

Islamic Reform in Malaya: The Contribution of Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin

Hafiz Zakariya*

Abstract: Reformation of religion does not entail changing the very teaching of Islam or the introduction of un-Islamic elements into Islam. Rather reformation of religion is a return to the original sources of Islam as practiced during the period of the Prophet (SAS) and early generations of muslims, unadulterated by the practices and beliefs that contravened Islam. This *salafī* reformist discourse, as the historical evidence shows, was adopted by Shaykh Tahir in his attempts to reform Islam in colonial Malaya.

In 1930, Shaykh Muḥammad Bisiyuni Imran, a prominent *‘ālim* in Sambas, West Borneo wrote to *al-Manār* requesting Rashīd Riḍā to ask Shakib Arslan, Riḍā’s reformist colleague, to answer his queries on two important issues.¹ First, why are the Muslims, especially those in the Malay-Indonesian world, weak and in a state of decline? Second, why are non-Muslim nations advanced, and is it possible for Muslims to emulate the Western model of advancement without compromising their religious principles? In response, Arslan wrote a series of articles in *al-Manār*; which were later published as a book entitled *Limādhā Ta’ akhkhara al-Muslimūn wa Limādhā Taqaddama Ghayruhum?* (Why are the Muslims Backward and why are the Others Advanced?).²

The questions raised by Imran demonstrates that there was contact between reform-minded Muslims in the Malay-Indonesian world and key Middle Eastern *salafīyyah* figures. It also indicates Imran’s familiarity with *salafīyyah* ideas as the issues of Muslim decay, and

*Hafiz Zakariya is a lecturer at the Department of History & Civilization, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: hafizz@iiu.edu.my

the possibility of following the Western model of development without compromising Muslim faith has already been raised by Muḥammad ‘Abduh. The probability of Imran’s exposure to such ideas lies in the fact that during the early years of the twentieth century, he studied at al-Azhar University. Inspired by the Egyptian political journalism, Imran and his fellow Malay-Indonesian sojourners in Cairo published *al-Ittiḥād* in 1913.

Apart from Imran, there were many other Muslims in the Malay world who were inspired by the *salafiyyah* thinking. The progressive ideas of the *salafiyyah* motivated concerned Muslims in the region to carry out an internal reform at their respective localities.³ K.H.A. Dahlan and the Muḥammadiyah movement led such reforms in Java,⁴ whereas a group of reformists, spearheaded by Haji Rasul, Haji Abdullah Ahmad, and Shaykh Djamil Djambek carried out a similar reform in West Sumatra.⁵

In British Malaya, the *salafiyyah* ideas influenced a group of Muslim scholars. These ideas were brought to Malaya primarily through reform-minded students/scholars who had studied in the Middle East, and the circulation of *salafiyyah* writings such as *al-Manār* that reached audiences in Malaya. Like the *salafiyyah* figures in the Middle East, the primary concern of the local reformists was the backwardness of the Malay-Muslim community and Muslim Ummah at large.

Against the background of Malay backwardness, the reformists believed that it is imperative for them to carry out a reform campaign in their own society to redress the malady and problems confronting them. In doing so, they believed that restoration of the purity of Islamic teachings and practices are necessary for Muslims to get out of the material slump and intellectual stagnation. The reformists also urged the Muslims to free themselves from intellectual stagnation by embracing *ijtihād* rather than adhering to *taqlīd* (blind imitation).

Indeed, the rise of the reformists and their new kind of ideas, which questioned the established practice and value system of the traditional Malay society challenged the entrenched religious hierarchies, the so called “Old Faction” represented by traditional ‘*ulamā*’ at the village level, and by the administrators of Islamic law at the local state level.⁶ This created a tension between the

reformists and the traditional ‘*ulamā*’ and Malay aristocrats in the early decades of the twentieth century.

A prominent figure that epitomized the Malayan reformists was Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin who is regarded as the pioneer and the first exponent of *salafiyah* ideas in the Malay Indonesian world.⁷ According to William Roff, a leading historian of Malaysia, “Mohd. Tahir b. Jalaluddin, of all the reform groups, was probably the most notable in intellect and scholarly achievement.”⁸

Despite Tahir’s preeminence, surprisingly, he has not received the scholarly attention he deserves. This study examines some of the major ideas and contributions of Tahir Jalaluddin to the Islamic reformist discourse in colonial Malaya. After a brief introduction to his life and works, the study analyses his ideas concerning innovations in religious matters, the factors responsible for Malay backwardness, and the forces hindering their progress.

Tahir Jalaluddin: Life and works

Muhammad Tahir bin Shaykh Muhammad or Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin al-Falaki (1869-1956) as he was popularly known, was born on Tuesday, November 7, 1869 in Kota Tua Empat Angkat,⁹ a district in Bukit Tinggi, West Sumatra.¹⁰ He was born into an established Minangkabau family with a strong tradition of Islamic learning and leadership. His great grandfather was Tuanku Nan Tua, the most prominent ‘*ālim*’ of Minangkabau who served as the master teacher to the Padri warriors. Orphaned as a child, he was brought up by a maternal aunt until he was sent to study in Makkah in 1881.

In Makkah Tahir stayed for twelve years with his older cousin, Shaykh Ahmad al-Khatib, a prominent teacher among the Malay community. In 1894, he pursued Islamic learning at the famous al-Azhar University in Cairo. It was probably here that Tahir was fully exposed to ‘Abduh’s reformism and even formed friendship with Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, the editor of *al-Manār*.¹¹ After graduating from al-Azhar in 1897, he returned to Makkah to help Shaykh Ahmad al-Khatib teach Malay-Indonesian students. Among those who studied with Tahir were the young Minangkabau students, Jamil Djambek, Karim Amrullah and Abdullah Ahmad, who would later become prominent reformists in their homelands.

After spending long years in the Middle East, Tahir returned to the Malay world in 1899. In 1901, he married Aishah Haji Mustafa in Perak and in 1906 opted to reside in Malaya permanently.¹² From 1903 to 1905, Tahir travelled to various parts of the Malay world, Java, Bali, Sembawa and Celebes, and the Middle East.¹³

In the Malay states, which were controlled by the Malay rulers in alliance with the traditional *‘ulamā’*, it was very difficult for the *‘ulamā’* of reformist leaning to gain any position in public office. Tahir, however, was an exception as he held public offices in two Malay states of Perak and Johore.¹⁴ Apart from being a religious functionary, Tahir with his reformist colleagues published *al-Imām* in 1906 to promote reformist ideas. After devoting much of his life to the reformist cause, Tahir died in Kuala Kangsar, Perak in 1956.

Tahir worked in a Malayan Islamic religious intellectual milieu in the early twentieth century Malaya, which was characterised by the polemics between the *salafī* oriented reformists and the *madhhab*-oriented traditional scholars in the realm of Islamic jurisprudence. Additionally, the Malay-Islamic intellectual development saw the emergence of the *Aḥmadiyyah* movement, which attracted a small group of English-educated Malay intellectuals in Malaya. The advent of this movement sparked opposition from both the traditionalist as well as the reformist adherents. Tahir actively participated in these debates.

In response to the traditionalist Shāfi‘ī version of jurisprudence, some of which did not meet the requirements of the primary sources of Islamic law, Tahir published his major work entitled *Risalah Penebasan Bid‘ah di Kepala Batas* (The Treatise on Clearing Innovation in Kepala Batas), in which Tahir took the traditionalist scholars to task with regard to a number of issues in Islamic worship (*‘ibādah*). This work was actually published in response to a religious polemic in 1952 in Kepala Batas, Penang, outlining his own interpretation of innovation.¹⁵ Tahir was also involved in the polemics against a traditional scholar, Haji Bakar, concerning the status of the supererogatory prayer before the Friday prayer. This polemics resulted in the publication of a book *Ini Huraian yang Membakar: Pada Menyatakan Hukum Dua Raka‘at Qabliyah Juma‘at* (This burning evidence: Stating the ruling of the supererogatory prayer before the Friday prayer) refuting Haji Bakar’s

contentions by arguing that such a prayer had not been established by the authoritative sources of Islamic law and, therefore, an innovation. This book was translated and published as *Kitāb Ta'yīd Muttabi' al-Sunnah fī al-Radd 'alā al-Qā'il bi Sunniyah al-Rak'atain qabla al-Jum'at* (The book supporting the followers of the Sunnah in refuting those claiming that the Friday supererogatory prayer is sunnah). In response to the *Ahmadiyyah* movement, Tahir published *Perisai Qadiani* (The Qadiani shield), in which he declared the *Ahmadiyyah* as heretics.

Indeed, Tahir's earliest work *Natījat al-Jalāliyyah* (The Jalaliyyah Result) dealing with Islamic calendar and almanac was published in 1925. His other early work is *Ithāf al-Murīd fī 'Ilm al Tajwid* (Entertaining the disciples in the science of the recitation of Qur'an) that deals with the method of Qur'anic recitation. This was published by Maktabah al-Jamiliyyah, Johor in 1928. It was used as a textbook for standard one students at the Islamic school.

He also published *Natījat al-Ummī li Ma'rifat al-Awqāt al-Khamsah* (The result/work of an illiterate man in determining the times of the five daily prayers) in 1936 in which he provided guidelines for ordinary Muslims to understand the basic principles governing the determination of times for the five daily prayers.⁵ Another work related to the same topic is *Pati Kiraan pada Menentukan Waktu yang Lima dan Hal Qiblat Dengan Logaritma* (The essence of calculation for the five prayers and the Qiblah through logarithm), was published in Singapore in 1938 by Al-Ahmadiyyah press. This work is considered a valuable contribution in the field of astronomy. Tahir was the first 'ālim in Malaya to use logarithm in calculating Islamic calendar. He learned astronomy while studying in Makkah and Cairo.

However, Tahir's major work is the "Treatise on Innovation." One central aspect of Tahir's religious thought was his insistence on strict adherence to the authentic religious practices of the Prophet (SAS) and early Muslims. Tahir became more and more aware of the gap between Islam as he conceived as pristine and the reality of religious practices in Malaya. A natural result of this was his effort to fight those religious practices that he believed deviated from true Islam.

Development of Islam in Malaya and Minangkabau

Tahir made profound contributions to the development of Islamic reform and Islam in general in several ways. As regards the introduction of Islamic reforms in the Malay-Indonesian world, he is considered as the first exponent of the *salafiyyah* ideas in the region. Armed with his experience in Cairo, familiarity with Riḍā's works, and even friendship with the editor of *al-Manār*, Tahir played a pioneering role in the publication of *al-Imām* and served as its first founding editor to promote the reformist ideas.

Tahir also became the foremost spokesperson for the Malayan reformists in their confrontation against the traditional Muslim scholars. Although the reformists possessed many other eloquent and effective writers in their fold such as Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi, Tahir possessed something that many other reformists lacked, namely, his solid credentials in Islamic learning as a graduate of the famous al-Azhar University, and Islamic learning center in Makkah. Despite disagreement with Tahir's ideas, the traditionalists still had to take the reformist ideas seriously as they did not just come from any ordinary Muslim, but from a scholar of reputable stature. Tahir's role in the purification of Islam was not only limited to his confrontation against the traditional Islam; he also acted as the defender of the faith of *Ahl Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah* in denouncing the teachings posing a threat to it.

Tahir's role in the development of Islamic reform in Minangkabau, which has not been fully realised, merits a fuller discussion. It is argued that the development of Islamic reforms in Minangkabau during the early decades of the twentieth century has been influenced by two blood-related scholars: Ahmad al-Khatib and Tahir, both of whom resided and operated in *alam rantau* (the area outside of Minangkabau).¹⁶ While the reformists' puritanical outlook, which denounced the Minangkabau matrilineal system and mystical practices was probably derived from Ahmad, their *salafiyyah* outlook was transmitted through Tahir Jalaluddin.¹⁷ The first means linking Tahir to Minangkabau reformists were through three students who studied with him in Makkah during the latter years of the nineteenth century (ca. 1897-1899). These students were Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah, Haji Abdullah Ahmad, and Shaykh Djamil Djambek.¹⁸ Upon their return to Minangkabau, these students

emerged as prominent ‘ulamā’ and the leading voices of Islamic reform in the area.

Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah, well known as Haji Rasul, was born into a family of respectable Minangkabau Muslim scholar in Maninjau.¹⁹ After receiving his elementary Islamic learning in Minangkabau, he went to Makkah in 1894 and studied there for seven years. Two of his teachers were Ahmad al-Khatib and Tahir Jalaluddin.²⁰ Tahir not only instructed Haji Rasul in Islamic astronomy, but also the *salafiyah* ideas. According to his son, Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (known as Hamka):

Apart from learning Islamic astronomy from Tahir, my father (Haji Rasul) had also learned about the reformist ideas from the latter who openly expressed his leaning to the reformist ideas of Afghani and ‘Abduh.²¹

When he returned to Maninjau in 1906, Haji Rasul started teaching. His *modus operandi* was unique in that he did not confine his teaching to one particular village or town. Rather, he visited and taught at various areas and villages in Padang Panjang, Matur and Padang.²² The energetic Haji Rasul was very active in promoting the *salafiyah* reformist ideas in West Sumatra. When Malayan reformists led by his teacher, Tahir, published *al-Imām* in Singapore in 1906, Haji Rasul served as one of its distributors in Minangkabau.²³

Haji Abdullah Ahmad was born in Padang Panjang in 1878. After completing his elementary secular education in the village school and religious learning at home, he went to Makkah in 1895 and remained there for four years to pursue Islamic learning.²⁴ Apart from learning from Ahmad al-Khatib, Abdullah also studied with Tahir Jalaluddin. He returned to Minangkabau in 1899 and became a teacher in Padang Panjang. While serving as a teacher there, Abdullah launched a criticism against innovation and the local mystical brotherhood. In doing so, Abdullah often consulted his mentors, Ahmad al-Khatib of Makkah and Tahir Jalaluddin in Malaya.²⁵

Like Haji Rasul, Abdullah served as *al-Imām*’s distributor in Minangkabau. Besides, Abdullah also became *al-Imām*’s regular correspondent. For example, in one of the editions, Abdullah examined the periodical concerning the practice of *marḥaban*

(chanting the name of Muḥammad, SAS), a religious performance that was often practiced in West Sumatra and Malaya in conjunction with the celebration of *mawlid* (the birth of Muḥammad, SAS).²⁶ Abdullah's two major contributions are his pioneering role in publishing *al-Munir*, a reformist periodical that is parallel to *al-Manār* and *al-Imām*; and establishing Adabiyyah School - a new kind of Islamic school whose learning system differed from the way it was traditionally taught in Minangkabau. It has been argued that Abdullah's initiative to publish *al-Munir* was partly influenced by his teacher, Tahir who helped to publish *al-Imām* in Singapore. In order to establish a new kind of Islamic school in Padang, Abdullah solicited Tahir's opinion and even visited the latter in Singapore between 1906-1908. During this visit, Abdullah studied the curriculum of the school, which helped him significantly in establishing a similar school named *Madrasah Adabiyyah* in Padang.²⁷

The third prominent scholar who studied with Tahir was Shaykh Djamil Djambek, a foremost scholar in Islamic astronomy in West Sumatra.²⁸ Born in Bukit Tinggi in 1860, Djamil went to Makkah in 1869 with his father to perform the pilgrimage. His father passed away during the journey to Makkah. While in Makkah, Djamil was adopted by a Minangkabau resident and scholar in Makkah, Shaykh Salim. Djamil stayed in Makkah for nine years to pursue Islamic studies. His teachers in Makkah included Ahmad al-Khatib and Tahir Jalaluddin.²⁹ Djamil was particularly interested and talented in Islamic astronomy, which he learned from Tahir.³⁰ After spending long years in Makkah, Djamil returned to Minangkabau in 1903, where he transited in Penang, toured the Malay peninsula and met his teacher, Tahir, who had already resided in Malaya at that time.³¹

These three prominent Minangkabau scholars, who studied with Tahir in Makkah, played a leading role in promoting Islamic reforms in West Sumatra during the early twentieth century. Undoubtedly, Tahir played some role in their exposure to the *salafiyyah* ideas, which they promoted vigorously after returning to West Sumatra. Through his famous students, Tahir played an indirect role in promoting the reformist ideas to the Minangkabau world.

Tahir's close connection with the Minangkabau reformists is particularly evident during his visit to West Sumatra in 1923. As

Hamka noted, the Minangkabau reformists received Tahir very warmly. Hamka's father, Haji Rasul, who held his teacher in the highest regard, was particularly joyous with Tahir's visit.³² According to Hamka, Tahir's arrival coincided with a period when the local reformist movement, Sumatra Thawalib, whose leader was Haji Rasul, was facing an internal leadership crisis, which threatened the future of the movement. As a leader of the movement, Haji Rasul placed his hope on Tahir to help him resolve this problem.³³

Even after his return to Malaya in 1927, Tahir maintained contact with his native land, Minangkabau. This is attested by numerous correspondences between Tahir and Minangkabau figures who sought Tahir's advice on various issues. Thus, through the medium of long distance contact, Tahir continued to provide inspiration and guidance to prominent Minangkabau leaders and scholars that sought his help.³⁴

Innovation

The major preoccupation of Shaykh Tahir, as stated earlier, was related to combating innovation (*bid'ah*). It is, therefore, necessary to examine briefly the meaning of *bid'ah*. The Arabic word *bid'ah* comes from the root *bada'ah*, which means to originate, introduce, devise, contrive, improvise or to be inventive in a manner not done before. Thus, *bid'ah* is something which is new, or something that was not done before, i.e., it has no precedent in religion. Muslim jurists had developed elaborate classifications of innovation into obligatory, recommended, forbidden, disliked and permitted. The prominent Muslim scholar, al-Shāṭibī, defines *bid'ah* as:

any new invention in religion, which closely resembles the *sharī'ah*, by which nearness to God is sought, (this innovation is) not being supported by any authentic proof.³⁵

A less technical definition of *bid'ah* is provided by Duncan B. McDonald, as follows:

The exact opposite of *Sunnah*, and means some view, thing or mode of action the like of which has not been formerly existed or been practised, an innovation, novelty.³⁶

Traditional Muslim scholars of Malaya, by and large, adopted Shāfi'ī's view that there are two types of innovation in religious

worship: *al-bid'ah al-ḥasanah* (the good innovation) and *al-bid'ah al-dalālah* (the deviated innovation). For example, traditionalist Muslims considered the celebration of the birthday of Muḥammad (SAS) in the Muslim month of *Muḥarram* as a good innovation because although it was not sanctioned by the Qur'ān and Sunnah, it is beneficial to the Muslim community to remember and relive the examples set by Muḥammad (SAS). Tahir, on the other hand, admonished such a practice on the ground that Muḥammad (SAS) himself neither celebrated nor commanded his companions to celebrate his birthday.

As regard Shāfi'ī's contention that innovation in religious worship can be categorized into good and bad, the reformists argue that Shāfi'ī's view is too feeble because the *ḥadīth* that he provided to support his argument is a weak *ḥadīth* as it relies upon unknown narrators. Tahir was of the opinion that all innovations in religion are blameworthy, and in fact constitutes a major sin. The concept of a good innovation in religious matters is simply unacceptable to Tahir.

Tahir defined *bid'ah* as the exact opposite of the Sunnah, i.e., the sayings, practices and living habits of the Prophet (SAS). Tahir asserts that strictly speaking, any action or practice, which had no precedent in the life of the Prophet (SAS) is *bid'ah*. *Bid'ah*, according to Tahir, can be approached from two points of view, linguistic and religious. Linguistically, any new thing that neither had existed nor been practiced in the time of Prophet is *bid'ah*.³⁷

From the standpoint of Islamic law, to Tahir, *bid'ah* is of three types. The first is the innovation in faith such as the superstitious and animistic beliefs and practices. Indeed, Muslim theologians consider this as the worst form of innovation as it can lead to disbelief (*kufir*). The second category of innovation is any addition to religious observance itself such as the performance of the supererogatory prayer before the Friday prayer. Tahir believes that innovations in belief and religious observance are the opposite of the Sunnah, and hence deviating and misleading. The third type is innovation in custom. This category of innovation is not totally rejected. Rather, some might be preferable for Muslims such as the construction of minarets for mosques, while certain novelty even becomes obligatory such as the compilation of the Qur'ān during Abu Bakr's caliphate.

Tahir's strong rejection of innovation is based on several well-known traditions that admonished such practices. The most famous tradition, which Tahir quoted in the preface to his book, is the following:

I enjoin you to have fear of God and that you listen and obey, even if a slave is made a ruler over you. He among you who lives long enough will see many differences. So for you is to observe my *Sunnah* and the *Sunnah* of the rightly-principled and rightly-guided successors, holding on to them with your molar teeth. Beware of newly-introduced matters, for every innovation (*bid'ah*) is a deviation. The truest word is the book of God, the best guidance is the guidance of Muḥammad, the worse thing is novelty. Every new thing is an innovation. Every innovation is deviation, and every deviation leads to the hellfire.³⁸

The second oft-quoted tradition, which provided the basis for the reformist rejection of innovation is the saying: "Whosoever introduces into this affair of ours (i.e., into Islam) something that does not belong to it, it is to be rejected." *Risalah* provides a detailed analysis of the religious practices that were prevalent in Malaya, that Tahir considered innovation. Those practices included aspects of the Friday prayer, the controversy surrounding intention, and finally, *talqīn* (catechism).

Friday Prayer

Muslims regard Friday as the best day of the week, where adult Muslim males are required to perform the congregational Friday prayer. There is no dispute among the Muslim jurists that a congregation is a necessary condition for the validity of the Friday prayer.³⁹ However, scholars differ on how many people are required for the prayer. There are fifteen different opinions on this matter and they are all mentioned by Ibn Ḥajar in his *Fatḥ al-Bārī*. The strongest opinion is that the Friday prayer is valid if there are two or more people present since the Prophet (SAS) is reported to have said that "Two or more constitute a congregation." Malay Muslims who, by and large, were and still are the followers of the Shāfi'ī school of law, had adhered to the opinion that a minimum of forty qualified residents is a prerequisite for the validity of the Friday prayer. In his section on the Friday prayer, Tahir takes this view to

task. Basing his arguments on the Qur'ān and Sunnah, Tahir argues that there is no evidence indicating the necessity of having forty people as a prerequisite for the Friday Prayer. According to him, there is no confirmed *ḥadīth* which enumerates a specific number of people required for the congregational prayer.⁴⁰ The Qur'ānic verse (62:10) which established the obligatory duty for the Muslims to perform the prayer is as follows:

0 believers, when the Congregational Prayer is announced
on Friday, you shall hasten to the commemoration of God,
and drop all business. This is better for you, if you only knew.

Tahir argues that this Qur'ānic verse did not specify any particular number of Muslims required to perform the prayer and therefore it is wrong to argue that 40 people is the minimum number necessary. The Arabic plural pronoun used in the verse indicates that it is commanded to a group of people.

Tahir argues that since three constitute plural in Arabic grammar, three people can form the congregation required for the Friday prayer.⁴⁰ To counter the Malayan traditionalists further, Tahir cited the opinion of Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī (d. 370 *Hijrah*) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī. Tahir states that according to al-Suyūṭī there is no single sound tradition that establishes the minimum quorum required for the Friday prayer.⁴¹ Al-Rāzī's and al-Suyūṭī's opinions are based on the *ḥadīth* narrated by Jābir, which narrates that while the Prophet (SAS) was delivering a Friday sermon a trade caravan arrived in Medina, and hearing its noise and drum the audience rushed out of the mosque to the caravan leaving only 12 men in the mosque with the Prophet (SAS). Despite that, the Prophet (SAS) continued his sermon and performed the prayer with only 12 men.

Tahir contended that the actual stronger opinion within the Shāfi'ī school itself holds that the minimum number of people required for the Friday prayer is 12, given the Jābir's *ḥadīth*. This opinion is stronger than the one contending that 40 people is the required number for the Friday congregation, given the fact that the Prophet did pray when there were only 12 of his companions remaining.⁴² According to Tahir, the traditionalist scholars who insisted that 40 people are required for the validity of the Friday prayer are the followers of *bid'ah* since the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* do not specifically determine the minimum number required for the prayer.

Another innovation which Tahir stood against was “intention” for prayer. Intention is a very important aspect of Islamic worship as attested to by the famous Muslim tradition:

Every action is based upon intention. For everyone is what he intended. Whoever made the migration to Allah and His Prophet, then his migration is to Allah and His Prophet. He whose migration is to achieve some worldly benefit or to take some woman in marriage, his migration is for that for which he migrated.⁴³

While there is a consensus concerning the significance of intention, Muslim jurists differed in respect of the manner in which intention should be carried out, loudly or silently, or both. The issue that caused controversy in colonial Malaya concerned specifically with prayer.

A great majority of Muslims in Malaya believed that the declaration of intention must be pronounced loudly before prayer. Tahir strongly believes that such a practice is an innovation, which has no precedent in the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīth*. There is no *ḥadīth*, authentic or weak, reported by the companions or their successors (*tābi‘īn*) condoning such a requirement. Likewise, none of the founders of the four major schools of Islamic law, with the exception of some Shāfi‘ī jurists, recognised its need.

Those arguing for the necessity of pronouncing the intention loudly stood on shaky ground as their view was based on Shāfi‘ī’s vague expression, which he made in regard to the question of pilgrimage when he said that it is not obligatory for a pilgrim to pronounce his intention loudly as it is required for prayer where one needs to make the loud pronouncement. This vague expression of “the loud pronouncement” by Shāfi‘ī gave rise to varying interpretations.

First, the statement refers to the intention itself, thus, establishing the obligatory nature of loud pronouncement of intention during prayer. Tahir, on the other hand, argues that such interpretation as adopted by the traditional scholars in Malaya, is erroneous. This is because, as Tahir claims, the majority of the scholars including al-Ghazān and al-Nawawī are of the opinion that the Shāfi‘ī’s statement of “the loud pronouncement” does not refer to intention, rather to the *takbīr* (the pronouncement of God is Great), which is an obligatory

act of prayer. In short, according to Tahir, the traditionalist view on this matter is rejected because at most they relied on a weak *ḥadīth*, which had been nullified by several authentic *aḥadīth* contradicting the traditionalist viewpoint.

Another Malay customary religious practice that Tahir criticised was *talqīn*.⁴⁴ This practice grew out of the theological belief that immediately after the completion of burial, the deceased would be visited by the angels, *Munkar* and *Nakīr*, who would then ask the deceased questions to determine his or her real belief and to exact punishment if the answers were wrong.⁴⁵ While Muslim theologians maintained that the questions posed by the angels could be answered correctly only if the deceased had lived a pious and good life, the practice grew out of giving one last prompting to the deceased during the burial ceremony by reciting the confession of the faith.

The religious functionary performing the ceremony recited the funeral speech in Arabic, and sometimes followed by the Malay translation. Tahir clearly disapproved this practice, arguing that it was not commanded in the Qur'ān, Sunnah or the practice of the companions. Rather, it is argued that *talqīn* was an accretion taken into religious practice over the centuries, and hence an innovation, unacceptable in matters of religious worship. Furthermore, Tahir states that none of the founders of the four major schools of Islamic law ever condoned such a practice.⁴⁶ In Tahir's judgment, *talqīn* was *bid'ah*, which only came into practice at the end of the third century of *Hijrah* and those who are in favour of it only relied on a weak *ḥadīth*, which cannot be accepted as an evidence.⁴⁷ In his rejection of *talqīn*, Tahir based his opinion on the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth* narrated by Bukhārī, Muslim, Abu Dāūd, Tirmizī, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, along with the religious opinion of the famous Malay-Indonesian Muslim scholar of Patani origin, Shaykh Daud al-Fatani.

From the analysis of Tahir's *Risālah*, it is apparent that the principal criteria, which Tahir used to determine whether a religious worship is an innovation or not are the two primary sources of Islamic law: Qur'ān and Sunnah. Departing from this principle, any religious worship not sanctioned by the primary sources of Islamic law, although the Shāfi'ī jurist may have sanctioned it, is considered an innovation. In this regard, Tahir adopted a very strict position, which upholds that religious worship cannot be performed unless there is

legitimizing evidence from the Qur'ān and Sunnah. Tahir's non-compromising attitude on this matter is based upon the famous *ḥadīth*, which states that: "Whoever performs an action that is not according to our way will be rejected." This *ḥadīth* is used as a criterion for judging external actions or performance of *'ibādah*. If an action is not done in accordance to the *sharī'ah* or the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAS), it will be rejected and not accepted by God.

Malay Backwardness, Progress and Colonial Powers

Tahir was not as astute in social and political criticism as he was with Islamic studies.⁴⁸ As such, he did not produce any major work analysing the Malay problems. However, his lack of literary productivity in social and political criticism did not mean that Tahir was neither aware of nor concerned with the problems confronting the Malays. His views on these issues can be found by examining several articles appearing in the reformist periodical and his religious works, where he made occasional references to the problems of the Malays.

In the preface to the *Risālah*, Tahir expressed his anguish at the sorry state of the Muslims whom he characterized as living at the edge of destruction.⁴⁹ Tahir's statement attested to the fact that he was indeed concerned with the problems of the Malays and the socio-economic slump they were stuck in. Like many other concerned Malay intellectuals of his time, this alarming situation of the Malays urged him to analyse and find out the reasons behind this crisis. As a religious scholar who was more at home with Islamic doctrines than with the social sciences, Tahir approached the problem of Malay stagnation from the theological standpoint. He contended that the Malays' inertia and stagnation did not stem from Islam. Instead, their situation was due to their own ignorance and negligence of Islam.

As a result of this ignorance, the Muslims were unable to distinguish between right from wrong. Furthermore, they continued to cling on to their ancestral customs that did not meet the demands of the time and even contradicted Islam. In this regard, Tahir shared with other Muslim reformers like 'Abduh and Riḍā the conviction that Muslim weakness and stagnation stemmed from their deviation from the "true" Islam. In order to revitalize their conditions in Malaya,

Muslims had to recommit themselves to understanding and living according to Islam as promulgated by the Qur'ān and Sunnah, and as exemplified by the early generations of Muslims. In other words, the Muslims need to return to the "true" Islam.

Tahir's conception of the "true" Islam entailed the precepts of the Qur'ān and Sunnah without the admixture of un-Islamic beliefs and practices. Thus, in order for Muslims in Malaya to practice and live according to the "true" Islamic precepts, it was necessary for them to purify their beliefs and practices from any un-Islamic elements which corrupted the form of Islam that they had adopted and practiced. The sole basis in distinguishing the "pure" Islam from the "tainted" Islam was the Qur'ān and Sunnah. Tahir urged the Muslims to base their religious worship in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'ān and Sunnah, and not on the established opinions formulated by the great scholars of Islam.⁵⁰ In general, they must reject any innovations in religious practice.

As noted previously, Tahir was aware of the fact that the form of Islam as practiced in Malaya was strongly influenced by the time-honoured Malay custom, some of which clearly contradicted Islam. He contended that the traditional 'ulamā' accommodated some of the old un-Islamic customs in the Malay society by defending existing religious beliefs and practices prevalent in Malaya. As such, Islam as practiced in Malaya remained intermingled with superstition and un-Islamic elements and thus, seriously needed to be reformed and purified.

Tahir argues that in order to solve this problem and revitalize the Malays' socio-economic condition, Muslims should carry out a religious reform that would bring about great benefits to Muslims the same way Martin Luther's reformation did to the European Christians. In order to convince Muslims to embrace a religious reform, Tahir emphasised that a religious reform would not be threatening to the Islamic faith. This is because religious reforms would not introduce any new additions to Islam, neither would it reduce the Islamic rules, which had been clearly and firmly established by Islamic evidences.⁵¹

Tahir assures his Malay audience that they should not be resistant to religious reforms because these would not introduce foreign un-Islamic elements into Islam. Rather rectification and reformation of

religion, according to him, represented a return to the original teachings of Islam as practiced in the period of the Prophet (SAS) and early generations of Muslims, unadulterated by the customs, practices, and beliefs that contravened Islam. To Tahir, the life of Muḥammad (SAS) and the early generations of Muslims represented the golden age and normative period for Muslims throughout the ages. In short, Tahir believed that only by returning to the models set by Muḥammad (SAS) and the early generations of Muslims, could the Malays revitalize their conditions.

Tahir was aware of the official '*ulamā*' and Malay aristocrats' reluctance and unwillingness to embrace a religious reform because it would threaten their positions in the Malay society. Despite that, he placed high hopes on the Malay rulers, and the official '*ulamā*' who Tahir believed should spearhead the process of religious reform. This was particularly pivotal because they were in positions of power, and thus, would be able to bring about wide reaching changes in the society.

Tahir's articles on the significance of reform in Malaya only provided a general, mostly theological, explanation for the backwardness of the Malays and the religious prescription to cure this ill. They neither provided a systematic analysis of their problems, nor offered a specific plan of action that Malays need to undertake to revitalize themselves. Tahir's analysis in the articles was primarily restricted to religious reform. Thus, there was no reference to the question of Muslim interaction with and adoption of positive aspects of Western knowledge and technology. Since Tahir's writings provide no detailed information about his attitude toward Western technology and progress, it may be assumed that he was totally opposed to borrowing from the West.

It appears, however, that though Tahir did not openly champion Muslim adoption of the positive aspects of Western ideas and technology, at heart, his attitude towards Western ideas and institutions was positive. A case in point was his dialogue with Datuk Haji Batuah, a local Minangkabau political activist, surrounding the question of the struggle for independence. The following is the dialogue between the two, which took place at Batuah's house:

Batuah:...My brother, we must condemn the rulers because they often commit wrongdoings. This is very obvious as I

have worked with them for a long time. ...Therefore we should demand independence for our country.

Tahir: Independence requires several conditions. From my point of view, the time to rule ourselves has not come yet. If we want independence it is obligatory upon us ...to acquire perfect knowledge in all aspects, including religious knowledge and skills, which the Europeans possess....We also must have enough material wealth. With all these conditions we may achieve security and independence, otherwise these ideas cannot be achieved and if we insist (to acquire it) ...it will endanger ourselves. This is prohibited by Islamic law.⁵²

In this dialogue, Tahir emphasized that it was significant for Muslims not only to acquire Islamic learning but also to embrace positive aspects of Western skills and technologies, which contributed to the advancement and supremacy over the Muslim world.

Tahir and Politics

Tahir was basically non-political. He neither joined any political party nor wrote any work analysing politics.⁵³ In light of this, it is not surprising that the available studies on Tahir provides no, or at best very little, information about Tahir's political attitude. The reformists in Malaya, by and large, had a positive impression of the British and regarded the Muslims as much better off under British administration than they were under the feudalistic Malay rulers. Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi, Tahir's colleague, even went to the extent of likening the British with God's army whose arrival to Malaya brought about blessings to its people:

Indeed, the English are an army of God, the Lord of the worlds, who has ordered them to come here to free us from darkness, the prison of ignorance, injustice, wickedness, and cruelty of our own rulers.⁵⁴

Unlike Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi who wrote extensively on the contemporary social and political problems of the Malays, Tahir's original writings provided very little information about his attitude towards the colonial powers. Therefore, attempts at constructing Tahir's attitude towards the British is seriously inhibited by the lack of source material on the subject. Yet, in Tahir's writings, there is no indication that he expressed negative attitudes towards British administrators. There is only one passage where Tahir made reference

to British colonialism, and this passage showed his positive appraisal of the British. This is apparent in his criticism of the existing religious administration in Malaya, when Tahir writes:

The great government, which protected this eastern country, does not like to interfere in, far less to change, the religious law and custom of the native people.⁵⁵

Thus, it appears that Tahir shared with his reformist colleagues their appreciation of the British rule. The reformists' positive attitude towards the British colonial rule was not difficult to understand. The British adopted a cautious and accommodative policy towards Islam in Malaya, which contributed to a relative harmonious relationship between the colonial authority and the colonised. Moreover, the British administrators provided a sanctuary for the reformists in the Straits Settlements to propagate their ideas and conduct their activities in the British enclaves.

As regard the Dutch colonial rule in his homeland, Tahir did not hide his dislike for their rule. This can be partly attributed to the different nature of the colonial rule between the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya. Comparatively, the Dutch administrators adopted more restrictive policy on Islam than the British in Malaya. Furthermore, in West Sumatra, the Dutch authority crushed the last bastion of the Padri warriors in 1838 and effectively established its control throughout Minangkabau. As a Minangkabau, this must have left a bitter taste in Tahir's mouth. This attitude of anti-Dutch was particularly apparent during his visit to Minangkabau in 1923 and 1927, where Tahir delivered fiery speeches against the Dutch, which led to his arrest and imprisonment.

Conclusion

Tahir stands as the most eminent reformist Muslim scholar of his generation. One principle underlying his religious writings is his insistence on adherence to the pristine teachings of Islam. In order to promote the "pristine" Islam, he wrote and engaged in debates against the traditional '*ulamā*' who he believed were promoting Islamic ritual laws, some of which deviated from the principles of the Qur'ān and Sunnah. With regard to Islamic faith, he became the foremost spokesperson to renounce the *Aḥmadiyyah*, which introduced teachings that departed from the accepted set of Islamic

beliefs as sanctioned by the *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah*. Although the *salafī*-form of Islamic laws, which do not adhere to the Shāfi'ī, were not accepted and even condemned by the traditional 'ulamā', his expertise in other areas of Islam such as Islamic faith, and especially Islamic astronomy was universally recognized by Muslims in Malaya. Indeed, he was the first to use logarithm in calculating the Islamic calendar in Malaya.⁵⁶ In light of his immense contribution in the realm of astronomy, he is regarded as the father of Islamic astronomy in Malaya. In appreciation of his immense contribution to the field, the observatory centre officially launched in Penang, in 1991, was named Shaykh Tahir's Astronomy Center. While Tahir contributed significantly to the development of religious ideas in colonial Malaya, his contribution to the socio-political discourse of the time was meager at best.

Notes

1. Muhammad Bisiyuni Imran was born in 1885 in Sambas, West Borneo. His family served as 'ulamā' to the court of the Kingdom of Sambas. When he was 17 years old, Imran went to Makkah for Islamic learning. In 1906 he returned to Sambas, and began to subscribe to *al-Manār*. Impressed with the *salafīyyah* thought, he went to Cairo to study with Rashīd Riḍā at Madrasah Dār al-Da'wah wa al-Irshād. After returning from Cairo he established his own reformist school in Sambas. Through this school, Imran propagated the *salafīyyah* ideas. Moreover, he translated many of the *salafīyyah* works into Malay. Imran passed away in 1953. Martin van Bminessan, *Dictionnaire biographique des savants et grandes figures du monde musulman peripherique, du XIXe siecle nos jours*, S.v. Bashuni'Imran (Paris: CNRS- EHESS, 1992).

2. Jutta E. Bluhm, "A Preliminary Statement on the Dialogue Established between the Reform Magazine *al-Manār* and the Malayo-Indonesian World," *Indonesia Circle*, 32 (November 1983): 40-41; W. Cleveland, *Islam Against the West: Shakib Arsalan and The Campaign for Islamic Unity* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985), 1.

3. This study refers to 'Abduh-led intellectual trends as the *salafīyyah*. Technically, the word *salafīyyahh* is derived from its Arabic root, *salafa*, to precede. In Arabic lexicons, the noun *salafī* refers to the virtuous forefathers, and the *salafī* is a person who relies on the Qur'ān and Sunnah as the sole sources of religious rulings. While most Muslim scholars agree that the first three generations of the Muslims are the *salafīs*, the issue of who is considered a member of the *salaf* after those earlier generations remains contested. In this study 'Abduh's stream of thinking is designated as the *salafīyyah* because it

has become known so. Furthermore, it called for a return to the practices of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-ṣālih*).

4. For details on K.H.A. Dahlan and Muhammadiyah, see Deliar Noer, *Modernist Muslim Movements in Indonesia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973), 73-82.

5. A standard account on Islamic reform in West Sumatra is provided by Taufik Abdullah, *Schools and Politics: The Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra 1927-1933* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971).

6. Clive Christie ed., *Southeast Asia in the Twentieth Century: A Reader* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 17.

7. This view was presented by Indonesian scholar, Hamka, in a lecture delivered at al-Azhar University when receiving an honorary doctorate on January 21, 1958. Hamka's lecture was published as *Pengarah 'Abduh di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Tintamas, 1961).

8. William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 60.

9. "Kota Tua Empat Angkat" literally means the Town of the Four Exalted Ones.

10. Shaykh Tahir's personal papers at Kuala Lumpur National Archive, SP.10/199.

11. The evidence of Tahir's contact with Riḍā is provided in Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin, *Kitāb Ma'bid Mazkirat Muttabbī' al-Sunnah li al-Radd 'alā al-qā'il bi Sunniyat al-Rak'tain qabla al-Jum'at* (Penang, Malaysia: n.p., 1953), 58-59. In addition, I have also located three letters, at the National Archives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, that Shaykh Tahir wrote to M. Rashīd Riḍā, and a reply that Rida wrote to the former. See for example, Shaykh Tahir's Personal Papers, SP.10/561.

12. Prior to this marriage, Tahir married and divorced several times previously. In contrast to his earlier ones, this marriage lasted till his death in October, 1956.

13. We have no information concerning Tahir's activities during this trip.

14. In 1909, Tahir was called to serve as a consultant to the Magistrates' Courts in Taiping and Ipoh to help them in *sharī'ah* related cases. In July 1909, the Chief Judge of the state of Johore offered Tahir to teach Islamic laws to judges and magistrates of Johor. Furthermore, in 1914, Tahir taught at a religious school in Johor Baharu.

15. The religious conference took place on 4 January 1953. Both reformist and traditionalist scholars were invited to attend this conference. Prominent reformists such as Tahir and Haji Ibrahim were also invited, but they refused to

attend the conference because they did not trust the organizer's ability to mediate this controversy fairly. Furthermore, Haji Ahmad Fuad, the convener of the conference himself was a staunch supporter of the traditional scholars, and openly declared his support for the traditional Islam. This religious discussion was attended by many religious scholars in Malaya from both the camps. It is reported that a great majority of the participants were those inclined to the traditional Islam, and the controversy could not be resolved fairly. The traditional 'ulamā' constituting the majority at the conference declared their religious view victorious as it was endorsed by the majority. The reformists who were a minority at the conference became discontented with the manner in which the resolution of the discussion was reached because the participants neither debated the issue seriously nor considered the reformist opinion fairly. Following that conference Tahir published his well-known *Risalah Penebasan Bid'ah di Kepala Batas* (The Treatise on Clearing Innovation in Kepala Batas) outlining what is *bid'ah* in order to refute the traditional scholars opinion on the subject. The traditionalist scholars also published a work defending their view on the issue of innovation entitled *Risalah Ketetapan Maflis Muzakarah 15 Masalah*, (Penang, Malaysia: Jaafar Rawa, 1953).

16. Syamsuri Ali, "Al Munir dan Wacana Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam" (Master's Thesis, IAIN, Padang, 1997), 65.

17. Ibid. See also Hamka, *Pengaruh 'Abduh di Indonesia*.

18. A Ph.D. thesis on these three prominent Minangkabau reformist figures is being completed by H. Fachri Syamsuddin at IAIN, Yogyakarta, entitled "Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam di Minangkabau, 1903-1947" (Reforming Islamic Thought in Minangkabau, 1903- 1947). According to Fachri, the most apt connection was with Hj. Abdullah Ahmad, who visited Tahir in Singapore, and Iqbal that served as a model for his Madrasah Adabiyah in Padang (Interview, 2 February, 2001 at IAIN-IB, Padang).

19. Hamka has written *Ayahku* (Jakarta: Umminda, 1982), a detailed biography of Haji Rasul, his father. This book though very useful, is also mixed with its author's emotions to the subject.

20. Hamka notes that his father recorded in the margin of his book that Tahir was one of his teachers in Makkah. Ibid., 171.

21. Ibid., 275.

22. Noer, *Modernist Muslim Movements in Indonesia*, 37.

23. Karel Steenbrink, "Hamka and the Integration of the Islamic Ummah of Indonesia," in *Studia Islamika* 1, no. 3(1994):128.

24. Abdullah acquired Islamic learning from his father, Haji Ahmad, who was a scholar and a textile trader. Noer, *Modernist Muslim Movements in Indonesia*, 38.

25. Ibid.

26. *Al-Imām*, 1, no. 3 (1906). The practice of *Marhaban* to some degree is still being observed in many parts of Sumatra and Malaysia.
27. Noer, *Modernist Muslim Movement*, 34.
28. Syamsuri, "Al Munir dan Wacana Pembaharuan Pemikiran Islam," 70-71.
29. Noer, *Modernist Muslim Movement*, 35.
30. Edwar, *Riwayat Hidup 20 Ulama Sumatera Barat* (Padang, Indonesia: Islamic Centre of West Sumatra, 1981), 58-59.
31. *Ibid.*, 59.
32. Hamka, *Ayahku*, 275.
33. *Ibid.*
34. These correspondences can be found in Tahir's Personal Papers.
35. Al-Shaṭībī, *al-I'tisām*, vol. I (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 1982), 231.
36. *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), s.v. bid'ah.
37. Tahir, *Risalah Penebasan Bid'ah di Kepala Batas* (Penang: Lembaga Persediaan Muzakara, 1953), 19.
38. *Al-Nawawī's 40 Ḥadīth* tr., Ezzeddin Ibrahim (Beirut: The Holy Qur'an Publishing House, 1982), 28.
39. Sayyid Sābiq, *Fiqh al-Sunnah*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dār al-Diyān li al-Turāth, 1987), 133.
40. Tahir, *Risalah Penebasan Bid'ah di Kepala Batas*, 7.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 14.
43. *Al-Nawawī's 40 Ḥadīth*, 1.
44. Tahir's view on this issue was also published in a book by Abdul Hélim Mahmud titled *Hukum Melafazkan Niat Denagn Lidah*. This book was a translation of the religious ruling of Rashīd Riḍā and Muhammad Abd al-Zahir. Besides the translation, it also included Tahir's opinion on *talqīn*.
45. Federspiel, *Persatuan Islam. Islamic Reform in Twentieth Century Indonesia*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Modern Indonesia Project, 1970), 59.
46. Tahir, *Risalah Penebasan Bid'ah di Kepala Batas*, 26.
47. *Ibid.*, 42.
48. As such, he did not write any major work analysing the socio-economic problems of the Malays. Tahir's longest analysis of the problem of the Malays was published as a series of articles, which appeared in a reformist periodical, *Al-lkhwān*.
49. Tahir, *Risalah Penebasan Bid'ah di Kepala Batas*, 4.

50. Tahir, "Membetulkan Perjalanan Agama Islam atau Pemturan Perjalanan Kaum Agama Islam," *Al-lkhwān*, 1, no.16 (November 1926): 44.
51. *Ibid.*, 42.
52. Tahir's Personal Papers, SP.IO/118-146.
53. According to Bachtiar, Tahir was an avid observer of political development in the country.
54. Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi, "Teguran," *Al-lkhwān* (November, 1926).
55. Tahir, *Perisai*, 24.
56. Bachtiar, "Syeikh Tahir," 140.