

## THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE ACCORDING TO ABDULLAH FAHIM'S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

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### Abstract

The fact of truth or principle that forms knowledge is often seen from three aspects; ontology, epistemology and axiology. In the context of education, ontology is the basis of knowledge that serves to know the nature of divinity, epistemology is the basis of knowledge that serves to explain where science comes from, and axiology is the basis of knowledge that sees the benefits of science. This study seeks to examine the concept of science according to the perspective of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim as a respected educator of his time. In addition, analysis of the link between the basic thoughts on the knowledge and attitude of the Malays towards science will be emphasized. Included in the analysis of the study, are the changes made by Shaykh Abdullah Fahim in developing knowledge. For the purpose of collecting and analyzing data, this study uses an archival approach and fully qualitative methods. The documents examined include the writings of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim which are considered as primary sources and writings about Shaykh Abdullah Fahim are considered as secondary sources. The results of the study found that the concept of knowledge that he conceived is not tied to the traditional stream that pays too much attention to *naqli* (revealed) knowledge but at the same time not as hard as the *islah* (reform) stream which places *aqli* (non-revealed) knowledge as the main basis for development and progress of society.

**Keywords:** *Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, Science, Traditional, Islah, Wasatiyyah*

### Introduction

Science is very important for shaping individuals, developing family institutions and advancing society. In other words, the mastery of knowledge is very important in the development of human civilization. Knowledge is said to reach a balance when there is integration between *ilmu naqli* (religious knowledge) and *ilmu 'aqli* (modern knowledge). When translated into the realities of life, a balanced knowledge

will reveal to the sane a clear concept, and a good understanding of the teachings of religion. A person's failure to acknowledge the importance and connection between the elements of knowledge, intellect and religion will lead to deviations in behavior and practice, as well as a failure to understand his true role towards religion, race and country (Sulaiman@Mohamad, Jamsari, & Talib, 2016).

Thus science greatly influences the human characteristics endowed by God with intellect and utilizes it for thinking activities. The process of thinking, on the other hand, requires the existence of knowledge or something that is known to reach the true essence of knowledge, which is the truth. Thus, science will always be in touch with truth (Idris & Ramly, 2016).

The fact of truth or policy that forms knowledge is often seen from three aspects namely ontology, epistemology and axiology. Ontology is the basis of science that discusses the nature of the science of all things. In the context of education, ontology is the basis of knowledge that plays a role in recognizing the reality of divinity. Epistemology is the basis of science that examines the source of knowledge. In the context of education, epistemology is the basis of science that serves to explain where science comes from. The axiology is the basis of science related to the value of the usefulness of science. In the context of education, axiology is the basis of science that looks at the benefits of science (Mahfud, 2018).

This review is limited to the ideas Shaykh Abdullah Fahim (1869 - 1961), the Malay scholars who returned to Malaya

from Mecca around 1916. His return as a scholar who was educated in the Holy Land is something eagerly awaited by the community especially in his hometown of Kepala Batas, Penang, which is expected to help develop the life of the Malays. At that time, the living standards of the Malays are in retreat. The entry of British colonialism as a whole in Malaya in the 19th century did not bring much change to the community, particularly in terms of economic activity. The life of the Malays at that time was defined as self-sufficiency; which is closed, traditional, less competitive, and its production results are small -scale, which is at a low level of productivity (Iqbal, Hussin, & Seman, 2015).

As a scholar, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim see education as the best medium to help the Malays. Through education, knowledge can be disseminated. This study seeks to examine the concept of science according to the perspective of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim as a respected educator of his time. During his life, he was the headmaster of Madrasah Al-Hamidiyyah, Alor Setar and Madrasah Idrisiah, Kuala Kangsar. In his hometown of Kepala Batas, he founded Madrasah Da'irat Al-Maarif Al-Wataniyyah. These three educational

institutions have produced many important figures in the country. In addition, another purpose of this study was to analyze the link between the basic thoughts on the knowledge and attitude of the Malays towards science. The changes made by Shaykh Abdullah Fahim in developing knowledge were evaluated and grouped in the study. To support the efforts to collect and analyze data, this study uses an archival approach and fully qualitative methods. The documents examined include the writings of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim which are considered as primary sources and writings about Shaykh Abdullah Fahim are considered as secondary sources.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Ontology**

The ontological dimension is related to the fact that knowledge refers to the real purpose of life. Thus, the educational process looks at human beings and nature as each have a connection with each other. Shaykh Abdullah Fahim sees the environment and society as important elements in education, which cannot be separated. Thus, knowledge must be within the scope of these two elements.

The most important basis is respect and love for knowledge so that the knowledge imparted benefits the recipients and contributes to the development of society. Shaykh Abdullah Fahim saw that the society at that time showed less interest in science. The pattern of life based on the rural economy gives less exposure to the importance of learning knowledge. Moreover, the British colonial culture that only focused on urban areas caused rural communities to be marginalized. As a result, the public, especially the Malays at the time it is exposed to science skills that can only be used to connect legacy of his parents work, and science on the basis of religion.

According to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, it is not possible for a person to know science if he does not love books. Therefore, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim encouraged his students and the community to love books. He described the book as a building of knowledge as the center of light, which is able to eliminate ignorance which is likened to darkness, as quoted in his poem,

*The morning sun has risen  
Then imagine a full moon  
Then the two planets disappear  
Continental darkness (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)*

Furthermore, according to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, students must have a sense of love and appreciate the content contained in the book as stated in the poems he wrote,

*He realizes all ideals  
And bring authentic verses  
That is an essay that deserves to be  
appreciated  
Which contains eloquent expressions*  
(Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)

This is because by appreciating the book then only the student will be honored for his position as a scholar,

*If you want to grab a position  
Sincerely praise (this book)* (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)

Shaykh Abdullah Fahim also stated that community development cannot be done in a state of ignorance, because the process of community development requires accountability, active and dynamic. Only scholars have those characteristics. Development, on the other hand, is in line with the meaning of progress, although the context of progress is not necessarily material. What is meant by progress here is human capital, which is to cultivate souls with the seeding of knowledge and the sowing of civilization. Therefore, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim urged Muslims to develop

educational institutions and write books because that is where the abundance of knowledge lies which is the key to progress as stated in his poem,

*By setting up a school, composing books  
Containing the miracle of unknown  
knowledge* (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)

The work of developing human capital is not done by individuals but in teams. Therefore, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim urged that the work be done within the community. The wisdom of unity according to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim is to get the help of Allah SWT. The quote,

*Work together in unity, O children of my  
people  
So that your dignity is high in the end*

*May Allah help you  
And lead you to goodness* (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)

### **Epistemology**

The main source of knowledge according to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim is Al-Quran and Hadith. Thus, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim encourages students to master Al-Qur'an and hadith in depth, either in general or specifically and investigate its meaning so that understanding can be improved. *Obviously,  
Convey the interpretation of Al-Qur'an by  
examining  
General or specific verses as appropriate*

*Understand in depth the hadith of the Prophet by examining*

*The understanding is whether it is a different understanding or the same understanding (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)*

Apart from Al-Qur'an and Hadith, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim also urged students to memorize the *matan* (material), and lectures in books agreed upon by previous scholars because it is the norm for scholars to master the field of knowledge. He said in a poem he composed,

*Memorize some related knowledge*

*Refine some of the lectures and footnotes included*

*That is the habit of the scholars, who are advanced*

*Succeeding and approaching everyone who is far away in a certain situation (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)*

Al-Quran and Hadith as well as *matan* (material), and *syarah* (lectures) in authoritative books belong to the science of *naqli* which must be mastered by students according to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim. Only by mastering it, then students can understand the responsibilities and roles that need to be done to develop the nation and country. One of the factors of backwardness of the Malays at that time was, they failed to

understand the contents of Al-Qur'an which discuss the principles of science as the basis of success in Islamic civilization. Al-Qur'an always encourages Muslims to use their intellect and work hard to achieve success in this world and the hereafter. Similarly, the hadith in which the community is less susceptible to it. Hadith Studies at that time often associated with Kaum Muda (youth movement), causing the Malay people afraid to learn it (Ahmad, 2014). As a result, the Malays do not practice a life based on the Sunnah as a whole. In a larger context, the failure to practice the Sunnah cause of the Malays failed to develop a successful Islamic civilization as was achieved by the early Muslims (Stapa, Joseph, & Shahrudin, 2012).

Shaykh Abdullah Fahim stressed that the understanding of Al-Qur'an and Hadith among students must be in the scales of Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah, not in the scales of other ideologies or other movements including Kaum Muda (the Youth). According to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, the principles of Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jama'ah adopted in the Malay world is following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence; Ash'ariah from the point of view of faith; and the works of Imam Al-Ghazali from the point of

view of Sufism. Thus, he bequeathed the Malays, including the student to master and understand the scriptures venerated outlined in the Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jama'ah. This is because the contents of the books have been taken from Al-Qur'an and Hadith and agreed upon by the majority of scholars for a long time (Awang, 1977).

The principle of Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah became the firm hold of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim because of its moderate nature, which is very suitable to be practiced in Malaya. The approach is seen to coincide with the social atmosphere in Malaya, which consists of a variety of multi-ethnic nation, as it can educate Muslims to practice compassion, tolerance and live in harmony. In addition, the modest approach can also be a cause of guidance to non-Muslims, after seeing a prosperous life among Muslims (Al-Rasyid, 2014).

### **Axiology**

Beneficial knowledge refers to the knowledge that can develop human civilization. The measure of civilization from the physical aspect can be seen in terms of living achievements and facilities provided such as housing, community centers, industry and economy. While the

measure of civilization from the spiritual aspect can be seen through the development of human capital such as quality of work, morals, authority and intellectual strength (Abdullah, 2012).

For that reason, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim did not limit the meaning of knowledge to knowledge in the field of religion only, instead he also received social knowledge and co-curricular activities that can benefit students. Social sciences help students increase their knowledge of the current situation; while co-curricular activities can nourish the body, and relieve mental tension after hours of learning in the classroom (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006).

In the event of Malaya was colonized by the British at the time, students need to master as much knowledge as possible in order to get out of the shackles of backwardness, and economic recession. Looking at the approach used by Shaykh Abdullah Fahim in the field of education, he not only expects more of his students to go out as teachers and set up schools, but also to be able to be leaders who serve the community whether working in government or being entrepreneurs. The combination of

religious knowledge and social knowledge allows his students to work in various fields. He encouraged students to compete to acquire useful knowledge, and to explore the opportunities available through the knowledge learned;  
as worked out in his poetry,

*Compete with your peers, you have many advantages*

*Get the advantage of each trait* (Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)

At the same time sincerity in seeking knowledge is very important, in accordance with the concept of moderation to be the backbone of Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah that is by competing healthily and not offending others. The more important thing in seeking knowledge is to display admirable manners and morals. This matter is explained in the verses of his writings as follows;

*The nature of science, politeness  
Moral manners and praiseworthy deeds of  
the world and the hereafter  
Move sincerely so as not to hurt people*  
(Ghani, Talib, Zain, & Jamsari, 2006)

**The attitude of the Malays towards science**

When Shaykh Abdullah Fahim returned to Malaya around 1916, he saw the minds of the Malays against science is divided into two streams: those who prefer the traditional sciences and those affected by the reform movement. Basically, this development is quite detrimental to the Malays, because both of these flows has led to the Malays fragmented.

Traditional scholars are said to be too obsessed with calling on Muslims to learn the science of *naqli* alone. The lessons taught are around the texts found in the yellow (classic) books which are common in the fields of fiqh, tauhid and tasawwuf. Too few studies are conducted in the field of tafsir while the study of hadith is almost non-existent. To study in more depth, students had to further their studies in Haramayn or the Middle East. The study of the sciences of *aqli*, perhaps, does not exist in the traditional stream. To study it, students had to enter a vernacular school, or study it with certain figures. The reformers on the other hand are too hard on their polemics with the traditionalists. They blame traditional trends as the cause of weakening Muslims. The effect is that Muslims are not able to appreciate the

teachings contained in Al-Quran and Hadith properly (Ghaus, 1980).

However, the traditional stream has reason to defend the study of *naqli*. The entry of the British into Malaya had caused the Malay people exposed to secular education. Furthermore, the Christian missionaries were given a room to open the vernacular schools in Malaya (Hashim, 2004).

Reformers are growing in society, as they often voice reform ideas in magazines and newspapers. They also called on the Malays, in order to make changes to the pattern of the existing rule in Malaya. They described the Malay chiefs, as an obstacle to the progress of the Malays. On the positive side, they have managed to raise the national consciousness to the Malays. They provided recommendations to advance the Malays, especially in the economic field, such as holding meetings to resist foreign demands; learn English and Arabic; provide exposure to carpentry skills; urged the British government to provide placement of the Malays, near the municipality; and ask the British government to provide more government posts to the Malays (Ghaus, 1980).

Seeing the situation, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim took the middle path as the principle of Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah, which is moderation. In the context of education, Shaykh Abdullah introduced a syllabus that combines the knowledge of *naqli* and *aqli* but the focus is still given to the knowledge of *naqli* as the community desperately needs religious figures who can lead them to develop human capital first. At the same time, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim blew the national spirit so that the community has awareness to improve living standards and economic position. Shaykh Abdullah also emphasized the concept of unity by adopting the attitude of cooperation regardless of position or political party.

### **Winds of Change**

Based on the concept of knowledge held by Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, it can be concluded that the knowledge required by students is to have perfect faith to understand the meaning of *adab* (manners) which refers to the obligations that need to be performed. *Adab* are divided into two, namely *adab syariah* and *adab siyasah*. *Adab syariah* is a matter of fulfilling obligations while *adab siyasah* is a matter of creating prosperity on earth. The absolute



condition to both is justice. The person who does not carry out his duty upon himself, then he has wronged himself; while the one who makes mischief on the face of the earth, then he has wronged himself as well as others (Yaakub, 1957).

Thus in the context of education, the task of a teacher if we look at the approach of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim is in fact to produce scholars. The meaning of a scholar in the connotation of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim is one who can guide himself to perfection and happiness of life in this world and victory in the hereafter. Some of the characteristics of scholars outlined by Shaykh Abdullah Fahim are as follows (Fahim, 1948);

1. Fear of God
2. Do good
3. Unite
4. Develop the country
5. Awareness
6. Work hard
7. Thinking about the fate of the people
8. Exploring the earth
9. Establish public infrastructure
10. Be motivated
11. Trust
12. Restrain lust

As a scholar, it is an obligation to impart knowledge to others. There is no term of science only for a certain race, or a certain group for example for the elite. With knowledge, talents and abilities can be developed. According to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, every human being is endowed with abilities. Therefore, the ability should not be wasted, and the talent should be disseminated to others. The purpose is for others to develop their talents and abilities because everyone has been endowed with intellect for that purpose (Fahim, 1948).

In Islam, the intellect has a very important position. Apart from being used as the basis of belief, it is also complementary to sharia. A mind guided by Islamic law is certainly able to act as an illuminating light towards success in this world and the hereafter. Imam al-Ghazali in his work entitled *Miskat al-Anwar* states that the intellect is an aspect of the light of Allah SWT on human beings (Zaqzouq, 1989). On the other hand, lust is the cause of all damage. So much so that it has been revealed that the greatest *jihad* (strive) is the *jihad* against lust. Thus, human beings have only two choices; either letting his lust reign supreme or striving to generate the capacity of the intellect, and ensuring that it is guided

by the Shari'ah and leading the lust towards the pleasure of Allah SWT. For that reason, according to Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, rational people should abandon the pleasures of the world, especially the luxuries of modern currents that stem from the pleasures of lust. On the other hand, people with common sense must focus on the work that should be done to uphold religion, race and country. Said Shaykh Abdullah Fahim, *So take off all kinds of nonsensical and fake modern jewelry and face it for arranging and providing quality, noble and true work equipment* (Fahim, 1948).

### **Conclusion**

The concept of knowledge on the part of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim is based on theory and practice, with the main condition, is a perfect understanding of religion. In the context of education, Shaykh Abdullah equips the souls of students with religious and social sciences with the aim of producing scholars.

Scholars according to Shakyh Abdullah Fahim are not just academics but more importantly they understand and know the ways to develop the country. To achieve that goal, human capital development, and the call for awareness to diligently run the

enterprise, needs to be carried out simultaneously.

Shaykh Abdullah Fahim has a positive mindset on the potential that exists in human beings. According to him, everyone has talents and abilities that can be developed. This is because everyone has been endowed with intellect by God. Therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers or scholars to impart knowledge to develop that potential.

Basically, the thought of Shaykh Abdullah Fahim is not tied to traditional streams; but at the same time not as hard as the reformers. Although he graduated from Haramayn, and is often associated with traditional learning, Shaykh Abdullah Fahim remains of the view that the concept of integrated knowledge should be practiced. This is because given the state of the Malays who are lagging behind other races even reside in their own country. By placing ilmu *naqli* as the basis of knowledge that needs to be mastered, students should also be given space to equip themselves with ilmu *aqli*. This is because both of these sciences play a role in managing oneself and society.

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