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MALAY APOSTATES IN MALAYSIA: A STUDY ON REASONS

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The Malaysian Constitution guarantees Freedom of Religion under article 11. Yet, it is tacitly understood that this does not apply to Malay Muslims. In fact, some Malay Muslims have openly declared their apostasy over the Internet. The Malay community does not take Malay apostasy lightly. They show animosity towards anyone who leaves Islam. This research aims to find out the reasons for apostasy and if one can leave Islam against the hadith which calls for the death penalty for apostates. Islam defines an apostate as one who says, does, or believes that Allah and Messenger are not what they claim to be. It looks at the position taken by the Malaysian courts in dealing with apostates. This study uses qualitative methodology and content analysis by evaluating text, social media and interviews with apostates. Many Malays have left Islam to embrace Christianity and Atheism. Many researchers in the past have said that the main cause of apostasy had been the lack of religious knowledge among the Malays. However, this study has found that many of the apostates are well grounded in Islamic studies and some of them have even studied Usuluddin and Fiqh until university level. Most of the apostates have undergone at least 10-12 years of religious studies in Malaysian school. The results of this study are intended to provide guidance and set examples to the public and the authorities in dealing with apostasy especially among young educated Malays.

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1. Introduction

According to statistics from JAKIM, 106,474 people converted to Islam during the period of 2000 – 2012. At the same time, there are so many talks about many Malay Muslims having had embraced Christianity. It was reported in the Malay Mail that the Mufti of Perak, Datuk Seri Hurusaini Zakaria as having said that 250,000 Muslims have left Islam and 100, 000 among them have become Christians. Such claims are also made by Benjamin Stephen, a Malay apostate who is a Christian pastor now. He says that 10,000 Malays have accepted Christ as their saviour in Johor. Then, during the "Allah" And Christology Seminar on 6 May 2014 at UiTM it was reported by yahoo.com.sg, that Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia (Muafakat) president Abdul Karim Omar as saying that Christians will outnumber Muslims by the year 2100. The Mufti of Negeri Sembilan, Datuk Mohd Yusof Ahmad, created a stir that rocked the country recently when he declared that Islam prescribed the death penalty against Muslims who leave Islam. The reality is there is no provision for the death penalty in the Negeri Sembilan state enactment, instead Section 48 of the Enactment punishes Muslims who claim to be not Muslims with a fine of not more than RM5,000 and a jail term of not more than three years' or both.

In fact, all four major schools of jurisprudence agreed on one particular thing and that is when a Muslim become an apostate, firstly they will be asked for their repentance and if they are still stubborn with their stand to turn their back on Islam then their punishment is mandatory fixed death penalty (bin Nik Wajis & Norazman, 2018). Adil (2007) in his article makes an in-depth study of the right to freedom of religion and the issue of apostasy from the Islamic law perspective, and argues that Muslims who intend to leave the Islamic faith are only required to undergo a process of repentance (tawba), and any punishment prescribed for apostasy is contrary to the right to freedom of religion. Whereas, Ahmad Saufy (2016), laments that there is no uniformity of the law among the various states regarding apostasy as well as the procedure of conversion out of Islam.

2. Problem Statement

There are several research issues identified for this research, among others, include the lack of religious education among Malays, the influence of mass media that is unmonitored, wrong peer selection and the pressure of life:

2.1. Lack of religious education

Religious knowledge plays an important role in ensuring the survival of one's religion and its population. Lack of religious education will result in the gradual abandonment of religion. Today, more and more people are focusing on their career advancement, first by getting tertiary education with the aim of enjoying the luxury of life later. As a result, the spiritual aspects begin to erode because it is considered unnecessary and impedes progress and Islamic communities become free thinkers and end up as apostates.

In August 2017 a Malaysian group known as the 'Atheist Republic Consulate of Kuala Lumpur,' held its first gathering at an undisclosed location and uploaded a picture of their gathering with many Malay looking faces. Once news of the Atheists gathering went viral, the deputy minister in charge of religious

affairs, Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki declared, “We need to determine whether any Muslims attended the gathering and whether they are involved in spreading such views, which can jeopardize the faith of Muslims.”

2.2. Influence of mass media

The unfiltered information that is disseminated to the public is risky. Those with low levels of education will be easily influenced by this social media buzz. Anyone can convey propaganda and indoctrination without clarifying whether the information that was shared is true or false. These include information about free life styles, the absence of God, life after death, God’s wrath, and so on. On the other hand, the mass media might also bring news about the latest scientific developments which challenges the faith of believers.

2.3. Wrong peers’ selection

A peer group is the group that is closest to someone and as such, the group plays an important role in leading the group’s friends in the right direction or vice versa. If a person has good friends, then the probability of him/her being good is very high and vice versa. When a person faces problems in life and loses direction, the guidance of the peer group becomes of paramount importance, especially so, if the group member has been successfully in solving his own problems. Under the circumstances, his/her opinion is very much adopted. However, his/her success story might be secular and materialistic and might not be in line with the teaching of religion, this is where the chances of peer groups leading one away from religion is very high.

2.4. The pressures of life

The pressures of life can be very difficult to handle by some people: high cost of living, difficulty in getting a place to stay, health deterioration and diseases, cumulatively make one to lose faith. The problematic process of getting assistance from state agencies or federal departments adds to the stresses of life. In situations like these, individuals, willing do whatever to escape sufferings. When NGOs from a different religion come and offer help and comfort, these people become dependent on the NGOs for their wellbeing and eventually change their religion.

3. Research Questions

Some of the research questions to answer the issues that have been discussed above are as follows:

- 3.1.** What is the position of apostasy in the Islamic law?
- 3.2.** What causes a person to apostate?
- 3.3.** How serious is apostasy among Malays in Malaysia?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to answer the above research questions, that is:

- 4.1.** To investigate the position of apostasy in the Islamic law.

- 4.2. To scrutinize the causes of a person to apostate.
- 4.3. To examine the seriousness of apostasy among Malays in Malaysia?

5. Research Methods

This thesis makes use of both qualitative and quantitative research strategies using the Internet as the primary source to collect data. Apostates are in hiding. They do not want to be known by others however, they have a strong need to connect with others of their own kind and the Internet provides them with the anonymity and privacy they need (Gaiser & Schreniner, 2009).

Qualitative research is a method of observation to gather non-numerical data to get answers to the 'why' and 'how' a certain phenomenon may occur (Given, 2008). Qualitative research approaches are employed across many academic disciplines, focusing particularly on the human elements of the social and natural sciences. Qualitative research is widely used by political science, social work, and education researchers (Given, 2008). Qualitative researches are very interpretative (Willis et al., 2007) and expresses that facts are derived mainly from secondary sources, and which are qualitative in nature and are governed by a variety of factors which are non-tangible and difficult to measure (Willis et al., 2007).

5.1. Data Collection

The researcher applied two methods of data collection techniques, namely, 'library research' and 'field research.' This was done in order to collect adequate and relevant data to address the research objectives of this study.

Data gathered via library research is categorized as the secondary data. Secondary data means the data is readily available and is used by anyone besides researchers. This means that secondary data is not originally collected but rather obtained from published or unpublished sources (Walliman, 2011). Library research includes data gathered from textbooks, published PhD dissertation, published Master's thesis, published academic papers, the Quran, the sunnah, newspaper articles, journals, social media communication.

Meanwhile for field research, the data were collected through interview and direct personal correspondence. Both are two of the ways to obtain primary data. Primary data is understood as data which are collected during the conduction of a research. Therefore, in order to obtain primary information, face-to-face interviews were employed. The researcher, with prepared written, questions to the interviewees. In this context, the structured interview protocols ask specific objective questions in an arranged order. In addition, the questions were well structured, planned and organized in line with the objective of the study.

5.2. Data Analysis

All data was analysed manually through content analysis. The author aimed to detect common words, phrases, and 'categorize' respondents together, in order to be able to determine trends and tendencies in the answers of the respondents.

Interviews are often used as complementary research method in the social sciences, because they give the opportunity for a more in-depth, open discussion, and more informal, free interaction between the

interviewer and the interviewee (Potter, 2002; Sarantakos, 2013). Despite being considered a disadvantage because it produces subjective results, the flexible format of the interviews was a major advantage for this study, as some nuances of exploring “emotions”, and “creating memorable experience” could not be properly captured with the questionnaire design. Most results from the interviews are not generalizable, because of the subjectivity of data obtained. On the other hand, their flexible format contributes for a deeper explanation and understanding of the connection between apostates and their refusal to get a declaration as having have left Islam from the Sharia courts.

6. Findings

These findings were obtained wading through the social media on the Internet and interviews with the apostates.

Table 01. Demographic Analysis of Malay Apostates as found from March 2019 – February 2020.

No of Apostates: 83		
Gender	Age	New Belief
Male: 49 Female: 31 Unknown: 3	< 40: 51 > 40: 12 Unknown: 20	Atheism: 51 Christianity: 10 Unknown: 22
Educational Level	Religious Education	Family Background
Tertiary: 29 Sounds educated: 34 Secondary: 20	Tertiary: 5 Religious School: 5 Govt. Schools: 73	Very Religious: 27 Not Religious: 3 Unknown: 53

Table 01 shows the demographic analysis of Malay apostates as found from March 2019 till Feb 2020. It was found that almost 60% out of the 84 apostates are males and more than 60% of them are below the age of 40. The majority of them have chosen to become Atheists. Most of them are academically educated. Contrary to popular belief that the apostates are not knowledgeable in Islam, it was found that 5 of them have religious education at tertiary level and another 5 of them have attended religious schools. Practically all of them have had a minimum of 11 years of religious education in secondary schools as they have to pass religious subject to pass the form 5 examination. 27 of them come from very religious families and 53 of them have not stated if they came from religious families. Only 3 of them have come from non-religious families.

6.1. Sexual Abuse

With reference to Table 02, sexual abuse seems to be the prime reason for apostasy as stated by female apostates.

Table 02. Reasons for Apostasy as expressed by the Apostates themselves.

Sexual Abuse	For Being Gay	For Being Effeminate	Marriage
6	4	1	5

Received Christian 'Hidayah'	Received Atheist 'Hidayah'	Problem with Islamic Morals	Problem with Hadith and Quranic Science
10	5	2	10
Charmed	Because of Christian Prince	Unknown	
1	1	38	

The sexual abuse of Catholic priests is well known. A high ranking monk was accused of abusing female nuns in China. In India, news of Hindu gurus getting caught for sexual offences is common. However, it has to be noted that the trauma caused by such an act on the psychic of a child would be devastating and as such they grow up hating Islam rather than the Muslim who did harm to them. It is the responsibility of the parents to keep a close eye on their children when they go for religious classes. Sexual abuses are not new. They have been happening for a long time and one should not be lackadaisical in one's responsibility for the consequences are disastrous.

6.2. Being Gay

The Muslim LGBT community faces an identity crisis. They want to be Muslims but it is haram to be an LGBT. Muslims condemn the LGBT community for behaving in such a way on purpose. They are physically attacked. Christians the other hand, on the most part have begun to welcome the gay community. Buddhist gays are not mistreated. They are left alone. Such is also the stance among the Hindus. In fact, India has established the first University for the LGBT community. If the Muslim community take the approach taken by Ebit Lew, the Researcher believes that these people can be saved. Ebit Lew's style of dakwah is non-condemning and is gay friendly.

6.3. Being Effeminate

Some humans are born abnormal. A good example would be the albinos. An African Albino male will have fair skin and blonde hair. An effeminate child can be considered to be born like an Albino. That is how they are. Those who are effeminate are not pretending to be girls. In fact there are so many effeminates in Malaysia but they are all lumped together with the LGBT community.

The Researcher feels that Malaysians, especially Muslims should show their caring nature to this group of people. Recently the Terengganu State Education Department sent 66 boys age 13 to 17 to a boot camp in Besut to make them 'men.' The then, Malaysia's Women's Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil told local media the programme broke the law and should be banned. "It is in clear violation of the Child Act," she said. "The experience of being singled out on the basis of perceived characteristics is an extremely traumatising experience, particularly for adolescent teens. If we are caring towards this group, we could rescue more people from leaving Islam.

6.4. Marriage

Love is difficult to come by. When one has a chance to fall in love they care less about religion. Perhaps, such is the case with those who convert to another religion. This is an open secret among converts.

That is the reason many of them get out of Islam once they get a divorce or once their relationship turns sore. They fail to understand that once one becomes a Muslim he remains a Muslim forever. Surah Al-Baqarah verse 256 says very clearly that “There is no compulsion in religion.” No one is forced into Islam but once in, one is expected to stay as a Muslim. For those Malay Muslims who have decided to convert out of Islam to get married to their non-Muslim partners, the Malaysian law does not recognize such marriages and the Muslims who converted are told to repent and return to Islam (Mohamad et al., 2017).

6.5. The Christian Zeal

Christianity spreads through missionary work. Christianity doesn't grow if missionary work stops. Mark 16:15 says, “*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.*”

Matthew 28:19-20 says,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The ‘Malaysia for Jesus’ video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMNLO8hY2Ws> Retrieved 27.7.19) would give an idea how aggressive Christians can get in doing missionary work. Christians are not held back by politics. They will preach to just anyone. In the Malaysian context, Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution says that Islam is the religion of the Federation and non-Muslims are not to preach their religions to Muslims. But this can be easily overcome, if any Muslims were to ask any questions to Christians. It gives the Christian an opportunity to preach to Muslims through dialogue. The Christian in principle would claim that he was merely answering the questions posed by the Muslims or they are merely having a friendly interfaith exchange.

Next, the Researcher is convinced that Muslims can be easily be swayed to Christianity by Christian missionaries, especially those Muslims who are young or those who face problems in life. Unlike Islam, Christianity has few restrictions as far as what one eats, the number of times a person prays, dress code, the intermingling of the sexes and so on. When a person is in dire straits, Christians are very generous in comforting the distressed through the Church.

Christian worship is a crowd puller. Youngsters would love attending church services. Christian worshippers sing and dance during worship. No one takes off their shoes or takes ablution. No one is restricted from going to church during menstrual flushes. One can dress in the best. And after church services, everyone engages in fellowship with food and pleasantries. This is in stark contrast to what happens at mosque worship. Muslims have to take off their shoes and take ablution, they have to be very silent, pray and leave. It is all over in 20 minutes.

Christians use creative ways to reach out to Muslims. According to the magazine, ‘Christianity Today,’ the use of the word ‘Allah’ instead of the phrase, ‘the son of God’ in the Islamic countries have borne good results. Ghazali Basri, in his book, ‘*Gerakan Kristian*, (Basri, 2014) says, in Sarawak, Christianity attracts many followers even though Christians operate without funding from the government. Christians still continue worshipping deities and observe Gawai festivals (p. 108-114).

6.6. Atheism on the Increase

The Researcher is of the opinion that the social media is one of the media which is responsible for apostasy not only among Malays but among other religions as well. Today many people are influenced by the yogi, mystic and spiritualist, Sadguru of the Non-Religious Isha Foundation. He has million of followers and is one of the most widely watched persons on YouTube.

There are so many anti-Muslim content on the new media now. No one dared to question the Quran before but now people are challenging it. There are different versions of the Quran claims one Muslim scholar, Dr Shehzad Saleem. The scientific verses are challenged through public debate. New reverts convert out of Islam. All these are public knowledge and are easily accessible. That is the reason why rationalism and Atheism are on the rise.

Lately some western scholars have taken it upon themselves to do a serious critical analysis of the Quran. Among them, the 'Coupus Coranicum' project headed by Angelika Neuwirth at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (2007-2024). Jay Smith on the other hand, claims that there are 26 versions of quran existing today and he shows them online. Fred Donner, in his *Muhammad and Believers: At the origin of Islam*, claims that there is no documentary evidence from prophet Muhammad (saw) or his companions or the regional communities of his movement (Donner, 2010). Donner claims that there are only sparse documents that can be taken as quasi-documentary in quality but there are extensive narration about the origin of Islam in Muslim sources but these were written down after a couple of hundred years after the events. However, if we were to look at Islamic sources we get a clear picture on the development of Islam, which from a critical point of view, are questionable.

Irshad Manji for instance supports the LGBT community and called for a complete revamp of Islam (Manji, 2011). Maajid Nawas, calls for a secular Islam in his book he co-authored with atheist, Sam Harris (Harris & Nawas, 2015).

Calls for reformation in Islam is nothing new. In 1883, Cheragh Ali wrote on Reforming Islamic Law (Kurzman, 2002), where he argues that the ideas that Islam is essentially rigid and inaccessible to change; that its laws, religious, political, and social, are based on a set of specific precepts which can neither be added to, nor taken from, nor modified to suit altered circumstances has to change.

6.7. Islamic Morals

Among the apostates who have had a chat with the Researcher say that Islamic morals are disgusting. For instance, a biological father can marry his own daughter if she was born out of wedlock. And when it comes to divorce, a man can divorce his wife without giving any reasons (twice) but if a wife wants to divorce a man she has to go to court and prove that the man has treated her badly. These people are underground Muslims and they are aghast how Muslims can live with such a religion.

6.8. Problems with Hadith

The Interviewees say that, when questions about embarrassing Hadith were asked to their lecturers they were told that these hadith are all weak or false even though they are from Sahih Bukhari. It is a fact that the corpus of Hadith contains many unpleasant hadiths which are considered sahih. When sahih hadiths

are rejected as weak or false, it makes one question the authenticity of the Sahih hadiths. The apostates' moral judgement doesn't allow them to believe that one can have sex with the hostages' wives during war. It is not a sin as God actually allows it."

6.9. Problems with Quranic Science

The Catholic Church has openly embraced the Darwin's Theory of Evolution as a fact (Chaberek, 2015). Modern Jews also have embrace evolution to be compatible with religion. The theory of evolution seems to be the default science in human creation. Hamzah Tzortzis, a Muslim scholar who has debated scientist like Lawrence Krausse and professor Hoodboy on the miracles of Quranic scientific claims, now says that evolution is a far more established theory than the big bang theory. Similarly, Yasir Qadhi says that evolution is true and Muslims must embrace it. Muslims however, seem to be going against the commonly held scientific belief and this could be a source of embarrassment for some Malay apostates.

As much as Muslims are claiming that there is no conflict between Islam and Science, some Muslims are leaving Islam for the same reason – conflict between Islam and Science. There are so many debates on Youtube on this subject. One of it is the debate between Nadir Ahmad and Aron Ra.

6.10. Because of Christian Prince.

Christian Prince is an active Youtuber who challenges Muslims on anything Hadith or the Quran. He describes the sex life of paradise with women all based on the Quran and the Hadith (Prince, 2018) He also condemns the science in the Quran (Prince, 2015). Often the Christians who converted to Islam convert back to Christianity. He has a degree in Islamic Studies. He uses the hadith and the Quran to attack Muslims. He has also debated Imam Sheikh Rohi, a Phd Holder from the University of Al-Azhar.

7. Conclusion

This research embarked to find out if indeed there were Malay apostates and if so how many. This research managed to identify 83 Malay apostates. This study verifies the existence of Malay apostates but it rejects the claim by the Mufti of Perak 250,000 Malays have apostate. Even if the apostates were 10 times more, the number would still be in the hundreds but never in the thousands. None of the apostates have intentions to officially renounce Islam and have their identity changed because Islamic law does not allow apostasy. The apostates have gone 'underground' while putting on a show as pious Muslims among us. Many of them use pseudonyms and are active on the Internet. In fact, the Internet gave birth to the dissemination of liberal thoughts. New ideas openly challenged the content of the Quran. Though we do not see an exodus of apostasy but the wave has already started. Should Muslims change their attitude towards the LGBT community, and keep an eye of religious teachers, some apostasy can be prevented however, as more non-Muslims learn about Islam and start challenging the claims of Islam, the faith of the Muslims becomes shaken and they leave Islam. The West has embarked of various Quranic criticism studies and they do engage with Muslims in public debates. To what extent apostasy among Muslims will go on nobody can tell. The future of Islam lies in the hands of Muslims themselves. If Muslims can defend the

onslaught of accusations against Islam then Islam would regain its glory, prevent apostasy and gain new converts.

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