

Exploring the Challenges and Implications of Atheism for Religious Society in Malaysia

Meneroka cabaran dan kesan fahaman Ateisme terhadap Masyarakat Beragama di Malaysia

AHMAD FAIZUDDIN RAMLI*¹, AEMY ELYANI MAT ZAIN², AMMAR BADRUDDIN ROMLI³, ATA UR REHMAN⁴ & AHMAD MOGHRI⁵

¹Faculty of Human Sciences, Sultan Idris Education University, 35900, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

²Universiti Islam Selangor, Bandar Seri Putra, 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia

³Politeknik Bagan Datuk, 36400 Hutan Melintang, Perak, Malaysia

⁴Department of Islamic Studies, Lahore Garrison University, Pakistan

⁵Department of Abrahamic Religions, University of Religions and Denominations, Pasdaran, 37100, Qom, Iran

*Corresponding Author; email: faizuddin@fsk.upsi.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Atheism is an ideology that rejects the existence of God and has gained increasing prominence in societies globally, including Malaysia. Atheism significantly challenges the religious orientation of Malaysian society. Specifically, atheism challenges spiritual and ethical foundations, unity, and cultural heritage linked to religious beliefs. Understanding these challenges is vital to formulate proactive measures, education, and informed dialogue to mitigate the negative impact of atheism on Malaysian society. This study explored the effects of atheism on Malaysian religious society via library research analysis. Scholarly articles, books, and reputable online resources on religious and atheism underwent content analysis, which yielded five key findings. Firstly, atheism leads to the loss of spiritual guidance and morality. Secondly, atheism potentially erodes ethical values and societal norms, and subsequently reduces social trust and cohesion. Thirdly, atheism contributes to moral relativism and ethical ambiguity, which potentially undermines established moral frameworks and social norms. Fourthly, atheism can weaken community cohesion. Lastly, atheism threatens religious institutions and practices. Additionally, the absence of the role of God might undermine the cultural and heritage importance of religion. This study presented critical insights on the negative societal effects of atheism. By exploring the potential consequences of atheism on social cohesion, moral foundations, and existential perspectives, this study highlighted the need for religious education as part of atheism prevention and rehabilitation.

Keywords: Atheism; New Atheism; agnosticism; theism; religious society

ABSTRAK

Ateisme, suatu fahaman yang menolak kewujudan Tuhan, semakin menonjol dalam kalangan masyarakat di seluruh dunia, termasuk Malaysia. Penyebaran ateisme menimbulkan cabaran besar kepada orientasi keagamaan tradisional masyarakat Malaysia, khususnya terhadap asas kerohanian dan etika, perpaduan masyarakat, dan warisan budaya yang terikat dengan kepercayaan agama. Memahami cabaran ini adalah penting untuk merumuskan langkah proaktif, pendidikan dan dialog bermaklumat untuk mengurangkan kesan negatif ateisme terhadap masyarakat Malaysia. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menerokai sejauh mana pengaruh ateisme terhadap masyarakat beragama melalui pendekatan kajian kepustakaan. Sejumlah artikel ilmiah, buku, dan bahan berkaitan agama dan ateisme dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan analisis kandungan. Hasil kajian mendapati lima aspek cabaran ateisme kepada masyarakat beragama. Pertama, ateisme menyebabkan hilangnya bimbingan kerohanian dan moral. Kedua, ateisme menggugat nilai-nilai etika dan norma-norma sosial, serta menjejaskan kepercayaan dan perpaduan sosial. Ketiga, ateisme dapat melemahkan perpaduan komuniti. Keempat, ateisme mengancam institusi dan amalan keagamaan. Selain itu,

ketiadaan peranan Tuhan dalam kehidupan dapat melemahkan nilai budaya dan warisan agama. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini memberikan pandangan kritis terhadap kesan negatif ateisme terhadap masyarakat. Dengan menerokai implikasi ateisme terhadap perpaduan sosial, dasar-dasar moral, dan perspektif eksistensial, kajian ini mencadangkan pencegahan dan pemulihan terhadap ateisme menerusi pendidikan.

Kata kunci: Ateisme; agnostisisme; teisme; masyarakat beragama, falsafah

INTRODUCTION

Arnold J. Toynbee's collapse of civilisations theory suggests that societal decay and the loss of moral fibre are key factors in civilisational decline. Toynbee's theory suggests that a civilisation collapses when loses its core values and the cultural elite exploits the masses. Similarly, Ab Razak and Sanusi (2010) stated that spiritual religious values provide a moral compass to pursue sustainable living. Religion transcends mere notions of God and ceremonial practices and extends to the intricate connection between humanity and the environment. Additionally, religion is crucial to foster personal growth and development. Religion guides the delineation for proper individual conduct in their coexistence on Earth. Furthermore, religion confers profound life values and significance. A prevailing tenet across global religious traditions is cultivating virtue and benevolence, which emphasises the importance of nurturing human goodness.

In Western countries, atheism and agnosticism are not considered social problems due to the prevailing orientation towards secularism (Anshory et al. 2023). Religion is considered a personal matter limited to specific life aspects, such as new-born baptisms, marriage, and death. Conversely, other life factors, such as social interactions, education, and politics, are frequently managed without religious frameworks. Thus, religion is mainly considered a cultural phenomenon. This view enables atheists or agnostics to participate in Islamic celebrations as "cultural Muslims" without holding genuine beliefs (Duile 2020).

Recently, the author of this article was privileged to engage with Western scholars studying atheism in Southeast Asian countries. One specific question by these scholars was as follows: "If atheists no longer attack religions and instead support social cohesion and engage in benevolent actions, would they be accepted?" This question prompted a focus shift not just for the author but in the broader context, from a primarily theological perspective to an exploration of the multifaceted factors influencing the acceptance of atheism, particularly in Malaysia.

Malaysia has a strong religious and traditional orientation, which is based on its historical development as part of the Malay Archipelago (Jaffary Awang et al. 2022). As the predominant religion, Islam is central in Malaysian society, where it shapes its cultural, legal, and social systems. The Malaysian Constitution recognises Islam as the official Malaysian religion, which is significant in citizens' personal and public lives. The Islamic influence permeates Malaysian education, governance, and social norms (Ahmad F. Ramli et al. 2022). Atheism specifically affects civilisational sustainability in Malaysia. Understanding how atheism affects societal cohesion in Malaysia is essential to understand the complexities that arise when a predominantly religious society encounters alternative perspectives. Thus, Malaysia presents a unique background for examining the dynamics between atheism and established religious frameworks.

Atheists and agnostics may participate in religious celebrations, such as *Hari Raya*, with their families for social or familial reasons. Nevertheless, their participation does not make them "atheist Muslims" or cultural Muslims. Rather, atheists and agnostics are engaging in a cultural practice without subscribing to the associated religious beliefs. Conversely, religious identity encompasses a deeper level of belief and adherence to specific religious doctrines, principles, and rituals. Being religious involves genuine faith and commitment to the core beliefs and practices of the religion. Mere participation in cultural rituals or identification as a cultural member of a religious community without actual belief contradicts the essence of religious identity.

Questioning religious authority and rejecting the belief in a higher power (Onfray 2005) directly challenge prevailing religious narratives and doctrines. Most atheists criticise religious thinking and are concerned about its effects. Contrastingly, other atheists demonstrate a more nuanced perspective, where they recognise the potential positive societal contributions of religion. For example, an atheist biologist from the United Kingdom acknowledged the distinct domains of

science and religion and respected religious beliefs and their background motivations. The biologist acknowledged that religion could provide solace and consolation, and contribute to overall life satisfaction. This biologist, during a dialogue, specifically highlighted various means by which she perceived religion as beneficial to its followers. Notably, she acknowledged the value of religious institutions and rituals, and emphasised their ability to create a pleasant and conducive environment for social gatherings and leisure activities (Ecklund and Johnson 2021).

It is important to acknowledge that not all atheists share the same aforementioned perspective. While some atheist scientists recognise and respect the potential benefits of religion, this viewpoint cannot be assumed to be representative of all atheists. Other atheists are significantly antipathic to religion and God, which stems from personal experiences and ideological stances (Muhammad Faisal Ashaari and Sabri 2018; Ahmad F. Ramli et al. 2022). Such atheists might consider religion a source of division, oppression, or irrationality, and reject its societal role and potential benefits. Rejection of Islam is unacceptable to Muslims and could be considered insulting to Islam or bringing it into contempt. Insulting Islam is an offense that involves ridiculing or causing contempt for any Islamic law in force, including fatwas (Salleh, Bahori, and Yahya 2021).

The emergence and growing prominence of atheism challenge the entrenched religious orientation and traditional beliefs that have shaped Malaysian society for centuries. As atheistic perspectives gain prominence, they might prompt discussions and debates that force Malaysian society to confront alternative worldviews that challenge established norms. The strong Malaysian religious and traditional orientation creates a background against which the effects of atheism can be examined. As acceptance of atheism increases, the resulting erosion of religious authority and institutional power challenges the established hierarchy and raises questions about the legitimacy and role of religious leaders and institutions. Therefore, considering atheists' diverse opinions is crucial, as some atheists might be more critical of religion. Such atheists consider religion incompatible with their worldview or as a hindrance to societal progress.

Blending religion and tradition has been significant in shaping Malaysian social values, moral frameworks, and cultural practices. Nonetheless, atheism can also reconfigure power dynamics

and alter religious influence in Malaysian society. The rise of atheistic perspectives challenges these aforementioned norms, and potentially leads to conflicts with atheistic viewpoints. Therefore, the effect of atheism on Malaysian societal structures and norms should be explored within the context of national historical and cultural heritage.

Atheist vs. theist tension may require Malaysian society to navigate complex discussions around identity, values, and cultural heritage preservation. Exploring the effects of atheism in Malaysia extends to its intellectual and philosophical contributions. The rise of atheism introduces alternative perspectives that might challenge current intellectual paradigms and necessitate re-examination of Malaysian academic philosophical foundations. Thus, examining the effects of atheism on challenging religious authority and traditional belief systems has added significance in Malaysia.

The strong Malaysian religious and traditional orientation is rooted in its historical development as part of the Malay Archipelago. The orientation provides a unique backdrop for understanding the resultant complexities when atheistic perspectives challenge established religious frameworks. Exploration of the implications of atheism on Malaysian religious frameworks can contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between the two. Ultimately, the findings will clarify the broader societal implications of these aforementioned interactions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINITION OF ATHEISM

Atheism is an ideology that rejects the existence of a higher power and significantly challenges religious authority and traditional belief systems. The 2021 Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an atheist as a person who does not believe in the existence of God or any gods. The term "atheism" has etymological roots in classical Greek, where "a" typically signifies "not" or "without", and "theos" refers to "God" (Milem 2019; Stephen Bullivant 2013). Nevertheless, the original meaning of atheism in ancient Greece notably differs from its subsequent interpretations (Alexander 2020). Initially, atheism referred to "someone who has lost faith in the gods" or who was "godless" or "godforsaken" in archaic English (Alexander 2020). During Athenian democracy, specifically 4 and 5 BCE, the meaning

of “atheism” approached that of the modern understanding. Therefore, “atheism” denoted “a lack of commitment to belief in the gods” (Alexander 2020). Atheism in ancient Greece was not always straightforward, which highlighted its complexity. Accordingly, the meaning of “atheism” cannot be solely based on its Greek origin.

Historically, atheism was frequently weaponised to discredit others. In ancient Greece, Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth with apparent atheistic beliefs, which he staunchly refuted. The public spotlight on atheism increased significantly during the post-1859 debates between theologians and scientists. The debates were sparked by Charles Darwin’s seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin’s theory of evolution challenged literal interpretations of specific biblical passages, specifically those regarding the age of Earth. This tension was intensified by textbook authors who aimed to depict the conflict between science and religion as pervasive throughout pre-Darwinian eras. Hashemi (2017) and Malik (2018) stated that the Western understanding of the term “atheism” shifted from identifying heretics to those who denied the God of Christianity. More people began to identify as ‘atheists’ and reject all religions in the later stages of modernity. Some ‘modern atheists’ adopted a general rejection of all religions. Regarding God, the atheist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), stated:

The concept of “God” invented as a counter-concept of life—everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole hostility unto death against life synthesised in this concept in a gruesome unity! The concept of the “beyond”, the “true world” invented in order to devalue the only world there is—in order to retain no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality! The concept of the “soul”, the “spirit”, finally even “immortal soul”, invented in order to despise the body, to make it sick—“holy”; to oppose with a ghastly levity everything that deserves to be taken seriously in life, the questions of nourishment, abode, spiritual diet, treatment of the sick, cleanliness, and weather! In place of health, the “salvation of the soul”—that is, a *folie circulaire* [manic-depressive insanity] between penitential convulsions and hysteria about redemption! The concept of “sin” invented along with the torture instrument that belongs with it, the concept of “free will”, in order to confuse the instincts, to make mistrust of the instincts second nature! (Onfray 2005)

ATHEISM AS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

There has been a recent resurgence of scientifically motivated atheism, prominently advocated by authors known as the New Atheists, including Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens (Rehman 2020). These

authors are known for their constant defense of atheism and have achieved considerable success with their bestselling books, many of which focus on atheism and related subjects. The New Atheists attempted to popularise atheism as a modern and scientifically supported ideology, where they asserted its truth and aimed to expose the fallacies of religious perspectives.

The New Atheists’ works emphasise the mission of atheism to challenge and refute religious beliefs (Geertz and Markússon 2010; Hashemi 2017). Contrarily, Buckley (2004) posited that the emergence of atheism could be attributed to a significant shift within theism, where God became a subject of scientific investigation. Buckley stated that atheism did not merely challenge theism externally, but rather developed as a theological revolution from within the realm of religion. Buckley’s premise challenges the idea that atheism is a consequence of the perennial conflict between science and religion, a notion that historians frequently dismiss as the ‘conflict myth’ (Lindberg 2010). Rather, atheism is considered a product of the inherent contradiction and apologetic strategies within orthodox tradition. This perspective means that modern atheism has fundamentally theological origins. The transformation of theology thus enabled rationalist critiques and the subsequent emergence of atheistic thought (Hyman 2007; LeDrew 2012).

THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE MALAY CIVILISATION

Among the Malays’ original religious beliefs were identical by Kapitayan the ancient Nusantara religion, which shares the same concept with Islamic monotheism (*tauhid*). However, later interpretations by some orientalist, who may not fully understand this concept, led to the mischaracterization of the Malays’ original belief as animism. Islamic monotheism was introduced to the region in 1300 CE (Agus Sunyoto 2017). Nonetheless, Western observers frequently misunderstood this concept of animism and associated it with nature worship and superstitious beliefs. Contrary to these misconceptions, Agus Sunyoto (2017) stated that the religious focus of the aforementioned Malay communities centred on monotheism rather than animism and dynamism (Jaffary Awang et al. 2022).

Buddhism emerged in the Malay Archipelago during the second century and subsequently became a significant religion that coexisted with the ancient animism and dynamism-oriented beliefs in early

Malay kingdoms. These kingdoms included the kingdoms of Langkasuka (second century), Chi Thu (second century), Kedah Tua (fifth century), Pahang Tua (fifth century), Srivijaya (seventh century), and Majapahit (13th century) (Jaffary Awang et al 2022). The amalgamation of religious beliefs highlights the influence of Buddhism on the regional cultural and spiritual landscape during those periods (Muhamat Kawangit et al. 2012; Yaacob 2011). Animism was also prevalent within the aforementioned belief systems.

The arrival and development of Islamic preaching in Nusantara, during eleventh century CE (Yousif 2007), changed the Malays' beliefs (Rani 2007). Subsequently, Islam became the dominant faith to date. This change occurred due to the prolonged emergence and development of the Malay civilisation (Denisova 2008), with a pivotal moment marked by the conversion in Perlak, Sumatra, in 1292. Over the following centuries, the spread of Islam continued to shape the beliefs of the Malay people in Nusantara. Melaka embraced Islam in 1445, followed by Java in 1450 and Maluku in 1490. The propagation of Islam extended to northern Borneo and the Philippines, with Sulu converting in 1450, Brunei and Maguindanao in 1480. These historical dates, mainly sourced from royal chronicles, primarily denote the conversions of key rulers, serving as dating milestones. It is likely that the process of Islamization had an earlier impact on the general population, with many port cities seeing conversions in the wake of Muslim arrivals even before the royal courts officially embraced the faith (Federspiel 2007). The Malay civilisation peaked with the Malaccan Sultanate (1402–1511 CE), which established Islam as the primary state religion and influenced Southeast Asia (Hussin Mutalib 2010). Malacca gained recognition with the comprehensive application of Islamic teachings in administration, politics, economy, and law. This recognition drew the attention of major civilisations, such as China, which led to successful diplomatic relations. While Islam was the dominant religion of the Malaccan Sultanate, non-Muslim communities were free to practice their own beliefs (Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli & Jaffary Awang 2018). This relationship between the Malaccan Sultanate and China was strengthened by the Malaccan open policy towards Chinese traders, some of whom settled in the region (Samuels 2015; Bakar 2005).

RELIGION IN MODERN MALAYSIA

Religion is significant in shaping the Malaysian cultural, social, and political landscape. Islam is the most widely practiced religion in Malaysia, where its adherents comprise 63.5% of the population (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020). The other religions practised in Malaysia include Buddhism (18.7%), Christianity (9.1%), Hinduism (6.1%), other known religions (0.9%), and those who identified with no religion or had an unknown religion (1.8%). Officially, Islam experienced 2.2% growth among the current 32.4 million population, while practice of other religions decreased. Notably, Malaysians professing no religion, or an unknown religion increased by 0.1% to a small 1.8% minority that corresponded to 584,052 Malaysians. Typically, atheists tend to distinguish themselves from religious affiliations (Ahmad F. Ramli et al. 2022). Thus, the 1.8% of Malaysians potentially indicated the growing presence of atheism in the country. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to establish a direct link between this percentage and atheism.

The Department of Statistics Malaysia findings aligned with TNS Malaysia survey commissioned by the Worldwide Independent Network (WIN)–Gallup International. The survey involved 500 Malaysian respondents from October 27 2014, to November 15 2014. The survey revealed that 3% of the respondents identified as “convinced atheists”, while 20% reported no religious affiliation (WIN–Gallup International Survey 2014). Most atheists in the survey were 18–34 years old (7%) and 35–54 years old (6%).

Furthermore, the atheists were employed (3%), studying (5%), and had educational backgrounds in higher education (4%) and secondary school (3%). Moreover, 72% of the respondents professed specific religions, while 6% were unsure of their beliefs. While the percentage of atheists in Malaysia is relatively low, there are valid concerns about their presence in society. On the other words, it is need for understanding and addressing the challenges and implications of atheism, particularly within the cultural and religious context of Malaysia. This issue is one that requires attention and collaboration from various stakeholders (WIN–Gallup International Survey 2014)., including religious leaders, educators, policymakers, and the broader society, to foster dialogue and understanding.

Ibrahim (2007) stated that ethnicity and religion are frequently perceived as interconnected in Malaysia. For example, the Federal Constitution definition of a Malay individual includes speaking the Malay language, adhering to Malay culture, and professing Islam as their religion. Similarly, being Chinese is associated with Buddhism, Taoism, or folk religions, while Indians are identified as Hindus or Christians. In this context, culture is considered an immutable heritage. While Islam is recognised as the official religion in the Malaysian Constitution, other religions can be practiced within the federation (Haque and Masuan 2002; Mohd Sani and Abdul Hamed Shah 2020; Walters 2007).

During the 1980s, Islamisation in Malaysia led to a deeper understanding and stronger identity of Islam among the Muslim population. Islamisation resulted in increased government control and protection of Islamic practices (Abdullah 2003). Additionally, Islamisation coincided with national political and social changes, specifically the rise of Islamic movements (Saat 2012) and global Islamic events in the Middle East and Central Asia. These initiatives aimed to promote Islamic values in Malaysian economic, educational, medical, political, and cultural aspects (Hamid 2007; Nor 2011; Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli, Awang, and Rahman 2020) Malaysia's response to Islamic resurgence since the formative decade of 1980s has typically combined cautious encouragement of official *dakwah* (missionary effort).

Mohamad (2010) emphasised that when misconstrued or miscommunicated, Islamisation superseded family welfare and integration concerns. Thus, Islamisation inadvertently fostered an environment conducive to atheism. Samuri and Khan (2020) highlighted that Islamisation in Malaysia had indirect implications on the rise of atheism. Specifically, atheism was prompted when people who lacked a comprehensive understanding of Islam perceived it as a dogmatic religion. This perception was due to misinterpretations propagated by some Islamic preachers. Furthermore, this perception resulted from the significant contrast between misrepresented Islamic teachings and rationality. Ultimately, the contrast contributed to the emergence of atheistic philosophies. Whether intended as humour or stemming from ignorance, Islamic teaching misinterpretations were significant. The misinterpretations inadvertently led to disparagement among people without comprehensive religious education. Consequently,

such people turned to atheism and even engaged in humour that questioned or ridiculed religion. Ismail et al. (2018) noted that Islamic religious programmes that included humour and jokes should carefully review and accurately align the programmes to ensure that they adhered to the intended Islamic values and teachings.

Apostasy is highly relevant when considering atheism in Islamic religious freedom. Defined as the act of renouncing or abandoning one's religious faith (Schaffner and Cragun 2019), apostasy is a significantly sensitive issue in Islam. Traditional Islamic traditions and formulations commonly consider apostasy a criminal offense (Ahmad, Masum, and Ayus 2016), which reflects a complex and potentially contentious aspect of religious freedom. Viewing Muslim apostasy as a criminal offense raises questions about the extent to which people are allowed to exercise their freedom of belief and the potential consequences for deviating from prescribed religious norms. As atheism inherently rejects the belief in God and religious doctrines, it can be perceived as challenging the established religious order and potentially exposing individuals to legal and social repercussions.

The tension between the freedom to practice and observe religion and the freedom to change or reject religion underscores the complexities surrounding atheism within the broader discussion of religious rights and freedoms (Laskowska 2016). The discussion of religion in modern Malaysia, particularly within the context of Islam, intersects with the existence of atheism. As atheism challenges traditional religious frameworks, it becomes crucial to examine the dynamics between religious beliefs and the rise of atheism. The coexistence of atheism alongside the dominant Islamic landscape in Malaysia has been examined (Ahmad F. Ramli et al. 2022).

Atheism in Malaysia as well for most religious country is frequently deemed a deviation from societal norms and is subject to social and cultural stigma (Duile 2020; Simmons and Sandhu 2020). The factors that contribute to the development of atheistic perspectives in a predominantly religious society and how they interact with the broader Malaysian religious environment should be understood. Additionally, the effects of atheism on Malaysian interfaith relations, social cohesion, and religious authority has been examined (Gates 2017). Exploring the intersections between religion and atheism in modern Malaysia can clarify the challenges,

tensions, and potential areas of dialogue and aid understanding of these contrasting perspectives. Further research is necessary to examine Malaysian atheists' experiences and attitudes, their engagement with religious communities, and the implications of atheism on the broader national religious landscape. Examining the relationship between religion and atheism would provide valuable insights into the changing religious dynamics and social implications of atheistic viewpoints in modern Malaysia.

This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of scholarly research on atheism in modern Malaysia. The findings highlight religious freedom, interfaith relations, religious identity, religion and politics, and religious influence on social issues. The studies reviewed demonstrated the complexity and nuances of religion in Malaysia. Furthermore, they clarify the dynamic interplay between religion, society, and politics. Further research on these aforementioned areas is crucial for a deeper understanding of the role of religion in shaping the contemporary Malaysian landscape.

METHODS

The effect of atheism on challenging religious authority and traditional belief systems in Malaysia was examined with a qualitative research approach using a comprehensive literature analysis. The selection criteria for scholarly articles, books, and reputable online resources ensured the reliability and relevance of the literature analysed. The literature analysed focused on academic rigour, relevance to the research topic, and publication in reputable outlets. The search incorporated keywords like 'atheism', 'Malaysia', 'religious authority', and 'traditional belief systems' to pinpoint sources that directly pertained to the study's objectives.

Philosophical, sociological, theological, and cultural perspectives were used to provide a comprehensive understanding of atheism–religion dynamics. Philosophical perspectives investigate the arguments for and against atheism. Sociological perspectives examine the social construction of religious authority and the role of atheistic viewpoints in influencing social norms. Theological perspectives explore the responses and implications of atheism within religious frameworks. Cultural perspectives consider how atheism interacts with and challenges traditional beliefs in Malaysian culture. Integrating these perspectives yielded a

holistic analysis of the effects of atheism on religious authority and traditional belief systems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the negative effect of atheism on the Malaysian religious society and its implications for the sustainability of civilisation. The potential consequences for ethics, social cohesion, environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and interfaith dialogue are emphasised. Religion significantly influences Malaysian values, ethics, and societal norms. The Malaysian religious society is deeply rooted in diverse faith traditions. Atheism not only challenges religious society in Malaysia but also raises concerns regarding the sustainability of civilisation. Atheism disrupts the established spiritual framework and calls into question the foundations upon which civilisation is built.

Religious principles and teachings influence individual behaviour and societal practices. Such principles promote harmony with nature, social cohesion, and ethical conduct. Islam has historically provided a moral compass and guidance for sustainable living. Nonetheless, atheism could jeopardise the sustainability of Malaysian civilisation. The absence of religious values can undermine social cohesion, disrupt communal harmony, and erode the moral foundations that contribute to societal well-being and progress.

LOSS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE AND MORALITY DUE TO ATHEISM

The eagerness to criticise religious texts and beliefs is a significant effect of atheistic perspectives. Appealing to modern discourse, atheists claim to be superior to theists as they are more scientific and rational. For example, questioning divine revelation, miracles, or religious rituals (Khairuddin 2013; Jaffary Awang et al. 2022) might lead to a re-evaluation of their significance and interpretation (Baggini 2003; Guenther 2014).

Islam provides a comprehensive framework that encompasses moral and ethical principles derived from the Quran and Prophetic tradition. Atheism challenges the unquestioned acceptance of religious doctrines and encourages questioning of the validity, coherence, and relevance of religious beliefs (Nielsen 2005). Atheism significantly challenges to Malaysian religious society by causing the loss of spiritual guidance and morality. The rejection of

religious belief inherent in atheism (Onfray 2005) undermines the religious moral compass (Reisner 2018). Consequently, individuals lack a clear ethical framework to navigate life.

The absence of religious principles can erode the ethical values and societal norms deeply rooted in religious teachings. Potentially, social cohesion might be disrupted. Nevertheless, atheism does not guide personal conduct and decision-making. Thus, individuals solely on subjective judgments, which can result in moral relativism and a fragmented society (Stenmark, Fuller, and Zackariasson 2018). People who reject religious beliefs might struggle with personal and professional ethical decision-making. Lizardi and Gearing (2010) demonstrated that the “lack of religious or spiritual identification” was associated with increased suicide risk. People who lack a religious moral compass might find it challenging to navigate complex moral dilemmas. This challenge potentially leads to decisions that lack a strong moral foundation and ethical considerations. These aforementioned negative effects on the religious orientation of Malaysian society raise concerns regarding the loss of spiritual guidance and morality.

EFFECTS OF ATHEISM ON SOCIETAL STRUCTURES AND NORMS

Atheism challenges established traditional values, beliefs, and practices (Onfray 2005) in religiously oriented societies. The absence of belief in a higher power and divine accountability directly contradicts the foundational principles that underpin many social norms and moral frameworks. The conflict between atheistic viewpoints and religion-based social norms creates significant societal tension. This tension arises as atheists question the authority of religion-sanctioned norms, such as gender roles, sexuality, marriage, and family structures. The conflict between atheism and social norms frequently leads to heated debates and ideological societal divisions. Such debates necessitate societal adjustments and frequently result in conflicts.

As atheistic perspectives gain prominence, individuals and communities struggle with the need to merge their religiously rooted norms with the changing societal landscape. This struggle can fragment social cohesion as differing viewpoints on morality, ethics, and social practices emerge. Conflicts arise when people advocating atheism perceive religiously rooted social norms as restrictive or oppressive. The tension between

atheism and traditional norms creates a dynamic societal landscape that requires constant negotiation and adaptation.

Numerous case studies illustrated the need for societal adaptations in response to atheistic perspectives (Beaman 2015; Lampert 2019). These case studies showcased situations where the conflict between atheism and traditional norms triggered societal shifts and adjustments. For example, the recognition and acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights and non-traditional family structures challenged religiously rooted norms and required broader societal acceptance (Lampert 2019; Silver 2013). Similarly, debates on gender equality, reproductive rights, and scientific advancements frequently exposed the conflicts between atheistic viewpoints and traditional norms. Such case studies highlighted the necessity of engaging in dialogue, introspection, and gradual adaptations to accommodate diverse perspectives and ensure a harmonious coexistence.

The tension between atheistic viewpoints and religiously rooted social norms has profound implications for societal structures. The aforementioned conflict has prompted debates, disagreements, and the need for societal adjustments. Questioning religion-sanctioned norms challenges the foundations of social cohesion, morality, and ethical frameworks within religion-oriented societies. Understanding the effects of atheism on societal structures and norms would provide insights into the continuing negotiation and adaptation necessary to accommodate diverse perspectives and foster social harmony.

EFFECTS OF ATHEISM ON INTERFAITH RELATIONS

Mutual respect and understanding are crucial to maintain harmony and social cohesion in the Malaysian multi-faith society. Nonetheless, atheism can profoundly affect interfaith relations in Malaysia and potentially lead to increased religious intolerance and discrimination. Atheism challenges the foundation of religious beliefs and can create a climate of hostility and animosity among different religious groups. Furthermore, atheism can increase tensions between religious groups, eroding the harmony that once existed. When individuals within religious communities begin to doubt their beliefs due to atheistic influence, it can lead to divisions within society as some may choose to leave their religion, impacting social cohesion. There might be a reluctance to engage with people who do not share

the same religious worldview. Such an environment would impede interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Furthermore, atheism can reduce opportunities for meaningful dialogue and understanding among different religious communities.

The lack of a shared belief in a higher power or common spiritual framework might weaken the basis for interfaith dialogue and hinder efforts to build understanding and cooperation. This weakening can perpetuate stereotypes, misconceptions, and prejudices among religious groups, which could exacerbate existing divisions and hinder progress towards interfaith harmony. To mitigate the negative effects of atheism on interfaith relations, it is essential to promote an inclusive and tolerant society that respects and celebrates religious diversity. Interfaith dialogue platforms should be encouraged, where individuals from different religious backgrounds can engage in open and respectful conversations that foster mutual understanding and empathy (Awang et al. 2022) religious freedom, religious conversion, religious prejudice, and religious pluralism throughout Muslim-Buddhist co-existence in the sixth century within the Malay Archipelago. Other faiths could be freely practised except for propagation towards Muslim communities with Islam being the religion of the federation. This study aimed to explore Muslim-Buddhist relation types and the issues underpinning the following themes: history, identity, and concerns. Content and thematic analysis as well discourse analysis were utilised as the study method for data collection and evaluation. The data were thematically analysed with ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software. Resultantly, the Muslim-Buddhist interaction pattern in Malaysia has occurred (culturally and religiously).

As interfaith dialogue is based on faith and religion, atheism has no common basis for engagement (Ramli et al. 2023; Carroll and Norman 2017). Consequently, interfaith dialogue cannot take place. Therefore, including discussions with non-religious perspectives (atheist and humanist) (Sukdaven 2019) should involve “inter-belief dialogue”, which is more accurate than “inter-religious dialogue”. A dialogue that is not faith-based would lose its essence and purpose, which is to understand and discuss beliefs and practices rooted in religious teachings (Sharp 2015). Thus, educational programmes and initiatives aimed at promoting religious literacy and cultural sensitivity can also be vital in dismantling barriers and nurturing a climate of acceptance and harmony.

It is crucial for religious leaders and institutions to advocate for interfaith cooperation and actively discourage the demonisation or marginalisation of atheistic viewpoints. Emphasising the shared underlying values and principles of different religious traditions can aid understanding and promote mutual respect. Fostering an environment of openness and inclusivity can result in a Malaysian society that values interfaith relations and upholds the principles of unity and coexistence.

WEAKENING OF COMMUNITY COHESION BY ATHEISM

Atheism potentially weakens community cohesion in Malaysian religious society. Religion is central in shaping individual and collective identities, and provides a sense of community belonging and shared values. Atheistic rejection of religious beliefs can lead to a diminished sense of religious identity and weaken community bonds. As moral conduct and social norms are based on religious values and teachings, the absence of religious influence can fragment and disintegrate religious communities (Rehman 2020). The lack of a unifying spiritual foundation might result in estrangement between community members and reduce social cohesion and collective cooperation (Lizardi and Gearing 2010). Hence, the shared rituals, practices, and values that once fostered a strong sense of community might become insignificant, thereby potentially leading to the loss of solidarity and collective action. Eroded community cohesion not only affects the religious fabric of Malaysian society, but also affects social harmony and sustainable development.

UNDERMINING THE CULTURAL AND HERITAGE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION BY ATHEISM

In Malaysia, religion is crucial in shaping community cultural identity. Religious rituals and ceremonies are key cultural practice components passed down through generations. Atheism significantly challenges the cultural and heritage significance of religion as it frequently leads to indifference to religious rituals and ceremonies. This challenge has resulted in a tendency to dismiss or modulate the importance of these practices and lead to their potential loss. Furthermore, atheism can dilute the cultural practices closely linked to religious beliefs (Hashemi 2017). Many Malaysian cultural traditions and customs are deeply intertwined with religious beliefs and teachings. These practices are integral

in the societal cultural fabric and contribute to the uniqueness and richness of Malaysian heritage.

As atheism becomes more prominent, the cultural vibrancy and diversity originating from religious beliefs and cultural practices is at risk of being lost. The loss of religious beliefs can also lead to diminished appreciation for the historical and cultural significance of a religious heritage (Oppy 2019). Religious sites, artifacts, and landmarks frequently have significant historical and cultural value, where they represent a community's collective memory and identity. Nevertheless, the lack of belief in the religious foundations of these heritage sites potentially devalues and disregards their cultural importance. Disregarding a religious heritage can result in the loss of tangible and intangible cultural assets and erode the historical narrative and collective memory of Malaysian society.

To address the aforementioned challenges, it is crucial to promote a holistic understanding and appreciation of the cultural and heritage significance of religion. The public should be educated about the deep interconnections between religion, culture, and heritage. The importance of preserving and celebrating the religious traditions and practices integral to Malaysian identity should be emphasised. Collaborative initiatives involving religious institutions, cultural organisations, and educational institutions can be vital in raising awareness and fostering pride in the cultural and heritage importance of religion, and ensure that it is preserved for future generations.

THREATS TO RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES BY ATHEISM

Stalin's policy and its effects on Islamic identity and practice clarifies the challenges and implications of atheism regarding religious institutions and practices. The policy aggressively promoted atheism, which destroyed religious educational institutions and mosques and discredited religious scholars. The policy also profoundly affected Islamic identity and practice. Furthermore, the policy targeted clerics' source of money and independence from the state, such as waqf lands, which further undermined religious institutional stability and functioning (Yavuz 2008). This historical example underlines the potential threat of atheism to religious institutions and practices in Malaysia or other religious societies. If atheism gains societal prominence and influence, it might lead to similar challenges. These challenges

would affect the effective functioning of religious institutions. Eroded religious practices, values, and institutions potentially destabilise the fabric of society.

Atheism significantly challenges Malaysian religious institutions and practices, and contributes to decreased religious adherence and participation. People who hold atheistic beliefs might shun religious institutions, thereby reducing overall support and engagement in religious activities. Fewer active participants in religious practices would consequentially decrease financial contributions to religious institutions. The reduced financial support can undermine the maintenance of religious institutional facilities, support of religious leaders, and various religious programmes and initiatives.

Atheism also challenges the validity and importance of religious beliefs, and potentially results in society viewing religious practices as irrelevant or redundant. This perception shift might marginalise religious practices and traditions. Thus, the visibility and recognition of such practices within broader society would be limited. Additionally, acceptance of religious ceremonies, rituals, and traditions might be decreased. Furthermore, such practices might be considered mere cultural artifacts rather than integral components of religious faith. Consequently, such marginalisation could undermine religious institution and practice vitality and continuity. Thus, the rich religious heritage and cultural of Malaysian society might be eroded.

The rise of atheism in Malaysia might manifest in decreased adherence to religious teachings, reduced involvement in religious activities, and decreased religious organisational financial support. Consequently, religious leaders and communities should recognise and address the potential implications of atheism on religious institutions and practices. Religious leaders and communities should strive to maintain the vibrancy and continuity of their faith in the face of evolving societal ideologies. To counter these challenges, religious institutions should be proactive in addressing misconceptions about religion, promote religious education and awareness, and highlight the positive contributions of religious practices to individuals and society. Furthermore, interfaith dialogue and collaboration can aid understanding and strengthen social cohesion (Johannessen & Husebø 2019; Wolf 2012), which would ensure the preservation and maintenance of religious institutions and practices in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, religious society and interfaith relations are significantly challenged and negatively affected by atheism. Rejecting belief in God can lead to the loss of spiritual guidance and morality. Thus, ethical values and societal norms are potentially eroded. This erosion can weaken community cohesion as religious identity and shared values are diminished. Hence, social cooperation are fragmented and reduced. Furthermore, decreased religious adherence and financial support potentially marginalise religious traditions, which would threaten religious institutions and practices. Moreover, atheism might undermine the cultural and heritage importance of religion. Consequently, religious rituals might be neglected, cultural practices diluted, and the historical significance of religious heritages erased. Atheism can also adversely affect interfaith relations, where religious intolerance and discrimination are increased, and space for dialogue and understanding are reduced.

To address these challenges, it is crucial for religious institutions and community to implement preventative action to counter the negative effects of atheism. Such actions involve education about the importance of religion and belief in God. A strong religious foundation would foster an environment of inclusivity, tolerance, and respect for diverse beliefs. Promoting interfaith dialogue, education, and cultural exchange can bridge divides and cultivate a society that values religious diversity. Furthermore, emphasising the shared values and principles underlying different religious traditions can promote understanding and unity. These concerted efforts would enable Malaysia to navigate the complexities presented by atheism. Thus, a society that respects religious beliefs will be fostered, interfaith relations will be strengthened, and a sustainable civilisation can be achieved.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli: Conceptualisation-designed and conducted the study; methodology-data acquisition, data analysis, and interpretation; writing drafted the original manuscript and edited the final version. Aemy Elyani Mat Zain and Ammar Badruddin Romli: Provide co supervision; methodology- involved in data acquisition and interpretation. Ata Ur Rehman and Ahmad Moghri: Advisory on issues pertaining to this study and involved in identifying the Islamic experts; validating the content and the appropriate used of Islamic terms and references. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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