

The Concept of Belief in Religions: A Study from the Psychological and Human Behaviourial Perspectives

ABSTRACT

This paper is of utmost significance as it attempts to discuss the concept of belief in religions with special reference to Islam. Among the leading factors that have influence on one's belief are ethnic, race, lineage, nationality, emotion, and knowledge. In addition, this paper discusses the impact of belief on human psychology and behaviour. Faith and belief based on religion will have great influence on human psychology and behaviour, and thus shaping one's personality. There are differences between the concept of belief based on religion and that of ideology. In this respect, Al-Shahrastani (469-548 AH / 1076-1153 AD), in his magnum opus of Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal, distinguishes religious beliefs from other beliefs which are based on ideology and human philosophical thought. On another note, psychological values are the key aspect of one's religious belief. The psychological impacts on one's belief among others are tranquility, balanced soul, strong personality, and spiritual strength. In short, the psychological impacts have the ability to shape the behaviour of one who believes in religion. Understanding this concept is vital, especially in the society with multi-racial and multi-belief.

Key words: *Concept of faith, psychological aspect, human behaviour, religion and ideology, and strong personality and spiritual strength.*

INTRODUCTION

This article will focus on the faith concept of diverse religions in general as well as focussing on the main comparative aspects with Islam. In addition, the impact of faith unto the human psychology that affects human's behaviour will also be examined. The devotion and belief that form the basis of religion provide a great influence on human's psychology and behaviour which in turn develop the individual's personality. There exist differences in the faith concept. Al-Shahrastani (469-548 AH / 1076-1153 AD), in his book entitled *Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, has differentiated the belief in religion and the beliefs that are based upon the ideology and philosophy of man's ideas and thoughts.

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THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

The concept of religious belief is a potential that is innately present in human. From the Islamic perspective, the potential to *iman* (faith) is in the nature of human. As stated in the Al-Qur'an which provides the following understanding:

So set you (O, Muhammad S.A.W.) your face towards the religion of pure Islamic monotheism *Hanifan* (worship none but Allah alone) Allah's *fitrah* (i.e. Allah's Islamic Monotheism), with which He has created mankind. No change let there be in *Khalq-illah* (i.e. the religion of Allah – Islamic Monotheism), that is the straight religion, but most of men know not (Al-Rum:30).

Allah's *fitrah* here refers to Allah's creations. Human is created by Allah to have the religiosity instinct that is the *tauhidic* concept. If a man does not adhere to the *tauhidic* concept, then that is not proper. The non adherence to the *tauhidic* concept is directly attributable to the external influences that they receive when they were born in this world.

"Every child is born in a state of purity", narrated by Abi al-Husayn Muslim b. al-Hajjaj al-Qusyairi al-Naisaburi Muslim (1983). The innate characteristic of man that has a need for religious belief is accepted and discussed by scholars in the West. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 AD) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961 AD) are amongst those early scholars that have discussed at length about this concept (Wulff, 1991).

The creation of man is derived from two main sources that is the physical body and the sublime soul that also supports the need of man towards religion. Physically, man has a variety of needs to ensure his survival such as food, a place to live, transportation, and others. This goes true for man's spirituality that requires the feeding of the soul to ensure its permanence.

Al-Qur'an explicitly mentions about these two sources of man's creation. The first phase is the shaping of man's physical body from earth; and the second phase involving the blowing of the *ruh* into man. These two phases complete the creation of man. The meaning of the relevant verses of Al-Qur'an is as follows:

And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: "I am going to create a man (*Adam*) from sounding clay of altered black smooth mud. So when I have fashioned him completely and breathed into him (*Adam*) the soul which I created for him, then fall (you) down prostrating¹ yourselves unto him" (Al-Hijr:28-29).

From these verses from Al-Qur'an, it could be understood the important message pertaining to the creation and nature of man. Although there are differences amongst the various religions and beliefs based upon the ideology and philosophy of man's thoughts, nonetheless the existence to all these beliefs is due to the potential of man's innate nature to believe.

¹"Prostrating" here refers to respect and reverence to Adam and not submitting as a servant because submitting of one's self is only to Allah S.W.T. (*Subhanu Wa-Ta'ala*).

Throughout the history of man, there has never been any race, tribe or sect that is devoid of confessing to any form of beliefs whatsoever. It does not matter as to the shape or value of the belief as well as the positive or negative impact derived as all these show that man's self need to be filled with beliefs. Albeit with various names, man still acknowledges the existence of God that created this world and governed it (Hanafi, 1974:22).

Based on reality, we can see the effect from history the effort to negate this natural potential. After about 81 years of living without any form of belief that is based upon the existence of God, the Russian communist government has failed. This is evident in any society that does not hold to any beliefs that is spiritual in nature as the society will consequentially fail in their materialistic aim. The emptiness that is within man can never realise man's peripheral aim. This also proves that it is the strong internal aspects of man which has the ability to move a man externally. Everything is based from within.

Another example that shows that man innately believes that there is a strong powerful force of god is that which took place to Siddharta Gautama of Buddha. Based on a narration of his life story, he was sheltered from any form of hardship by his father who faced the emptiness in his soul. And after the incident of the "four encounters",² he left his luxurious lifestyle for the sake of seeking spiritual solace.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND BASIS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

In the religious belief concept, there actually exist the psychological elements. This is because the beliefs and conviction on something takes place in our mind which is characteristically internal in nature or is something that cannot be seen and cannot be shaped. A man's belief on something is a consequential result of his belief to that particular something. The man's conviction arose based on the understanding and knowledge on that thing. Knowledge, on the other hand, is a result of observation and proving of the existence of that particular thing. It is based on this that man uses his mind to make choices.

A person makes a choice to believe a thing based on his understanding and knowledge on the reality and existence of that thing. It can thus be surmised that the acceptance of the mind is the deciding factor to what is believed (apart from the *hidayah* factor from Allah from the perspective of Islam). In addition, we can also understand that this faith concept is related to man's internal aspects.

²Four encounters is the incident where Siddharta Gautama met with four things that he has never encountered before that is aging, pain, death, and a priest informing him about the serenity of life. For more information, please refer to Herman Oldenberg (1971). The teachings of Buddha do not stress on the aspects of Godliness but instead stress on the aspects of higher moral order that caused some of his followers to believe that Buddha is not holistically human and that God's spirits have engulfed him. This is because the belief in God is naturally found in man or habit that is innately present in man. Man will always look for existence that is Godly. Please refer to Ahmad Shalaby (2001:131-134).

Thus, it is also man's internal nature that influences his beliefs. In other words, the strong conviction and level of devotion of a person towards his beliefs is dependent on his internal well-being.³

From the Islamic perspective, every man that is born on this earth is intrinsically pure and clean. In other words, from the viewpoint of Islam, a person is originally born a Muslim. Besides the verse from *surah Al-Rum, ayat 30* as mentioned above, a *Hadith* from *Rasulullah Muhammad SAW (Salallahu 'Alaihi Wassalam* or Peace be Upon Him) also enunciates the same connotation. The interpretation to what *Rasulullah Muhammad SAW* said, "Each baby is born in a state of purity, thus it is his parents that made him a Jew or Christian or Majusi" (narrated by Muslim, 1983).

However, man's belief towards something is influenced by his surroundings. This includes the way he was nurtured and educated. As such these are the other external factors that influence a great deal the concept of religious belief in a person.

The religious belief or philosophy or ideology (then regarded as faith in religion) has a few main bases. Some of these bases are:

First, Ethnicity/Race/Lineage. The religious belief or ideology is influenced by the ethnicity of a person. As such, we can perceive the same faith among the same racial majority.⁴ Yet this is not absolute because as discussed the faith aspects is an acceptance process of the mind. This is the reason that caused the change in beliefs within the same racial group.

The lineage factor also influences the faith aspects of a person. The fervour of a person towards the belief or conviction that is practised by his forefathers may at times blur his mental judgment to make the choice. The lineage factor is nevertheless the decisive factor but can be attributed more to the environmental factor. In other words, a person who is a Jew will be a Jew not only based on his lineage but also the experience and education factors that influenced him. As an example, if a baby of Jewish parentage have been drifted to another country and brought up in a non-Jewish family, then it is most probably that his beliefs will follow the family that he grew up in because that was where he received his early exposure and education.

³It is due to this that according to Islam, the '*aqidah / iman* (faith/conviction) and devotion of a person cannot be tangibly assessed alone. The term of '*aqidah* literally comes from the word '*aqada* which means tied up or a knot. Usually, tied up or a knot refers to the tangibles such as rope and others. However, from the technical sense it can also be referred to binding of agreement and others. Thus, '*aqidah* is to the tying up or the knot that refers to the ideology or beliefs. In other words, '*aqidah* is the belief that ties up and binds tightly in a person's soul which makes it impossible to untangle and separate (Mohd Sulaiman Yasin, 1984:197). As such the situation of a person's soul that determines the strength and firmness of the knot. A person's belief will also develop man's internal characteristics that will then affect to his external behaviours. It is based on this premise that the discussion on man's behaviour from the Islamic perspective starts from the inner aspects of man (Noor Shakirah Mat Akhir, 2008).

⁴As an example in the context of discussion '*ahl kitab* (people of the book). For a more detailed discussion, please refer to Al-Shahrastani (n.y.) and Muhammad Azizan Sabjan (2009).

Second, Citizenship. A person's citizenship can also influence his belief. This occurs when a nation oppresses a particular religion and gives recognition to another religion. If a person requires the stipend which is only given to the citizen of that country then the person would most likely be inclined to follow the religion that is recognised by the country. Furthermore, the country that practises this type of administration would in all probability publicly display the said religion at all levels. As an example at the education level, children will be exposed to the said recognised religion. When contact towards a certain faith has occurred then that said belief will be accepted by the majority.

Third, Religious Belief and Knowledge/the Mind/Thoughts. Knowledge plays a very important role in determining the selection of faith in a person. Man will believe what is known through knowledge. Although there are devotions that are based on followings (or *taqlid* from the Islamic perspective), nonetheless this type of belief is not stalwartly held onto and will not be able to give a strong lasting effect and impact on a person. As an example, if the belief shapes a person's characters into something good then it will not be of benefit if the said belief is not based on religion.

The role of knowledge/the mind/thoughts is important in setting a person's belief. This means that a strong conviction of the belief will shove all factors away such as followings, heritage or lineage, tradition or customs, presumptions or fantasy, desires and compulsion. As such the role of knowledge/the mind/thoughts in forming the beliefs of a person is to identify, to know, to think, to understand, to compare and to consider, and also to prove all information to support the person's conviction. The mind is the medium to obtain the said knowledge pertaining to something that is to be believed. The thinking is the process to prove the truth. The result of the thoughts is the knowledge that supports the foundation of the belief.

Fourth, Religious Belief and Emotion. The emotion has also a role in the faith aspects. Man's emotions that naturally need a place of reliance will be sensitive towards whatever that has the ability to fill the emptiness.⁵ The belief that is chosen is dependent on how far the teachings in these beliefs are able to fulfil his emotional needs.

Fifth, Effect of Belief. This consists of three aspects, namely: (1) religious belief and the effect on the psychology or affective; (2) religious belief and the effect on man's cognitive; and (3) religious belief and the effect on man's psychomotor.

About the religious belief and the effect on the psychology or affective, there are two important factors, namely "tranquillity" and "balanced soul".

On the Tranquillity. Religion and the tranquillity of the soul share a very close relationship. The belief in religion provides the tranquillity of the soul to

⁵A number of researches have been carried out to identify the truth regarding man's nature to naturally have the instinct of religiosity. For a more detailed explanation, please refer to Mohd Sulaiman Yasin (1984:100-110).

those who profess the religion. This is due to a person feeling having a place of solace and will not give up easily when faced with hardship which in turn will always make that person in a state of serenity. The level of tranquillity is dependent on the level of dependence to his god or the level of belief within his faith.

On the Balanced Soul. A soul that is balanced is a result of a soul that is serene. A balanced and controlled soul gives rise to a good personality with admirable behaviour. Religious belief also gives rise to a strong personality. From a serene and balanced soul, an individual's steadfast personality is formed and not easily swayed by external elements that are contradictory to the teachings of his faith. This provides the consequence to the man's behaviourism. Meanwhile, a strong soul can also cause a person to be able to withstand any challenges faced in his life and he will not easily surrender or give up.

About the religious belief and the effect on man's cognitive, there are two important factors, namely "thinking process" and "perception".

On the Thinking Process. The view on a particular knowledge as secular and is not from Islam is a corollary thinking process that is not accurate. All good knowledge must be learned. All positive knowledge shares the benefit in this world and in the hereafter. There should not be a division between the religious knowledge and the secular knowledge as long as the knowledge is good and provides benefit to man's life (Noor Shakirah Mat Akhir, 2008).

On the Perception. Perception refers to how a person gives meaning or makes assumptions on what is seen, heard, felt, read, and so forth. As such an individual's faith plays a role in determining his perception on a particular thing. As an example, fashion clothing gives a different meaning between a Muslim and a non-Muslim.

About the religious belief and the effect on man's Psychomotor, there is one important factor, namely "motivation".

On the Motivation. Faith can be the motivating factor that moves and advance man. In faith, there will be elements of rewards that can act as the driving force to a person to perform whatever that is categorised as goodness according to his faith. This will enable him to improve him in his life's activities.

Contemporary societies have lost the invigorating forces which necessarily come from deep-rooted religious values. The industrial revolution was actually motivated by the true Protestant ethics and Puritanism. The Islamic empire was the result of genuine strive by God conscious Muslim (*New Straits Times*, 8/1/1994).

Motivation will be continuous because the faith enables a person not to give up easily. If a person depends on his god, thus he feels that that his self is owned. It becomes his responsibility to constantly serve devotedly and serve his owner. In addition, the feeling will help him from the aspect that he feels he has a place to rely on. This is what is meant by the relationship between the mind and body.

The behaviourism of man is very much dependent upon what he believes in. A person's behaviour is firmly grounded to the teachings of his faith. However, there are instances where a person's behaviour is not in accordance to the teachings of his faith. The issue of whether a person's behaviour is in accordance to the teachings of his faith or otherwise is very closely related to his level of acquiescence to each and every teachings of his faith. In other words, it is determined by the situation or circumstances within a person.

Sixth, Belief and Social Effect. This consists of two aspects, namely "justice" and "peace".

On the Justice. The teachings of any religion advocate justice. Yet in this current situation, the religious belief or ideology can bring forth justice or the opposite. Justice should occur among the devotees of the same faith. However, justice cannot perhaps be guaranteed to people of different faiths in some teachings. In this context, the effect of religious belief/ideology that should bring forth justice is to bring justice to all mankind. If oppression is present among the people of different faiths then it is not that the teachings of the faith are wrong instead is caused by the misunderstanding or wrong doings of the devotees of the faith.

On the Peace. Just as in the case of justice, the belief in religion promotes peace. But current situation provides a total opposite scenario. This situation occurs because of the misunderstanding or wrongdoings of the faith's devotees. All religions in general uphold good deeds. If any form of violence or whatever is wrong arise, it is not because of that religion but it is as a result of man's attitude itself. Violence can also occur if the element of fanaticism⁶ is present among the devotees of a religion or there exist the effort to defend their faith if oppressed by others. There are also factions that use religion for self interest. This attitude will give rise to anarchy and placement of accountability to a particular religion. Religious belief can also bring a positive effect on the nature's wealth. The ecology crisis, for example, can be put to right with the realization of positive moral values that is enjoined by religions.

Seventh, Religious Belief and Humans' Relationship. The teachings in all belief of religion affect the interaction or relationship among men. The acts of worship that is called upon by a religion affect the relationship between a person and another. This promotes helping one another, respecting one another, cohesiveness and others amongst men. The teachings of a religion also involve

⁶However, there is belief in religion that allows atrocity to the devotees of other religions. The killing of devotees of other religion is noble. This dogma exists amongst the Jews. The waging of war to devotees of another religion is permissible. The Jews firmly believe that they are the children of Allah and the chosen group of Allah. With this conviction, they believed that any wrongdoing committed by them will meet with limited punishments that have been determined. They are immune from hellfire and will be set free with haste from any retribution. This misunderstanding is recorded in Al-Qur'an. Please refer to *surah* Al-Baqarah:80 and Al-Maidah:18. With this confidence that they are the chosen ones, the Jews are always at war against the devotees of other religions, especially Islam and Christians. For a detailed explanation on the Jews from the Christian perspective, please refer to Ismail Raji al-Faruqi *et al.* (1991:19-21).

the rules in the interaction amongst men or the responsibility that need to be fulfilled amongst men. In performing the demands of the religion in this context, the social interaction of a person will develop well if the approach used is in line with the teachings of his religion.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that religious belief plays indeed an important role in man's life. This is because belief in religion affects various aspects of man's life. This includes two main aspects of man that is the internal aspects (soul/psychology) and external (behaviour/physical). Since the faith aspects are in the mind, thus it also affects the mind and the psychology of man. The faith of a person towards a particular religion or ideology will give birth to a feeling of obedience to the teachings contained in the said religion or ideology. His behaviour will be in tandem with his conviction towards his faith, which in turn is dependent on his level of obedience towards the teachings of the religion or ideology that he believes in.⁷

Thus, it cannot be negated that the belief in religion can influence a man's behaviour. It also provides harmony to the body and soul as a result of a balanced soul. Every man is undoubtedly in need of a "shoulder to cry on" and rules of life. A person who does not believe in any religion will still practice moral values that he follows. The group that denies the existence of a creator or god usually challenge the group that believes in god to bring proofs on the existence of god but simultaneously the former group is unable to prove with full assurance of the non-existence of god.

Each religion or faith needs to be studied from the correct source. The misunderstanding regarding certain religion sometimes is caused from the wrong source. This result in forming a misled understanding and conviction that is erroneous. It is made worse if each act of man is associated to his faith including negative acts. This results in negative perception towards the faith that he devotes upon. Islam at times is learnt from the wrong source. For example, the non-Muslims who learn about Islam from the Orientalists who delved into Islam not to understand with passion about Islam as knowledge but instead to use it to empower their knowledge trove on Islam which will then enable them to attack Islam with ease.

Besides that, the liberalism doctrine does not provide the means to resolve the problem that is besetting the society of different religions. The right to individual's freedom that is called upon do not guarantee the prosperity of man's life.⁸ Unlimited freedom will give rise to a myriad of problems. Man

⁷From the Islamic perspective, this is what is meant by the relationship between '*aqidah* and deeds. The '*Aqidah* has the ability to move man's deeds and effort in accordance with the teachings of the '*aqidah* that he professes. The relationship between '*aqidah* and deeds is analogous to the relationship of cause and effect. For further information, please refer to Mohd Sulaiman Yasin (1984:198).

⁸What these various "liberal" thinkers held in common was a stress on the freedom of individual human beings to run their own lives. For a detailed explanation, please refer to D.L. Carmody and T.L. Brink (2002:378).

with various thoughts need to be guided by a particular set of rules. And unity can be achieved among those that share the same thinking. Although it may not be universal yet man can unite based on the main aims and goals. This is where the belief in religion is essential as it can unite man and avoid chaos amongst mankind. In addition, the need to respect the faith of one another is also a necessity that cannot be done away with.

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