today is more casual and relaxed. The content of dakwah or the knowledge conveyed is also simpler and is sometimes interspersed with elements of humour and singing. There is no doubt that this contemporary method of dakwah has succeeded in attracting a large number of attendees but the effect and level of understanding of the participants of such dakwah programs are still vague.

Does the quantity become the main concern of dakwah today rather than quality? Is a successful dakwah measured by the number of participants alone? Does the participant's understanding and internalization of the content of dakwah become less important? The concerns over the quality of the content of this contemporary dakwah have been voiced by muftis who have been interviewed by the author. Melaka Mufti, Dato' Haji Abdul Halim Tawil stated that dakwah today focuses on entertainment and not knowledge. He made a comparison between two preachers. The first preacher is a preacher who uses more relaxed and humorous approach while the second preacher is a preacher who emphasizes the content of knowledge by applying a more serious and conventional approach in his religious lectures.

According to Dato' Haji Abdul Halim, the society will definitely be more attracted to the first preacher. But the question is, what is the value, quality and effectiveness of the talk or lecture? Will the knowledge delivered increase the religious awareness among the participants? Or they will simply feel entertained? He also questioned large-scale religious events such as *Malam Cinta Rasul*.

Although such events can promote *zikir* and *salawat* on the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W., but the content and lessons from such events are also contentious (Abdul Halim Tawil, personal communication, November 22, 2016). Mufti of Perlis, Dato' Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin has also raised similar concerns over contemporary dakwah methods that lack of content and are too focused on jokes, singing and other forms of entertainment (Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, personal communication, October 14, 2016).

Former Perak Mufti, the late Tan Sri Harussani Haji Zakaria raised the issue of the effectiveness of dakwah programs that we have today. According to him, although dakwah programs are growing rapidly in this

country in line with the development of information technology and mass media, but the effectiveness of these dakwah programs is still ambiguous. Tan Sri Harussani was of the view that, religious talks today are not practical in nature (Harussani Zakaria, personal communication, November 16, 2016).

All the contemporary dakwah programs that used the approach of reality program and performance are indeed prevalent in Malaysia today. The populist dakwah approach that combines local culture such as elements of local art with Islamic teachings had actually been used by preachers who belonged to the Sufis scholars in the past, especially around the end of the 16th century in their efforts to spread Islam in the Malay world. Among the artistic and cultural mediums used at that time by the Sufis such as Wali Songo were *wayang kulit*, *dikir barat* and *gamelan*. The use of arts and cultural platforms that were close to the hearts of the society at that time helped the preachers to spread Islam more easily (Khairudin Aljunied, 2019).

There is certainly nothing wrong for preachers to use this populist approach in order to increase the society participation in these dakwah programs. But there are few things that must be emphasized before a preacher uses this populist approach. Firstly, the clear identity and credibility of a preacher. The preacher should have an identity that can be distinguished from an artist or performer. The status of a teacher must be clear to ensure that his students have respect and manners not only to the teacher but also to the knowledge conveyed. Only through respect and manners the knowledge will have a positive impact to the audience. The significance of manners and *akhlak* in seeking knowledge has been highlighted by few Muslim scholars.

Malik ibn Anas, may Allah have mercy on him said:

“Learn good manners before seeking knowledge” (Al-Muzaffar, 2013).

According to Ibn al-Qayyim in *Madarij al-Salikin* (2/361),

“The reality of manners is that it results from beautiful character. Thus, manners is the externalization of the integrity and strength in one’s inward disposition into action” (Anjum, 2020).

Secondly, the intention of the preachers in their dakwah activities. According to Shehu (2017), the main objective of the Prophetic dakwah is to protect the religion of Islam. Therefore, disseminating Islamic

teachings and *amar makruf nahi munkar*, is apparently the real role of a preacher. However, with the existence of dakwah reality programs today and dakwah that is infused with elements of humor and entertainment, it raises the question, do the preachers prioritize popularity over the effectiveness of the dakwah?

It is narrated on the authority of Amir al-Mu’minin, Abu Hafis ‘Umar bin al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), saying:

“Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended. Whoever migrates with an intention for Allah and His messenger, the migration will be for the sake of Allah and his Messenger. And whoever migrates for worldly gain or to marry a woman, then his migration will be for the sake of whatever he migrated for.” Related by Bukhari & Muslim (Sahih al-Bukhari 54: Book 2, Hadith 47).

If the preachers prioritize the quantity of participants (which is exoteric in nature) in the dakwah program, then the quantity will be obtained, if the quality and content of knowledge (which is esoteric in nature) is the priority then the quality will be achieved.

### **Hijab: Identity of a Muslim woman or a symbol of modesty?**

Nowadays, we are witnessing a significant change in the mode of dressing among the Muslim woman in Malaysia such as hijab and Shariah-compliant clothing. Previously, it was quite difficult to see television programs such as dramas, movies, news or documentaries that featured images of a woman wearing a hijab. But lately, this scenario is no longer something foreign in our country. Many Muslim women celebrities have declared themselves to have ‘migrated’ (*hijrah*) and put on the hijab.

The question is whether the change in the mode of dressing in today’s context is due to the increase understanding of the teachings of Islam or is it just a current trend that will fade away at some point in the future? Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of hijab among Muslim women today is a good development. But, Dato’ Dr. Mohd Asri also questioned the sincerity of some Muslim women in wearing the hijab. Because there are few Muslim women traders will take the opportunity to profit from this hijab trend and fashion (Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, personal communication, October 14, 2016). Therefore, the wearing of hijab in this context is merely for commercial and not religious purposes.

If a person has really understood the reason why a Muslim woman needs to wear hijab and cover her *aurat*, then, there will be no issue of wearing and removing the hijab alternately or wearing hijab but still involved in immoral things, vices and misconduct. Hijab or often referred to as the “veil”, is a traditional Muslim women’s head, face, or body covering that worn with different forms and styles across time and space (Esposito, 2003).

There are some liberals who consider the wearing of the hijab only relevant for Arab women in the Prophetic era. They claim that what the Quran suggests is only the principle of modesty and preservation of a woman’s dignity and not the wearing of the hijab because it was only the culture of the Arab society at that time. Aminah Wadud (1998) for instance argues that, Islam indeed encourages the wearing of hijab because it is a mode of dressing among pre-Islamic Arab women from powerful and high-status tribes. These women wore the hijab as a symbol of modesty and the height of their status.

Esposito (2003) also acknowledges hijab as a symbol of modesty, privacy, and morality especially for a woman. The hijab practice was also allegedly borrowed from elite women of the Byzantine, Greek, and Persian empires, where it signified respectability and high status, during the Arab reigns of these empires. This trend gradually spread among urban populations, becoming more pervasive under Turkish rule as a mark of rank and exclusive lifestyle (Esposito, 2003).

For this reason, Aminah Wadud infers that what more important is the principle of modesty that needs to be practiced and not necessarily the wearing of the hijab. For the liberals, the wearing of hijab was merely a manifestation of modesty and high status of women at that time. Thus, the modesty and status can be manifested in any other ways depending on the period of time and culture of a particular society. Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, through the wearing of hijab at that time, the Quran has also indirectly confirmed the identity of Muslim women and believers.

In Surah al-Ahzab, verse 59, Allah S.W.T. has commanded (meaning):

“O Prophet, enjoin your wives and your daughters and the believing women, to draw a part of their outer coverings around them. It is likelier that they will be recognised and not molested. Allah is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

Through the decent dress and wearing of hijab, undoubtedly a woman will be known as a Muslim woman whose modesty and status is preserved. The wearing of hijab therefore is not the style of dress of

women in a particular era or the culture of a particular society. It is a set of standards and an identity of a Muslim woman embodied in the Quran.

Without a proper understanding of the true principles of wearing hijab, then there will be those who wear hijab inconsistently or those who wear hijab but are still involved in immoral things, vices and misconduct. The wearing of hijab and covering the *aurat* as the identity of Muslim women and believers (the exoteric) must go hand in hand with the principle of modesty (the esoteric) and vice versa. If a woman wears hijab but does not demonstrate good morals, for example, uttering abusive words against others then she is still not yet worthy of being called an honourable woman. And if a woman has good morals but does not cover her *aurat* properly, then she has no identity as a Muslim woman.

### **Islamic branding and labelling: Islamization of human beings or objects?**

Most of the muftis interviewed agreed that, although the trend of Islamic practice in Malaysia seems to be getting better, but the proliferation is only in terms of ritual and external practices (i.e. the exoteric) alone and not the rise in terms of internal and spiritual (i.e. the esoteric). Among the Islamic practices that are external, superficial and mechanical is the use of labels or branding of products and organizations with “Islamic” of “Arabic” names and attributes.

In Malaysia, this branding process is considered as part of the Islamization efforts that took place in the 1980s. The Islamization projects were a response to the growth of the Islamic revival movements led by several dakwah groups that began in the 1970s (Hussin Mutalib, 1993 & Muhamad Fuzi Omar, 1999). Examples of institutions that used Islamic names are International Islamic University Malaysia and Bank Islam Malaysia Berhad.

The same trend also applies to other goods and products where there are traders who use Islamic names or elements to their products. This strategy is used to attract customers and earned a large sum of money. Indirectly, Islam has been commercialized and has become a commodity (Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, personal communication, October 14, 2016).

In the food and beverage industry for instance, the Islamic labelling has succeeded in making the products more appealing to Muslim consumers. Furthermore, there are some products that use hadith texts as evidence in support of sales products. Even though those products are claimed to be “*sunnah food*”, they still need to be studied scientifically and thoroughly in order to prove its nutritional validity and benefits for health. This is

because, there are “*sunnah foods*” that have been mixed with other ingredients, so it is suspected that they will affect the true benefits of the “*sunnah food*” (Mohd Izzat, Mohd Farhan, Mohd Anuar & Ahmad Rozaini, 2016).

According to the former Federal Territory Mufti, Datuk Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad Albakri, the use of Islamic names on products or organizations will trigger the concept of dualism. The former mufti added that the dualism will occur not only in thought but also in education that will further separate Muslims and non-Muslims. The use of Islamic names on products or organizations is considered irrelevant because the name does not reflect the true nature of an entity (Zulkifli Mohamad Albakri, personal communication, October 6, 2016).

Other than dualism, the use of Islamic labels or brands on a product or organization can trigger exclusivism among Muslims. The exclusivism can be seen significantly in the legal system where the court system in Malaysia is divided into civil courts and Shariah courts. According to the Mufti of Penang, Datuk Dr. Wan Salim Wan Mohd Nor, some of the Shariah court ruling seem to be only in favour of Muslims. For example the issue of child custody for divorced parents. If one parent is a Muslim, then the custody will be given to the Muslim parent.

The decision to automatically grant rights to a Muslim guardian on the grounds of safeguarding the child’s faith seems to deny the rights of non-Muslim guardians. This kind of decision showing as if Islam is a very exclusive religion and has no element of justice and consideration. As a matter of fact, Islam is not a religion that condones punishment without fair judgment. Islam emphasizes wisdom and diplomacy especially with the non-Muslims (Wan Salim Wan Mohd Nor, personal communication, October 25, 2016). This principle is enshrined in Surah an-Nahl, verse 125 which also become the main Prophetic method in dakwah:

“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided.”

The use of Islamic names or attributes (the exoteric dimension) on products or organizations, if not in line with the values (the esoteric dimension) advocated by Islam will certainly discredit Islam itself. According to Pahang Mufti, Datuk Seri Dr. Abdul Rahman Osman, Islamic values and principles should be internalized and practiced by the Muslims instead of just putting a name

on a product or organization. What is the point of putting the name of Islam on a product or organization but in terms of its principles and practices do not reflect the teachings of Islam? (Abdul Rahman Osman, personal communication, October 20, 2016). If the product or organization that uses the Islamic names fails to demonstrate the principles and values of the Islamic teachings properly, then it will negatively affect the image of Islam.

In conveying ideas on Islamization of knowledge, Fazlur Rahman, a renowned Muslim scholar also emphasized the importance of Islamization of man instead of Islamizing the knowledge because according to him, it is the man who is responsible for his knowledge (Fazlur Rahman, 2011). It is obvious from his statement, that the first thing to be Islamized is the man himself.

### Unequal weighting in religious practices: Mandatory vs. recommended practices

Apart from the issue of Islamic labels and branding, the Muslim community in Malaysia is now also facing the phenomenon of unequal weighting in religious practices. [Shariah](#) rulings or *hukum* are divided into five categories namely, [mandatory](#) (*farḍ* or *wajib*), [recommended](#) (*mandub* or *mustahabb*), [neutral or permissible](#) (*mubah*), [reprehensible](#) (*makruh*), and [forbidden](#) (*haram*) (Vikør, 2014). However, according to Dato’ Haji Abdul Halim, the Muslim community today tends to give more priority on the recommended practices instead of the mandatory practices.

For example, there are some Muslims today, will use their money to perform *umrah* several times (whereas it is just a recommended practices) but at the same time they might have outstanding debts in which it is mandatory for them to settle (Abdul Halim Tawil, personal communication, November 22, 2016). We also see the awareness of the Muslim community in performing recommended prayers is increasing today, for example *tarawikh* prayers, *dhuha* prayers, *tahajjud* prayers and others. Indeed, these recommended prayers, like other recommended prayers, if performed, will be rewarded, but if not performed, there will be no sin.

However, there are a handful of people who use their working hours at the workplace and neglect the tasks that should be done during the working hours to perform recommended prayers such as *dhuha* prayers. In this context, fulfilling the responsibilities at the workplace is the real obligation but priority is given to the recommended prayers.

In addition, in the teaching and learning of the Quran, the Muslim community today focuses more on *tajwid*

and *tarannum* compared to the understanding and internalization of the content of the Quran itself. According to Datuk Dr. Wan Salim, what will lead to significant change in the life of the Muslim community is the understanding and application of the essence of the teachings of the Quran (Wan Salim Wan Mohd Nor, personal communication, October 25, 2016).

Rasulullah S.A.W. was the best example of a person who internalized and practiced the teachings of the Quran. Saidatina Aisyah R.A described Rasulullah S.A.W. as the living Quran since he demonstrated the Quranic values into his personal life (Fachri Aidulyah, 2020). If we wonder why there are some people who read and memorize the Quran but still committing vices, then, the answer is a lack of understanding and appreciation of the teachings of the Quran.

The Muslim community of the day should be more rational in prioritizing the religious practices in order to ensure that they are not only focusing on the exoteric dimension and abandoning the esoteric dimension of religion.

## Conclusion

The religious phenomenon in Malaysia recently shows a positive development where we can see the emergence of many young preachers, the mushrooming of dakwah programs in the mass media, the prevalence of *hijabi* trend, the adoption of Arabic and Islamic culture among the Malay Muslims, the use of Islamic brands in products and organizations and the increase awareness in implementing Islamic practices, especially the recommended practices.

However, along with the increasing level of religiosity in the Muslim society today, we are also witnessing the widespread of moral depravity and crime. This reality raises the question of the quality of Islamic practices that are evolving today. In actual fact, what is evolving today is merely ritual and external practices that will eventually give birth to a superficial and substandard Muslim society. If a society is shallow and of poor quality then it is not peculiar if we see the rapid advancement of Islam in Malaysia, but, at the same time we also see rampant immorality and crime.

The prevalent religious phenomenon in our society today is a religious phenomenon that focuses on the exoteric not the esoteric, the quantity not the quality, and the rituals not the values. Thus, the current religious phenomenon is mechanical, soulless and shallow Islamic practices. According to Dato' Dr. Mohd Asri, the Muslim society today actually only focuses on Islamic 'accessories' that is external in nature and not the values and essence of Islamic teachings themselves (Mohd Asri

Zainul Abidin, personal communication, October 14, 2016).

The superficiality of religious practices today can be seen in several themes that have been discussed in this paper. The influx of dakwah programs and preachers that focus on the popularity of preachers and the number of participants compared to the knowledge and quality of dakwah; wearing hijab without understanding and internalization of its principles, Islamization of products and institutions instead human beings and the unequal weighting in religious practices (for example, recommended worship is given more priority over mandatory worship) all indicate the shallowness of the Muslims religiosity today.

Focusing on one aspect of religion such as exoteric aspect and leaving the esoteric part reflects the superficial, unbalanced and incomplete religious practices as the phenomenon that we are witnessing today. This phenomenon has been identified by an Egyptian scholar, Fahmi Huwaydi (1994) as the phenomenon of *tadayyun manqus* or imperfect religiosity. This phenomenon is the phenomenon of separation between the exoteric and esoteric, between religious affairs and non-religious affairs, between rituals and other practices, and the separation between worldly and otherworldly affairs.

In actual fact, Allah S.W.T. has made Islam a perfect and complete religion on the day of *Hajj wada'* which is the last *Hajj* performed by the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. It is recorded in surah al-Maidah, verse 3 (meaning):

“This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favour upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion. But whoever is forced by severe hunger with no inclination to sin-then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.”

The perfect religion described in this verse does not at all reflect the phenomenon that is happening in the Muslim society in Malaysia today. Although Islam seems to be more flourishing and growing, but it is not a perfect religiosity instead it is an imperfect religiosity or *tadayyun manqus*. This is the reason why despite the increase of religious and dakwah programs, we are also witnessing a deterioration of morality and dignity of the Muslim society.

Our ultimate goal as Muslims is definitely to be the best *ummah* (*khayr ummah*) among mankind as stated in Surah Ali 'Imran, verse 110 (meaning):

“You are the best *ummah* ever raised for mankind. You bid the Fair and forbid the Unfair,



and you believe in Allah. If the people of the Book had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them, there are believers, while most of them are sinners.”

However, in order to be the best *ummah*, our approach to religion must be changed. An approach that is more comprehensive and holistic which encompasses not only the Fiqh i.e. the exoteric but also the Tasawwuf i.e. the esoteric, an approach that focuses not only on quantity but also quality and an approach that focuses not only on rituals and brands but also on values. Finally, the approach should also be soulful, profound, non-mechanical and not superficial.

Since this research only focuses on the perspective of the Mufti's and religious scholars on the issue of discrepancy between exoteric and esoteric dimensions in religious practices, future research should aim at the perception of the Muslim grassroots in general.

## References

- Al-Baarudee, M. S. (1987). *Al-da'wah wa al-daa'iyah fi da'wi' surah al-Furqaan*. Dar al-Wafaa'.
- Al-Jawziyya, I. Q. (2020). *Ranks of the Divine Seekers* (O. Anjum, Trans.). Brill. (Original work published N.A)
- Al-Junied, K. (2019). Islam in Southeast Asia. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Religion*. Retrieved July 20, 2022, from <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/-9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-658>
- Al-Muzaffar, A. A. M. (2013). *Ghara'ib malik ibn Anas*. Turath for Solutions.
- Asma, A. (2015). The impact of Islamisation on Malays in Malaysia. In G25 Malaysia (Ed.), *Breaking the silence: Voices of moderation* (pp.253-265.). Marshall Cavendish Editions.
- Bayman, H. (2003). *The secret of Islam: Love and law in the religion of ethics*, North Atlantic Books.
- Esposito, J.L. (2003). Hijab. In *The Oxford dictionary of Islam*. Retrieved July 20, 2022, from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195125580.001.0001/acref-9780195125580-e-839?rskey=CzOGDZ&result=1>
- Fachri, A. (2020). The Paradigm of Quran as the Main Element of Islamic Civilization, *Tsaqafah Jurnal Peradaban Islam*, 16(1), 127-146.
- Hussin, M. (1993). *Islam in Malaysia: From revivalism to Islamic State*. National University of Singapore.
- Huwaydi, F. (1994). *al-Tadayyun al Manqus*. Dar al-Shuruq.
- Maududi, S.A.A. (1982). *Towards understanding Islam* (K. Ahmad, Trans.). The Islamic Foundation. (Original work published 1980).
- Mohd Izzat, A. S., Mohd Farhan, M. A., Mohd Anuar, R. & Ahmad Rozaini A. H. (2016). Penyalahgunaan Sunnah Nabi dalam pelabelan dan promosi produk halal. In Mohd Yusoff, M.Y.Z. Ahmad, K. and Abd Razzak, M. (Eds.), *Penyelidikan tentang makanan : Perspektif nabawi dan saintifik* (p.129-138). Department al-Quran and al-Hadith, APIUM.
- Muhamad Fuzi, O. (1999). *Government policies on Islamisation: 1981-1996*. [Unpublished master dissertation, International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), Gombak].
- Rahman, F. (2011). Islamization of Knowledge: A Response. *Islamic Studies*, 50(3/4), 449-457. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41932607>
- Shehu, F. (2017). Methodology of prophetic da'wah and its relevance to contemporary global society. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 6, 9-17.
- Slotten, R. (1977). Exoteric and esoteric modes of apprehension. *Sociology of Religion*, 38(3), 185-208. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3709801>
- Vikør, K. S. (2014). Shari'ah. In E. E. Shahin (ed.). *The Oxford encyclopedia of Islam and politics*. Oxford University Press
- Wadud, A. (1998). Qu'ran and woman. In C. Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*. (pp. 127-238). Oxford University Press.