

Book Review

Abdul Rahman Hj Abdullah. (2021). *The Polemic of Salafi-Wahabi: Untangling the Tangle (Polemik Salafi Wahabi: Merungkai Kekusutan)*. Kuala Lumpur: Rimbunan Islamik Media Sdn. Bhd.

by Makmor Tumin

Divergence and convergence in religion is a common trait. This happens in all religions and becomes apparent amongst the followers, such as in Christianity and Islam. In Islam, besides the division between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, within the Sunnis themselves there are dozens of denominations, most notably Ash'arism and Maturidism, as well as the group quite often addressed pejoratively as Wahabism, of which in this review will be addressed more appropriately as Najdi Dawah. This divide cuts across the Muslim world today, albeit in different manifestations, mostly in a negative light, and Malaysia obviously is not an exception.

In responding to such a saga, Abdul Rahman Hj Abdullah, a well-known senior historian, attempts to explain the root of such divergence, hoping that a potential convergence shall be reached. In his book, *The Polemic of Wahabi-Salafi: Untangling the Tangle*, he demonstrates how external factors, especially the development of religious notions of Islam in the Middle East has impacted the divergence, focusing on the divergence in Malaysia as his case study.

He divides the book into four chapters, saving the juiciest fruits of the discussion for the last chapter (Chapter Four). One's understanding of Islam would be much more crystal clear if one understands the divergence of the said religion, argued Abdul Rahman, who begins the discussion by narrating what he calls the phenomenon of disintegrated Muslim community.

In Chapter One, he explains the divergence of Islam by presenting two camps; the first associated under the umbrella of *Ahlul Sunnah wal Jamaah* which consists of the majority of Muslims who follow the Ash'arism and Maturidism Islam, while the second is the Nadji Dawah (Salafi Wahabi) mentioned earlier.

In the subsequent two chapters (Chapter Two and Three) he unravels further on the two camps and provides a list of key figures in both camps. The two classifications in these two chapters are very useful in the sense that it sheds light on the important figures, both international and local, of these groups.

We shall list down the name of the figures discussed in the book only for both the interest of clarity and unnecessary polemics. Among contemporary international scholars in support of the Najdi Dawah school include Prof. Dr. Muhammad Abu Zahra, Prof. Dr. Wahbah al-Zuhaili and Prof. Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradhawi. In addition, local scholars highlighted with similar disposition include Abdulfatah Haron Ibrahim, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin and Abdul Hadi Awang.

Meanwhile, in Chapter Three Abdul Rahman mentions those who are against the Najdi Dawah's stance, such as Muhammad Said Ramadhan al-Buti, Ali Jum'ah and Ahmad Mahmud Karimah, together with Sayyid Muhammad Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani. As for local scholars, he listed Muhammad Uthman el-Muhammady, and interestingly, a rather young scholar, Zamihan Mat Zin al-Ghari.

In Chapter Four, the author's main ideas which form the backbone of the discussion are presented. In this chapter entitled 'Untangling the Controversy', Abdul Rahman throws in many points placing them under two subheadings: the first on the dangers of extremism, and second on the etiquette of expressing differences in views. The tendency towards extremism according to him, develops through two attitudes: the first is extreme support, whilst the other is extreme rejection. Such extremes create a huge division to the point that both parties declare infidelity (*takfir*) against each other.

The divide becomes more apparent as it becomes political. In such circumstance, a war may even take place. In the case of the Najdi Dawah followers, using the army to attack another Muslim is an example of how extremism becomes political, hence militant. For some religious

groups, they use particular terms to denote people's bearing or stance which consequently sparks animosity. There is a term in tauhid called *Mawani' al-Takfir* where Muslims are reprimanded for declaring *takfir* against another Muslim, and yet such an act is pervasive when the extremists get political. Such an act is forbidden as Allah SWT has made clear to believers not to claim themselves as holier than another. The said reminder appears in Verse 32 of Surah An-Najm that reads, "... *Fala tuzakku anfusakum ...*" which translates to "... So ascribe not purity to yourselves...".

The factors that contribute to extremism which the author pinned down are rather straightforward. First, the failure to distinguish between a doctrine and a method, and second, which is equally important, ignorance on the significance of text and context. The Najdi Dawah can be rationalised if one really understands the text and context of its emergence, where in its initial stage, Najdi Dawah was an attempt to respond to the deviated groups amongst extreme Sufists and the group of radical Shi'as. His point is, once we understand the text together with the context, our radicalism or extremism against any teaching which we deem astray and deviating would gradually subside.

In the second part of Chapter Four regarding the etiquette of expressing differences in views, the author begins by explaining three types of da'wah: oral da'wah such as in sermons, then through writings, and finally through one's character. It should be noted that a Muslim's role is to make da'wah, not to judge let alone declare *takfir* on others. The success of Islam, as noted by the author, is mainly through the third method of da'wah which is one's character, an aspect highly neglected by many Muslims today.

He highlighted the two differences in etiquette; the first is related to the allowable one, such as *Ikhtilaf Tanawwu'*. It is the second one that Muslims must be serious about not to get involved in, which is when it is related to theology. This one called *Ikhtilaf Tadhdad* is when things get intense and political, potentially leading to clashes among the ummah (*iftiraq ul-ummah*).

Saving the best for last, he clarified on a vital point. The perennial problems of knowledge at the surface shows nothing but a heart full of hatred that intensify the problem, and this was also highlighted by Yusuf al-Qaradhwani. After all, those involved in the extremes are

knowledgeable. “If all of them call for their way of teaching, who then in Islam would call for Allah?”, remarked the Yamani Cleric, Habib Umar ibn Hafiz, the founder of the centre of Dar al-Mustafa.

The reviewer has three comments to make:

First, the book can best be summarized as follows; although serious readers may benefit a lot from the author’s thoughts, it is most likely that the explanations would enhance further the existing divergence as readers would only pinpoint arguments which suit their own established belief. This is partly because the split or divergence in the Muslim community i.e., the Sunnis and Najdi Dawah is already both entrenched and widely justified in terms of the belief among the followers as time passed. All religious followers naturally tend to adhere to the teachings of their teachers and preachers, whom in their view, understand their religious needs far better.

Secondly, the content of the book should emphasise to readers the importance of the two primary sources of reference for Muslims. The idea that conforms to these sources is what that should be considered as authentic. There is no other way of authenticating ideas until and unless the teacher/preacher goes directly back to the original sources which are the al-Quran and al-Hadith. Any idea that does not tally with these original sources are deemed as deviant.

The second paradigm is the idea of accumulative wisdom. While it is imperative to abide by the teachings outlined in the original sources, however, as the time and society change, a new thesis emerges, followed by an antithesis, and responded by a synthesis of the new teaching of Islam. It is very clear from the discussion of the book that the divide is only a matter of methodology; less on doctrine, either to follow the original sources or refer to accumulative wisdom for the virtue of prudence.

Thirdly, it is suggestive to say that a divergence rather than a convergence should be expected in religion. After all, sociologically speaking, this is about the relationship between the leader and their followers. It is difficult if not completely impossible to have a cosmopolitan or universal leader and followers, hence as a new society developed, one should expect a new way of belief, and Islam is not

an exception. In fact, in the al-Quran, Verse 36 of Surah al-Baqarah makes it clear that each one of us will be against one another, and it does not mean that when seers and sages come, they can promise unity and peace.

Not only is the book relevant for Malaysian and Southeast Asian Malay readers, but the content resonates with the prevalent situation in other parts of the Muslim world, and I believe, the problem of divergence exists in other religions too as the Bible also made a claim over the "*Holier than thou*" phenomenon.