

AL-ITQĀN

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Volume: 5

Issue No. 2

August 2021

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eISSN:26008432

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Tel: +603 6196 5558
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Published by:
IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia
P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298
Website: <http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop>

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Atheism and Atheists: Western and Islamic Perspectives

Nur Afifah Abdul Razak*
Wan Mohd Azam Mohd Amin**

Abstract

This article aims to study the primary and secondary definition of atheism and atheists according to the Western and Islamic Perspectives. This research will highlight some of the typologies of atheists, sociological and psychological conditions of atheist and self-identified atheists in modern ideologies. A further discussion and exploration will also cover the response of Muslim scholars and philosophers to atheism and atheists such as Al-Ghāzālī and Sa'īd Ramaḍān Al-Butiy. This study employs a qualitative method by analysing related books, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and journal articles. The finding indicates that there are insufficient sources in defining the word atheism in Islam as compared to the Western connotations.

Keyword: Atheism, *Zindiq*, Faith, Islamic Philosophy, Religion

Introduction

The emergence of atheism as part of ideology has been known for decades. It has been a long-rooted problem throughout the world history of religions. Each religion confronts a different spectrum of disbelievers that somehow pointed to the same objection; the denial of the existence of God. In examining the definition, however, there are numerous versions connotes either by the formal references i.e. dictionaries and encyclopaedias or from the atheists themselves. The study refers to the formal references as a primary definition of atheism and atheists as well as the non-formal definition as the secondary definition of atheism and atheists.

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Primary Definition of Atheism and Atheist

According to the *Brill Dictionary to Religion*, the term atheism was known as “atheos” mean godlessness by the ancient Greek era in the sixteenth century¹. Kocku further implies that atheism denies the existence of any God or gods along with the denial of life after death. Doniger² and Thiselton³ have a similar idea in defining atheism as a denial of belief in God. Both authors also stress that the term atheism is in contrast with the term agnosticism, which claims the existence of God is uncertain.

Taliaferro in the Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion firstly denotes atheism like Konku which refer to the Greek word means “without God”. However, the dictionary later expressed the term atheism as the denial of theism, either atheistic or a non-theistic God.⁴ Draper affirms Taliaferro when he stresses that the term atheism needs to be inserted from the term “theism” which implies the belief that there is no God.⁵

The following elaborations indicate that there is no permanent or fixed terms use in defining atheism primarily. While those definitions might seem alike, all interpretations are different from one to another. Firstly, all definitions are pointing out to one subject called God, whether a single God or multiple gods, theism or non-theism. Secondly, the usage of the word “without” or “denial” in referring to the act of rejection. Thirdly, some might use the word “belief” while some of it not.

Taliaferro during the earlier time, for example, used to define atheism similar to the Greek definition which affirmed “without God”, but later on changed it to the “denial to the theistic or non-theistic God”.⁶ The change is made in reference to the current usage and the frequent connotation mark by society during the times. Draper further explains that rather than using the word “without”, he prefers to use “no” directly.⁷ That is because, using the term “without” still undeniably

¹ Kocku von Stuckrad, ed., ‘Atheism’, in *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, 1st ed. (Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), p.149.

² ‘Atheism’, in *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of World Religions*, ed. Wendy Doniger, 1st ed. (Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1999), p.87.

³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion*, 1st ed. (England: Oneworld Publications, 2002), p.18.

⁴ Taliaferro, Elsa J. Marty Charles, *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion*, 1st ed. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p.22.

⁵ Paul Draper, ‘Atheism and Agnosticism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017, accessed on Feb 9, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/Atheism-agnosticism/>.

⁶ Taliaferro, Elsa J. Marty Charles, *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion*, p. 22.

⁷ Draper, Paul. ‘Atheism and Agnosticism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

admit to the existence of God, while using “no” assure that someone rejects to believe whether God existed or not. To put it simply, Michael Martin defines atheism into two: positive atheism and negative atheism.¹ The earlier definition of Taliaferro indicates a positive Atheism to Martin, while the Draper definition is similar to his negative atheism.

An atheist, in addition, according to Gardner, can be defined as someone who denies the existence of the Divine Being.² Hinnells adds that the atheist might be someone who believes that the existence of God is false and illogical.³

Secondary Definition of Atheism and Atheist

The usage of the primary definition alone as a sole source is not sufficient in describing atheism. Therefore, the secondary definitions of atheism and atheist are included in supporting this study. The definitions are quoted from either the atheists themselves or from any formal researches concerning atheism and atheists. Unlike the primary definition, the secondary definitions seek to explore more on the categorization adopted by the atheist.

Silver et. al. in exploring the views of the atheist enumerate six types of “non-belief” or atheist as an outcome of his research.⁴ Parallel to religion, this study imposes that, there is a need to truly understand and divulge the characterisations, classifications and identity formations of the non-belief. This research also claims that, rather than stick to a specific term of atheism and atheists, they choose to broaden their scope to non-belief. The notion of non-belief not only covers up atheism but also applies to the other secular identities and philosophical beliefs.⁵ Hence, the six typologies of the non-belief highlighted by Silver et. al. are as follows:

¹ Michael Martin, ‘Atheism: A Philosophical Justification,’ (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 1.

² James Gardner, ‘Atheism’, *Encyclopedia of Faiths and Religions of the World*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1999), p. 247.

³ John R. Hinnells (ed), ‘Atheism,’ *A New Dictionary of Religions*, (Massachusetts: USA, 1995).

⁴ Silver, Christopher F., et al., ‘The Six Types of Nonbelief: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Type and Narrative’, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17, no. 10 (26 November 2014), 993-996, accessed on Dec 20, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2014.987743>.

⁵ Silver et. al. ‘The Six Types of Nonbelief: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Type and Narrative’

1. Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic

The Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic are those who actively educating themselves with any acquired knowledge whether in the philosophical or metaphysical discourse, theology and ontology. They are outspoken and forward-looking as they are open to any intellectual discussion, debates and relevant argument. They are well-versed people, intellectually rational and educated.

2. Activist Atheist/Agnostic

The Active Atheist/Agnostic denotes proactive participation in activism. They are holding both, the latest insight and intellectual knowledge regarding belief. They are an activist in the sense that they are vocally involved in anything related to the socio-political concerns and human rights. They are the main advocates to all the humanist, liberalist, and environmentalist movements.

3. Seeker-Agnostic

The Seeker-Agnostic are those who invoke their interest in any metaphysical or ontological possibilities in seeking their stand in those. They do not stand to any ideological position as they acknowledge the limited capacity of the human intellect and experience. They are inborn seeker, where they are continuously intrigued to explore and search for the right answer regarding religion and belief.

4. Anti-Theist

The Anti-Theist was obviously – are those who oppose any religious ideas. The Anti-Theist is truly ambitious as they seek to educate the Theist to reaffirm their belief towards religion. In other words, the Anti-Theist strongly against religion as religion and belief were viewed as illogical and outdated.

5. Non-Theist

Compare to the Anti-Theist, the Non-Theist are those who not interested in religion. They simply exclude themselves from having any engagement with anything concerning religion and belief. They simply are an insensible nonbeliever.

6. Ritual Atheist or Agnostic

The Ritual Atheist or Agnostic are those who intrinsically embedded with the tradition and the ritual of religion, as that might already be part of their inborn identity. They have a lack of belief in religion, where they might be spiritualist in person but had no stand-in ontological views.

Sociological and Psychological Perspectives of the Atheist

On the other hand, Saeed validates the discussion earlier in reference to her study on the socio-political thought and impact of atheism in contemporary Western society.¹ There are two core elements describe by the social scientist to an atheist that is identity and ideology. Ideologically, the atheists are those who had an issue in believing in the existence of God, while in identity, they prefer to self-identify themselves as an atheist.²

Secluding oneself apart from the community requires bold determination and strong identity stances. The dependability of a human to a community is undeniable, as the nature of human is tied to it. Therefore, to become an atheist, there are four stages highlights by Saeed in describing the identity developments of an atheist. First, the presence of theism in society. The misbehaviour of the theist, illogical practices and unnecessary rituals of religion are mainly what trigger the atheists. Secondly, the atheist begins to question and doubt everything on religion. Religion somehow fails to satisfy their curiosity, resulting in constant prejudice. Thirdly, total negligence where an atheist affirms his refutation to religion. Finally, an atheist will firmly justify himself as a self-labelling atheist or associate himself with other equivalent secular ideologies as atheism.

Marcus Mann, in his study on the correlation of three elements: stigma, identity and community among atheists in North Carolina also highlights the same four identity developments describe by Saeed.³ Mann affirms that those four stages indicate that perceptions, prejudices, and circumstances of the community play the biggest role in affecting

¹ Lubna Saeed, 'Socio-Political Thoughts and Impact of atheism in Contemporary Western Societies', *Context and Reflection: Philosophy of the World and Human Being* 7, no. 2018 (n.d.): p. 88.

² Lubna Saeed, 'Socio-Political Thoughts and Impact of atheism in Contemporary Western Societies', p. 88.

³ Marcus Mann, 'Triangle Atheists: Stigma, Identity, and Community Among Atheists in North Carolina's Triangle Region', *Secularism and Nonreligion* 4, no. 11 (23 October 2015): 1–12, accessed on Dec 18, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.bd>.

the life and identity formations of an atheist. The negative response from family members, bad perceptions from the co-workers may lead to overwhelming, self-guilt and blameworthy.

Mann further explains that nature innates of a human is relying on the society. By being an outcast to the mainstream society, an atheist, will, therefore, be intrigued to affiliate himself with other society. The emergence of an atheist society is not something new to the world. Mann in discussing the ethnographic situation of atheism groups classifies it into two different levels: local level and national level.¹ At the local level, the nature of the atheist organisation is focusing more on social support. While at a national level, the atheist organisation is more directly toward public engagement and reconstructing social order.

In emphasizing the social support groups, McCaffree illuminates that group affiliation is not only important for mental support, but it also influences the physical well-being of an atheist. By comparing the social groups of the religious and non-religious, the non-religious or atheist groups are often to be at disadvantages. He claims that a good relation in a religious group builds good emotional support thus creating a more cultural fit. A religious group with strong network capacity, firm quality and size, also offer a bigger prospect to better social-capital health. While, the smaller the scope of nonreligious groups in society, the lesser they gain opportunities, awareness and insights to a better health condition.²

Caldwell-Harris in understanding an atheist as an individual elaborate three characteristics according to psychological perspectives. Firstly, an atheist is categorised as a less socialising person. This is shown by their inactive mingling with family members and even less enthusiasm in friendship. Next, an atheist also views as singularity and self-centred where he is more open and more carefree. Thirdly, an atheist is believed to be a dissident person, where he rejected the idea of being control either by the authority or the belief systems.³

Based on these three characteristics, it can be seen that an atheist can be classified as a high social status people. The high social status

¹ Marcus Mann, 'Triangle Atheists: Stigma, Identity, and Community Among Atheists in North Carolina's Triangle Region'.... Pp. 1-12.

² Kevin McCaffree, 'Atheism, Social Networks and Health: A Review and Theoretical Model', *Secularism and Nonreligion* 8, no. 9 (16 October 2019), 4, accessed on Dec 20, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.101>.

³ Caldwell-Harris, Catherine L., 'Understanding Atheism/Non-Belief as an Expected Individual-Differences Variable', *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 2, no. 1 (February 2012): 4–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2012.668395>.

people are those who mostly have absolute control over their life, always in privilege and independent.¹ The Pew Research Center survey, for example, is among the researchers that agree with this idea. In describing the common features of an atheist in the United States of America, the atheists are mostly in their twenties, men, white, and well-educated.²

Alternative Ideology to Atheism

Few studies have shown that the prejudice and the stigmatize confront by the atheist are overwhelming. Therefore, in holding out with the stigma while maintaining their identity as an atheist, most of them preferred to label themselves in a certain way. The atheists nowadays seek to label themselves with any denominations of philosophical beliefs that signify atheism.³

Furthermore, McCaffree also abides by these arguments stating that the self-identified atheist would rather claim themselves with any secular identities than identify themselves as “non-religious” or “nothing in particular”.⁴ The philosophical ideologies or secular identities are believed to be more appealing and acceptable by society. Tomlins⁵ and Cragun⁶ manifest the same conclusion in resorting to the atheists’ claim pertaining to their identity. Most of the atheists insisted that they would rather use the “alternative” terms or ideologies like agnostic, Humanist, materialist and freethinkers.

¹ Caldwell-Harris, Catherine L., ‘Understanding Atheism/Non-Belief as an Expected Individual-Differences Variable’, *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 2, no. 1 (February 2012): 4–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2012.668395>.

² Michael Lipka, ‘10 Facts About Atheists’, *Pew Research Center*, 2016, accessed on Feb 9, 2019, [Http://Pewrsr.Ch/1vwtroy](http://Pewrsr.Ch/1vwtroy).

³ Lubna Saeed, ‘Socio-Political Thoughts and Impact of atheism in Contemporary Western Societies’, p. 88.

⁴ Kevin McCaffree, ‘Atheism, Social Networks and Health: A Review and Theoretical Model’, *Secularism and Nonreligion* 8, no. 9 (16 October 2019), 4, accessed on Dec 20, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.101>.

⁵ Steven Tomlins, “A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Atheist Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them.” *Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies Atheist Identities - Spaces and Social Contexts*, 2014, accessed on Feb 9, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09602-5_8.

⁶ Ryan T Cragun, ‘Nonreligion and Atheism’, in *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research* (Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2016), 304, accessed on Jan 10, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31395-5_16.

The New Atheism Movement

There are a huge shift of ideology connotes between the prior atheism with modern atheism namely, the New Atheism movement. Like what has been discussed by Mann earlier (see footnote 24), the New Atheism movement can be classified as the national level group of atheists.¹ Boldly being upfront in social engagement, the arising popularity of the movement is noticeable and sensational in the current social trends. Plus, the frontline represents the movement were considered as a big hitter in public which known as the Four Horsemen.²

Shoaib in his monograph describes some of the key features that distinguish those two atheisms.³ Previously, the criticism of atheist goes directly towards the Judeo-Christian traditions that oppressed society with its dogmatic teaching. On the other hand, New Atheism strikes their hatred for all religion especially Islam. They claim that religion is no longer relevant and valid. Various critics and groundless accusations have been specifically made towards the religion of Islam. Islam is barbaric, uncivilized and stupid. Islam fabricates and manipulates its advocator leaving them to live in backwardness and ignorance.⁴

Secondly, Shoaib forthuer explain the newness of the movement also seen through their devious critics of Islam in specific and religion in general. They do not even distinguish between the Islamic extremism with the righteous one as all Islam is the same to them: illogical, unlawful and vicious. Thirdly, they also were displacing God with other secular ideology like naturalism, Darwinism, materialism and scientism. They believe that science and reason are sufficient for discovering everything.⁵

Currently, they had succeeded in dominating all the philosophical discourse of the majority. Together with their publicity in the Western world, scientist and well-known atheist philosophers, they had deliberately labelling and attacking Islam with all negative connotations. Among the famous writings is *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, *The God*

¹ Marcus Mann, 'Triangle Atheists: Stigma, Identity, and Community among Atheists in North Carolina's Triangle Region' Pp. 1-12.

² The four figures consist of Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. See Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation that Spark an Atheist Revolution*, (Random House: New York, 2019).

³ Shoaib Ahmed Malik, 'Atheism and Islam: A Contemporary Discourse,' Kalam Research and Media, UAE, 2018, p.4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Delusion by Richard Dawkins, Breaking the Spell by Daniel Dennett and God is Not Great by Christopher Hitchens (d. 2011).¹

The Definition Atheism and Atheists according to Islam

In referring to the primary definition of atheism according to Islam, there is no specific term that can directly correspond with the term atheism as in the Western interpretations. Thus, the researcher chooses to elaborate among closest terms mention by the Islamic scholars, that is *ad-dahr* (الدهر), *zindiq* (زنديق), and *al-ilhād* (الإلحاد). Firstly, the term *ad-dahr* (الدهر) is also being referred to as *ad-dahriyyah* means those who believe in time. *Ad-Dahriyyah* comes from *dahri* in the root word of *ad-dahr* means time in Arabic.² The word *ad-dahr* is mentions in the *Qur'an*³ twice is in *Sūrah al-Insān* and *Sūrah al-Jāthiyah*:

*“Was there not a period of time when Man was not yet something to be thought of?”*⁴

*“They say: There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.’ Of this, they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess.”*⁵

There are many discussions in referring to the term *ad-dahr*. Firstly, *ad-dahriyyah* is the type of people who believe in the infinity of time.⁶ They insist that there is neither a creator nor a beginning to time thus rejects the existence of God. Shahrastani (d.1153) and some *mūtakallimūn*⁷ add that *ad-dahriyyah* is those who advocate the doctrine of materialism.⁸ They refer to creation to time, where they believe that creation and the world exist by

¹ Ibid.

² Cyril Glassé, ‘*ad-Dahr*,’ *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (London: Stacey Internat, 1989) p.91.

³ The *Qur'an*: The holy book of Islam.

⁴ Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an (Fi Zilal al-Qur'an)*, vol.17, Adil Salahi ed., The Islamic Foundation: Great Britain, 2008). *Sūrah al-Insān* 76:1, p.213-214.

⁵ Sayyid Qutb, *Fī Zilāl*, *Sūrah al-Jāthiyah* 45:24, p.321.

⁶ Ensiklopedia Kesenian dan Warisan Islam (Encyclopaedia of Islamic Arts and Heritage), *Ensiklopedia Kesenian dan Warisan Islam*, 4, (Shah Alam, Selangor: Anzagain, 2010), pp.1-2.

⁷ The member of *Ilm Kalam*, these are the people who claim themselves as raise an opinion with the used of logical reasoning and intellectual speculation.

⁸ Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb, Johannes H. Kramers, and Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, eds., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4. (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p.68.

themselves. These people existed back during the pre-Islamic Arabs, where their view was mentioned in the poetry of that era.¹

Sevinc et al. also denote that their rejection of God also leads to the rejection to the day of Resurrection.² However, in classifying the term of a non-believer in Islam, he pairs the term *dahri* along with *zindiq*, which mean the heretic. Both the term *dahri* and *zindiq* were believed to be used to denote those who are following the heretic beliefs.

Ahmad Taheri-Iraqi³ and Zakiah Ab.illah⁴ in examine the usage of the word *zindiq* indicate that there are countless connotations and interpretations used by scholars, theologians and philosophers. Ahmad mentions that, during the early Abbasid period, there is a heretical movement that was called *zandaqa*, while the followers were addressed as *zindiqs* or *zanadiqa*.⁵ Meanwhile, Zakiah in elaborating the meaning of *zindiq* conclude it with several inferences. Among the inferences to *zindiq* are, (1) those who refuse to believe in Allah as God, (2) those who are an advocate to atheism or freethinker, and (3) those who are *mulhid* or *dahrī*.⁶

Meanwhile, in analysing the word *ilhād*, there are several interpretations to dive into. Firstly, according to Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328) in his book *Sharh al-‘Aqīdah al-Wāsiṭiyyah*, the word *ilhād* means a tilt or a slight incline. The root word for *ilhād* came from the word *al-laḥd*, meaning a space in the grave hole.⁷ Normally, the corpse will be slightly tilted or push to the right side of the grave hole instead of positioning it in the middle of the grave hole. Therefore, *ilhād* could also be interpreted as a negative inclination or a deviation from the actual position or path.⁸

¹ Islamic Theology and the Philosophy of Science: the Metaphysics of Islamic Monotheism. <https://islamtheologyscience.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/islamictheologyandsciencedraft.pdf>.

² Sevinç, K, et al., ‘Non-believer: An Islamic Perspectives,’ *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 7:5, p.2, accessed on Sept 10,2020, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.111>

³ Ahmad Taheri-Iraqi, ‘*Zandaqa in the Early Abbasīd Period with Special Reference to the Poetry*,’ PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, UK, 1982, p.3. accessed on Sept 10, 2020. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Zandaqa%20in%20the%20early%20Abbasid%20Period.pdf.

⁴ Zakiah Ab.illah, ‘*Konsep Zindiq: Kajian dari Perspektif Pemikiran Islam*,’ (The Concept of Zindiq: A Research from the Islamic Perspective Thought), accessed on Sept 10, 2020, http://studentsrepo.um.edu.my/5325/1/KONSEP_ZINDIQ.pdf.

⁵ Ahmad Taheri-Iraqi, ‘*Zandaqa in the Early Abbasīd Period with Special Reference to the Poetry*

⁶ Zakiah Ab.illah, ‘*Konsep Zindiq: Kajian dari Perspektif Pemikiran Islam*.

⁷ Muḥammad bin Šāliḥ al-Utsaymin, ‘*Al-Aqīdah Al-Wāsiṭiyyah Li Syaikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah* (The Faith of Ahl Sunnah Wal Jamaah by Ibni Taymiyah),’ Dār Ibn al Jawzi, Saudi Arabia, 2013, p.78

⁸ Ibn Taymiyah, p.78.

In addition, Ibn Taymiyah also classified his meaning of *ilhād* into two types: inclination from the name of Allah and inclination from the word of Allah.¹ In the inclination from the name of Allah, Ibn Taymiyah indicates that people refuse to call God according to its name. The Christian, for example, tend to figuratively call their God as father and Jesus as the son of God.² Next, the inclination from the words of Allah simply means the denial to revelation i.e the Qur'ān and sunnah. These people incline to associate Allah with other gods (شرك)³ and deny what has been revealed by the Prophet Muhammad.⁴

On the other hand, Steingass suggest that the word *al-ilhād* (الإلحاد) come from the word *al-laḥd* means to deviate from the right way of faith.⁵ Therefore, *al-mūlhid* (الملحد) or *al-mulhidūn* (الملحدون) are those who deviate from the path of Islam or heresy.⁶ There are several verses in the *Qur'an* that mention the word *al-mulhidūn* (الملحدون) i.e., *Sūrah al-A'raf*: 180, *Sūrah and-Nāhl*: 103 and *Sūrah Fussilat*: 40.

However, *Sūrah al-A'raf* and *Sūrah and-Nāhl* addressing the word *al-mulhidūn* (الملحدون) not as a dispute against religion but as an inclination to others in a negative way. Meanwhile, *Sūrah Fussilat* indicates how Allah warns the disbeliever for the sin that they commit as everything is countable during the day of Judgement:⁷

*“Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He see all that you do.”*⁸

Moreover, as for the secondary definition of atheism in Islam, most of the researchers seek to adopt the definition create by the Western dictionaries and encyclopaedias together with the word *al-ilhād* or *al-dahriyyah*. The Selangor Religious Council (MAIS) in publishing their article entitled ‘*Atheism Confusion regarding God and Religion*’ for

¹ Ibn Taymiyah, p.78

² Ibn Taymiyah, p.81

³ Ibn Taymiyah, p.81

⁴ Ibn Taymiyah, p.82

⁵ Steingass, F., ‘الحداد,’ *A Learner's Arabic-English Dictionary*, (India: Delhi, 1986), p.911.

⁶ Edward William Lane, ‘الحداد,’ *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Part 7, (Pakistan: Lahore, 1982).

⁷ Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*.

⁸ Sayyid Qutb, *Fī Zilāl Sūrah*, Fussilat 41: 40, p.118.

example, using the context from the *Encyclopedia of Religion* and the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* in defining the term atheism.¹

Using the writing of Muhammad Rashidi Wahab as a premier source, the article further denotes that the term atheism in Islam can be referred to as *al-Ilhad*.² The *Mufti* of Federal Territory also denotes the same technique in writing on their response towards the phenomenon of atheism in Malaysia back in the year 2017.³

In correspond to atheism, all of the secondary responses circulate on similar ground. Apart from highlighting the definition from the Western and Islamic connotations, they also highlight the purpose and the function of human, the argument to the existence of God, and the revelation in countering atheism.

The Purpose of Man

The devotion to believe in the existence of Allah plays the biggest role in the creation of Man in Islam. Even since the beginning, the *Qur'an* has highlighted the purpose and the function of a human in detail as states by *Sūrah al-Baqara* verse 30:

“Your Lord said to the angels, ‘I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.’ They said, ‘Will You appoint on it someone who would spread corruption and shed blood, whereas we celebrate Your praises and extol Your holiness?’ He said, ‘I surely know that of which you have no knowledge.’”⁴

The verse stresses the function of human, that is as a successive authority to the world (*Khalīfah*). Allah has also imposed a concise regulation and system to be followed by a human in governing the world. Intact with an ability to reason with *‘aql* (intellect), human has denounced as the best and special creatures as compared to others.

¹ Majlis Agama Islam Selangor (MAIS), ‘Kecelaruhan Ateisme terhadap Tuhan dan Agama’ (Atheism Confusion in regard to God and Religion), accessed on Sept 10, 2020, <https://www.mais.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Artikel-Khas-Bil.4.2019-Kecelaruhan-Ateise.pdf>.

² Muhammad Rashidi Wahab, ‘Ateisme: Satu Penelitian Awal’ (Atheism: An Early Observation), (Selangor: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2018), p.10.

³ Muhamad Razif, ‘Assessing the New Atheism Movement,’ (*Putrajaya: Mufti of Federal Territory*, 2017), accessed on Sept 10, 2020.

<https://www.muftiwp.gov.my/artikel/bayan-linnas/696-bayan-linnas-siri-ke-107-menilai-fahaman-new-atheism>.

⁴ Sayyid Qutb, *Fī Zilāl*, *Sūrah al-Baqara* 2:30, p.55.

Human uses this capability to eventually evolves, learns, and questions from their surroundings.¹

Furthermore, human has also been created with a definite purpose to this life. Insert with the natural inclination (*fiṭrah*) that is pure and undiluted, human has been entailed with an instinct of acknowledging the existence of Allah, the creator.² This is parallel with the covenant of human with Allah as address in *Sūrah al-A‘rāf* verse 172:

*“Your Lord brought forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam and called them to bear witness about themselves. (He said): “Am I not your Lord?” They replied: “Yes, indeed, we bear witness to that,” (This He did) lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, “We were truly unaware of this;”*³

Through the following verse, it is clear, therefore, how humankind has been installed with the inclination to admit to the existence of Allah. With the assist from the revelation: the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah*⁴, and the guideline from the appointed prophets and messengers, a human should be able to be submissive to the right God.⁵

The *Qur’an* also manifest the example from the prophet Ibrāhim himself as he has once in search of the truth to strengthen his faith in Allah through observation as stated in *Sūrah al-An‘ām* verse 75-79:

“Thus, did we give Abraham an insight into (Gods) mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth; so that he may become a firm believer. When the night drew its shadow over him, he saw a star; and he exclaimed: “This is my Lord!” But when it set, he said: “I do not love things that set. Then when he beheld the rising moon, he said: “This is my Lord!” But when it set, he said: “If my Lord does not guide me, I will most certainly be one of those who go astray. Then when he beheld the sun rising, he said: “This is my Lord!” This is the greatest of all!” But when it also set, he said: “My people, I disown all that you associate with God. “I have turned my face with pure and complete devotion to Him who

¹ Hamka, Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, *Tafsir Al-Azhar (Tafseer al-Azhar)*, vol. 1, (Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 1984), p. 206-212.

² Hamka, vol.9, p.v. 2, pp. 596-2599.

³ Sayyid Qutb, *Fī Zilāl*, *Sūrah al-A‘rāf* 7:172, p. 257.

⁴ *Sunnah*: The Prophetic tradition.

⁵ Engku Ahmad Zaki Engku Alwi, *Membangun Modal Insan Melalui Pemantapan Akidah*, (Putrajaya: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2007), pp. 13-15.

*brought the heavens and the earth into being. I am not one of those who associate partners with God.”*¹

The argument above is continually relevant as the Muslim scholars and philosophers often used the verse to counterpart the question concerning the existence of Allah, the creator.²

The Ground Stance of Muslim Scholars toward Atheism and Atheist

Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) had once classified the school of scholars through philosophical thought into three namely: *al-dahriyyūn* (materialists), *al-ṭabiʿiyyūn* (naturalists) and *al-ʿilāhiyyūn* (the theists) in his book, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (Deliverance from Misguidance).³

Al-Dahriyyun, according to al-Ghazali, are those who believe that the world has been existed naturally, thus reject the existence of God as the creator of the world. *Al-Tabiʿiyyūn*, derived from the word *tabiʿi* means natural, thus referring to those who believe in nature. The naturalist circulates their research concerning nature like animals. They indicate that the human has similar anatomy and temperament as an animal.

Because of that, they conclude that the resurrection of human is invalid thus rejecting all the notions related to that. Meanwhile, *al-ʿilāhiyyūn* are those who believe in Theists or God. Among the scholar mention by al-Ghazālī are Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. Thus, *al-ʿilāhiyyūn* rejects the other two groups: *al-ṭabiʿiyyun* and *al-ʿilāhiyyūn* as they are considered as nonbeliever and heretic.⁴

Besides, Al-Ghazālī also wrote another book as a guideline on those who should not be accused as *zindiq* (non-belief or heretic), namely, *The Clear Criterion for Distinguishing between Islam and Godlessness* (*Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*). He also wrote this book to reaffirm his position in discussing the heretic in the light of Islam.

In short, Al-Ghazali highlight three main doctrines in distinguishing Islam from Godlessness, which are, the belief in monotheism, Muḥammad’s prophecy and description of life after death in Muslim revelation.⁵ Thus, whoever fails to advocate upon these three doctrines can be classified as a heretic or non-belief.

¹ Sayyid Qutb, *Fī Zilāl*, Sūrah al-Anʿam 6:75-79, p. 213-214.

² Hamka, vol. 7, p. 358-367.

³ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, (tr.) AbdulFatah Haron, *Penyelamat Dari Kesesatan*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1985) p. 23-25.

⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, p. 23-25.

⁵ Griffel Frank, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, (UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 109.

One of the Muslim philosophers who neglect the doctrines and classified as a heretic was Abu Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Zakarīya al-Rāzi (d. 925). Known as an outstanding alchemist, physician and philosopher, al-Rāzi denoting his belief solely with reason.¹ As a rationalist, al-Rāzi is a theist but has daringly refused to believe in revelation and prophecy. Though he admits to the *shahadah* (confession of faith),² he indicates that there is no need for other prophets as reasoning alone is sufficient in knowing God and differentiating evil and good. The act of privileging prophet against other men is also nonsense, as he inclines that all men are born equal.³

Muhammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān Al-Būṭī (d. 2013) is one of the Muslim scholars who wrote on countering the argument regarding God in his book, *Kubrā al-Yaqīniyyah al-Kawniyyah*.⁴ One of the arguments given by him is that one of the ways to attain the belief in the existence of God is through pondering nature. With the right consciousness of mind, a human cannot simply refuse the possibilities of a reason or a purpose behind all those creations. The revelation of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* also plays the biggest role in endorsing understanding and knowledge on the existence of Allah.⁵

Conclusion

This study starts with a basic exploration of the definition of atheism and atheists according to the Western perspectives. From there, it is shown that the changing views in the conception of “God” influence the inconsistency of the ideology. It also is seen that advanced assimilation took a very huge part in sustaining the relevance of atheism throughout times.

The changes in the definition do play role in the paradigm shift of atheism. As for secondary atheism, it can be seen that the notion of atheists is more complex than what has been expected. The assimilation and the adoption of atheism with secular ideologies, leaves a bigger threat to the people of religion, especially to Islam. By using the idea of liberation and human rights, the people of religion might unnoticeably anticipate thus advocating the notion of atheism.

¹ M. M. Sharif, Muhammad Ibn Zakariya Ar-Razi, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol.1, (Germany: Weisbaden, 1963), p. 445.

² *Syahadah*: Confession of faith, testify that there is no God, but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.

³ M. M. Sharif, Muhammad Ibn Zakariya Ar-Razi, p. 445.

⁴ Muhammad Rashidi Wahab, *Ateisme: Satu Penelitian Awal*, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2018), pp. 38-39.

⁵ Ibid.

Furthermore, in highlighting the views of previous Muslim scholars towards atheism with the new atheism, al-Ghazālī focus on classifying and rejecting the two groups of philosophers which are *al-dahriyyūn* (materialists) and *al-ṭabīʿiyyūn* (naturalists).¹ Symmetrically, Shoaib in mentioning the New Atheism movement also pointing out the ideology of materialism and naturalism practiced by the atheist in current society.²

What distinguishes between those two, however, is how the current atheism movement focusing its detestation toward Islam. They are turning Islam into their scapegoat where all the negative traits in religion are being labelled to Islam as the previous atheism does not against Islam as it is nowadays. Thus, it can be seen that both New Atheism and Islam are rejecting and against one another.

It could be concluded that the term *zindiq* is equivalent to the phenomenon of atheism. Though the term is not specifically defining atheism as in the Western definition, the usage of the word during the classical time had to denote *zindiq* as atheism. Other Islamic classical scholars like Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyah have classified atheism too in accordance with the people, the condition, and the setting of their eras. In short, the refutation of Islam towards atheism has always been consistent and absolute.

Therefore, the word *zindiq* is still applicable to be used during this time. However, looking through the variousness in classifying the problem of denying God, like freethinker and agnostic, a new comprehensive modification should be made in defining *zindiq*. The current scholars of Islam should be more attentive in redefining the term *zindiq*. It is because a definition is significant not only in installing a correct understanding of the term but also plays a major role in the implementation of laws and regulations.

The *Qur'an* serves as a central foundation whereas it is complemented with the other notion of *Sunnah*, *Ijmā'*³ and *Qiyās*.⁴ The Muslim scholars and philosophers have already inserted the right knowledge in refuting and debating against atheism and atheists. The above study also denotes that, Islam is continually relevant whereas the context and the argumentation against atheism are always valid and acceptable.

¹ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, pp. 23-25.

² Shoaib, *Atheism and Islam*.

³ *Ijmā'*: Consensus or agreement of the Islamic scholars on the point of Islamic laws.

⁴ *Qiyās*: the principle of analogy applied in the interpretation of points of Islamic law not clearly covered by the *Qur'an* or *Sunnah*.

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AL-ITQĀN

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Volume: 5

Issue No. 2

August 2021

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