



Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)

Volume 11 Issue 1, Spring 2021

pISSN: 2075-0943, eISSN: 2520-0313

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.111>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/JITC>

Journal QR Code:



Article:

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Published:

Spring 2021

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.111.02>

QR Code:



Mansoureh Ebrahimi

Citation:

Ebrahimi, Mansoureh, Kamaruzaman Yusoff, and Arief Sallah Bin Rosman. "Understanding several characteristics of Islam and good Muslim: A study of university students in Malaysia." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 1 (2021). 22-42.

[Crossref](#)

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Estd. 1990

Publisher Information:

Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

Indexing



Understanding Several Characteristics of Islam and Good Muslim: A Study of University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper examines the understanding of foundational Islamic doctrines as well as definition of authentic Muslim characteristics among Middle East, African (MEAS), and Asian (AS) university students in Malaysia. Outcomes have been drawn from an in-depth survey in which both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to three hundred (300) respondents from several Universities. In addition, a questionnaire survey of MEAS and AS in Malaysia government universities was carried out. A quantitative approach was used to systematically evaluate and draw the empirical results. Findings have revealed that the majority's knowledge levels were generally good in both realms while a small minority was poorly informed. The findings also indicate that respondents who displayed a better understanding of Islam benefited from their learning from religious scholars. It can be summed up that those whose understanding of Islam is poor are influenced by official or mainstream Islam.

Keywords: Islam, Muslim characteristics, university students, Malaysia

Introduction

Islam is generally considered by the Muslims as the last revelation pertaining to the Abrahamic faith and Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as its last messenger. It teaches that a superior power controls the universe (read omnipotent and omnipresent), and that human form and physiology are sufficient proof that this power exists which is Allah *subhanahu wa ta'ala* (SWT), the Creator and Lord of all worlds, including hell, and Who assembled them all in perfect order. He is the only God, without partner, the sole Lord of life here and Hereafter. Allah has sent his prophets, namely Moses (Torah), David (Psalms), Jesus (*Injeel*) and Muhammad (*SAW*) (Qur'ān), to reveal His message and truth. The Qur'ān therefore, is the most complete set of instructions as to how humans should

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live their lives in accordance to Allah's will.¹ This faith is known as Islam, and it urges Muslims to undertake the following to ensure a proper way of life:²

- (a) Services to sustain life and meet individual and society's material needs.
- (b) The understanding of individual and social conduct principles that enable people to live well materialistically, and to preserve justice and tranquility.

Allah has made available to humans all the resources of nature for them to live well materially. In order to fulfil his spiritual, financial, and cultural needs, He has raised His prophets from among men and revealed to them the code of life to guide them onto the right path.³ This rule of life is known as Islam. Islam's ethical principles and human values have had significant "effects on civilization as valuable precepts for all aspects of daily living."⁴ In the Holy Qur'ān, several verses⁵ there is a call on mankind to practise the way of the Lord and to obey Allah. The messages are the same, and they were all for the same cause: Islam.⁶

The objective of this paper is to assess the understanding of Islam among Middle Eastern, African and Asian students as well as what constitutes authentic Islamic characteristics from their perspective.

Qualitative (literature review) and quantitative methods (survey questionnaire) were used to achieve the study objectives. A stratified random sampling strategy was used to enlist 300 respondents (96 postgraduates and the rest undergraduates) as the study sample. The respondents were those studying in five government-funded research universities as well as International Islamic University in Malaysia and were from various disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics, social sciences and humanities. Middle Eastern, African students (MEAS) and Asian students (AS) were the target groups.

Survey responses were analysed using comparative and contrastive methods. The questions covered ethnicity, appearance, family, social life (13 items), Islamic understanding (12 items), and characteristics of Muslims (19 items). A pilot study with 20 international students was undertaken in UTM Johor Bahru, Malaysia; its aim was to assess their comprehension of the questionnaire which was updated and circulated accordingly.

¹Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism* (The Other Press, 2010).

²Khurshid Ahmad, *Islam: Basic Principles and Characteristics* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1980).

³Geoffrey Williams, and John Zinkin, "Islam and CSR: A study of the compatibility between the Tenets of Islam and the UN Global Compact," *Journal of Business Ethics* 91, no. 4 (2010): 519-533. DOI:[10.1007/s10551-009-0097-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0097-x)

⁴Mansoureh Ebrahimi, and Kamaruzaman Yusoff, "Islamic Identity, Ethical Principles and Human Values." *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 6, Nr. 1, (2017): 325-336.

⁵Al-Qur'ān: al Baqara 2:136; Aal-e-Imran 3:3-4, 83.

⁶Khurshid Ahmad, *Islam: Basic Principles...*

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is Islam?

Islam is an Arabic word meaning submission, surrender, obedience and devotion to Allah. The other literal meaning of Islam is “peace.” It means that one can find genuine harmony of mind and body by submitting and being obedient to God. Such a life of obedience calms the heart and ensures peace in society.⁷ “Those who believe and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allah—indeed it is in the remembrance of Allah alone that the heart of man finds rest—those who believe and act righteously, joy is for them, and a blissful home to return to.”⁸

This message was preached by all the prophets of Allah to lead man to the right path. Muhammad (SAW) was the last of these prophets. It is this rule that is now referred to as Islam and it is enshrined in the Holy Qur’ān and Prophet’s (SAW) *Sunnah* life-example.

Allah, the creator of humankind, alone sustains the world as the Lord and the Supreme Being of the World. He had fixed a life span for every human being on earth. He established a certain Code of Life for mankind, but at the same time, He granted man freedom to apply this Code of Conduct. The word Muslim refers to the person who adheres to this Code while the one who refuses it is called a kafir (infidel). A Muslim believes in Allah and the prophet Muhammad (SAW), and by professing faith in it via the ‘kalimah’ which embodies all of these convictions: *LA ILA HA ILLALLAH MUHAMMADUR RASULULLAH* (There is no Allah except Allah; Muhammad (SAW), is His Prophet)

The first portion of the ‘*kalimah*’ represents the idea of ‘tawhīd’ while the second affirms Muhammad’s prophethood.

2.2. Islam Emphasises on the Great Effort

The Muslims are supposed to apply the noble values of Islam and embody the following characteristics described in Al Qur’ān and Hadith:

1. Commitment: Commitment guides the Muslim employers to behave with integrity and fairness towards their employees while the latter should not provide false information to secure a position and should carefully read the appointment letter and sign it with intention to fulfill all the commitments described in the contract. An employer should behave professionally and ensure his or her employees are not unduly burdened with duties, namely those that are more than they can bear or described in their appointment letter. Businessmen are urged to keep to their

⁷Mohd Faizal P. Rameli, Muhammad Ridhwan Ab. Aziz, and Kalsom Ab. Wahab, “The Entrepreneurs Characteristic from al-Qur’ān and al-Hadis,” *International Journal of Trade, Economics and Finance* 4, no. 4, (2013): 191-196.

⁸Ar Ra’ad 13: 28-29.

commitment to protect their workers and staff and avoid the loss of customers and reputation.⁹

2. Accomplishing tasks in due time: Time frames prescribed for each prayer should be kept. In circumstances (intentionally or unintentionally) when a person skips Salah, the prayer remains pending and due. In like manner, if a person doesn't accomplish work within the expected time frame, it remains pending and leads to uncomfortable circumstances personally and professionally.¹⁰
3. Responsible (Employee): It is the duty of an employee to work sincerely and care for their employer's well-being and fulfill all obligations set by the employer.¹¹

2.3. Islam vis-à-vis Arab - Is Islam Synonymous with Arabs?

Arabs belong to an ethno-linguistic group that is often mistaken as a community of the Muslims adhering solely to the Islamic faith. There are Arabs who do not practise Islam while many follow other faiths. A diversity of religions in Arab countries is often overlooked and that results in the misconception that being an Arab equates being a Muslim. The Arabs originate from Arabian Peninsula and their history records their prominence during the 7th and 8th centuries after the death of Muhammad.¹² By then Islam had spread far and wide to North Africa, southern France, Persia, Pakistan and Central Asia. As Islam expanded, the Arab traditions and culture have become more detached from the Islamic ideology. However, some aspects of the Arab culture remain intertwined and play a huge role in Islamic history.¹³

It is crucial to understand that the Arab and the Islamic countries mean different things. The official language of the Arab countries is Arabic. A total of 22 Arab countries are members of Arab League and Islam is the official religion of these countries. The Islamic culture also does not separate religion from politics. Hence, Islamic culture as elucidated in the Holy Qur'ān is followed by the Muslims. The elements that distinguish the Arab and the Islamic cultures are described in Table 1.

⁹Al Baqara 02:282.

¹⁰Al-Isra 17:78.

¹¹Abasa 80:105.

¹²Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

¹³Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

Table 1. Arabic Culture Versus Islamic Culture

	Arabic Culture	Islamic Culture
Language and literature	The Holy Qur'ān has an important cultural role.	The Muslims must have complete faith in the Holy Qur'ān. The Holy Qur'ān was first transcribed in Arabic, the language used by Prophet Muhammad to spread the teachings of Islam. Today, the Holy Qur'ān and Islamic literature have been translated into other languages. ¹⁴
Arts (dance, music, theatre)	Freely practised by anyone regardless of their gender	Women are forbidden to dance in public. A woman's voice is part of her aurat according to certain school of thought. ¹⁵
Family values	Teaches independence	Emphasises the importance of family
Clothing	Not all Arab women wear hijab. Some Arab men wear a headscarf (<i>guthra</i>) with white robes.	Attire varies according to demographics. All the Muslims must abide by the rules described in the Holy Qur'ān.
Education	Women have less access to education, resulting in higher illiteracy among them compared with to the rest of the World.	No limitations on education regardless of gender

Naber reported that contrary to Islamic teachings, the Arab culture is what makes it appear that all Arabs are the Muslims.¹⁶ Women in particular are oppressed in the Arab culture, and there is a long list of how a woman should behave, while the men are free to do as they like. An ideal Arab Muslim woman is one who wears hijab, knows how to cook, appears fertile and is of good background. Naber also noted that “*while Arab culture is based on racism, Islam is based on racial equality.*”¹⁷ The Holy Qur'ān emphasises

¹⁴University of Pennsylvania – African Studies Center, *Qur'ān Translated into 114 Languages*. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Publications/Quran_Translated_13255.html

¹⁵Narrated Abu Huraira in Sahih al-Bukhari 1203, Book 21, Hadith 7; see also Sahih Muslim 422a, Book 4, Hadith 116, <https://sunnah.com/search?q=Woman+claps+hand+in+salaat>; Women's voice is not her aurat, but it is only prohibited when its tone is suggestive.

¹⁶Nadine Naber, “Muslim First, Arab Second: A Strategic Politic of Race and Gender,” *The Muslim World* 95 (2005): 479-495.

¹⁷Ibid., 490.

equality for both genders, which contrasts with the Arab culture.¹⁸ Verse 124 from Chapter 4 of the Qur'ān says that whoever does good, regardless of gender, shall enter heaven. In addition, it was narrated by Isma'il through Sa'il al-Juraiiri through Abi Nadra through those who listened to the Messenger of Allah in the middle of the days of *tashrīq*, that the Messenger of Allah said: "O' people, your Lord is one, and your father is one. There is no virtue for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab, and neither for a red-skin over a black-skin, nor for a black-skin over a red-skin except by righteousness. Have I delivered the message?"¹⁹

The hadith clearly shows that Islam does not discriminate or favour Arabs. There is no race superior to the other and all are equal. Hence, there is a crucial difference between Islamic and Arab cultures and they should not be confused or conflated.

2.4. The Question of Sharī'ah Law in Islam

The 9/11 terror attacks sparked global outrage, and the Muslims were accused of being terrorists, resulting in Islamophobia, particularly in the US. Islamophobes are very critical of *Sharī'ah* Law. The researchers at University of California-Berkeley's *Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society* reported that Islamophobia gave birth to numerous anti-*Sharī'ah* law being passed in US in 2011, 2013 and 2015.²⁰ They suggested that these anti-*Sharī'ah* laws were not enacted to fight extremism but were a product of Islamophobia. Hence, Islamophobes view Islam as a threat to their way of living. According to some researchers, Islamophobia baits and polarises society and inflames the political climate.²¹

A Law professor Khaled Beydoun²² (University of Detroit Mercy) remarked that Islamophobia had in fact facilitated Trump's rise to power while Tisa Wenger, a professor of American religious history (Yale), asserted that this was not the first religion that was used to create resentment and phobia against certain faiths.²³ From the foundation of America until 1950s, Catholics were said to be a danger to America. Secularist ideology is primarily responsible for this, and many of its adherents did not want Biblical precepts and tenets to guide American law. Secular politicians raised the specter of disloyalty,

¹⁸Madiha El-Safy, "Women in Egypt: Islamic Rights versus Cultural Practice," *Sex Roles* 51 (2004): 273-281.

¹⁹Ahmad bin Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal*, Ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut et.al., Vol. 38 (Damascus: Mu'assasah al-Risalah, 2001), 474: Hadith no. 23489.

²⁰Elsadig Elsheikh, Basima Sisemore, and Natalia Ramirez Lee, "Legalizing Othering the United States of Islamophobia," *Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley*, 2017.

²¹Ibid.

²²Khaled A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018). Accessed May 7, 2021.

²³Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

suggesting Catholics were more faithful to the Pope than to the US government. The Catholic ‘threat to American freedom’ was used for religious repression.

2.5. Implementing Islamic Law

In Islam, there are two sources of law: The Holy Qur’ān and *Sunnah*. The Holy Qur’ān is the word of God regarding what Allah permits and forbids while *Sunnah* is a collection of prophetic traditions, namely the sayings and behaviour of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The Holy Qur’ān was revealed by Allah through Jibrael to Muhammad (SAW) as a guide and code of conduct to live in this world. Nonetheless, Islamic law does not revolve around legislation or theory but encompasses every aspect of living to ennoble the Muslim way of life. There are many aims of Islamic law as stated in the Holy Qur’ān with distinct reasons (*hikmah*) behind all such guidelines. Allah said that we ought to learn the reasons behind these laws and come to understand that Islam is not all law, but rather a means of expressing faith. Islam serves a system of law that governs relations with the Creator, family, community and state. Non-Muslims are generally sceptical of Islamic law, especially Islamophobes, but one must understand that punishments for sins and crimes occupy a very small portion of the Holy Qur’ān. In Islam, punishments are not seen as proper treatment for transgressions, but as crime prevention.

Since Islam is a religion of peace, Islamic law considers every aspect of human nature. However, it prohibits gambling and anything that violates Allah SWT’s laws and injunctions. Once, when two young women were singing in the Prophet’s house, Abu Bakr scolded them. However, the prophet stopped him, “*leave them, Abu Bakr, these are holidays. Let the Jews know that there is room for joy in our religion, and that I was sent with the true and tolerant religion.*”²⁴ Allah is Merciful and Kind. Islamic law is also characterised by leniency towards those with disabilities and impairments. Allah is not hard on His servants but He wants everything that is good and beneficial for His servants. The rules outlined in the Holy Qur’ān are easy to apply and there is no single law that is too demanding.²⁵

2.6. Does Islam Advocate Radical Change

Radicalism is widespread. Historically, the term radical was seen as positive. In science, being radical relates to a good understanding of certain issues. Orientalists often use it positively when referring to a person or thing relating to Western intellectualism or art, but they use negative connotations in reference to the Muslims (though Islamists are only trying to fundamentally understand their roots).

According to The Cambridge Dictionary, a ‘radical’ believes or expresses belief in great or extreme social or political change. Here, extreme social or political change has a

²⁴Jalal ud Din Al-Suyuti, Jalal al-Din. *Al-Jami’ al-Kabir*, Ed. Mukhtar Ibrahim al-Ha’ij, ‘Abd al-Hamid Muhammad Nida, and Hasan ‘Isa ‘Abd al-Zahir, vol. 5, 2nd Edition (Cairo: al-Azhar al-Syarif, 2005), 21: Hadith no. 14139.

²⁵Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Islamic Awakening*.

negative connotation that deviates from the prevailing political social order. “*Radical Islamist ideologies lead us to expect that particular social changes provide the impetus for terrorism,*”²⁶ and therefore, denoting potential terrorist ideology. However, the Al Qur’ān asserts that the reward is hell for pursuits leading to bad deeds: “But whoever kills a believer intentionally - his recompense is Hell, wherein he will abide eternally, and Allah has become angry with him and has cursed him and has prepared for him a great punishment.”²⁷

This should not be taken lightly. If someone understands this verse, they will not commit radical deeds, such as murder. Allah also said in surah Al-Baqarah verse 193: “Fight them until there is no [more] fitnah and [until] worship is [acknowledged to be] for Allah. But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the oppressors.”²⁸

The purpose of war in Islam is not colonialism, to develop a cult, or to obtain war reparations. On the contrary, its aim is to eradicate tyranny, expand, and deny symbols of disbelief, *shirk* and *khurafāt*, so that justice reigns and people are directed towards Allah. The Muslims will only fight against people who fight Islam and disrupt the Muslim way of life. If such people cease to interfere with the Muslims, they will cease fighting, and they will not restart a war and will leave their former enemies in peace. In short, Islam advocates radicalism if it means understanding the root of something for a positive outcome. Hence, Islam enforces what is good and forbids bad ways of living.

2.7. Command the Good and Forbid the Bad as Religious Duty

Islam urges its followers to obey and do what is proper as per the Al Qur’ān while it forbids them from indulging in improper conduct (*amr bi al-ma’ruf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar*). Staying away from what is improper has become the *ummah*’s responsibility since the death of the Prophet (SAW).²⁹

Engaging in military warfare as well as physical, political or legal actions are ways to do good. It also can be done using soft or harsh words, sometimes private and/or public. It includes even feelings of approval for what is right and disapproval for what is wrong. The actions of individuals, if wrong, should be reprimanded in private whenever possible. However, public criticism becomes not only permissible but obligatory when it affects society as a whole.

²⁶Kristopher K. Robison, Edward M. Crenshaw, and J. Craig Jenkins, “Ideologies of Violence: The Social Origins of Islamist and Leftist Transnational Terrorism,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 2009-2026.

²⁷An Nisa 4:93.

²⁸Al Baqarah 2:193.

²⁹Michael Cook, *Forbidding Wrong in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), See Aal-e-‘Imran 3:110, 104; At-Taubah 9:71, 112.

2.8. Islam and Takfiri Thoughts

Takfīr, according to *Oxford Dictionary of Islamic Studies*, is the declaration that someone is no longer a Muslim. Its perverted use in the modern era gives licence to take actions against Islamic state leaders who are considered as not quite religious enough and serves as a foundational principle of militant ideology. *Takfīr* is derived from the word *kāfir* or *ka-fa-ra*, which means to *conceal something* or to *cover up*. It also implies the act of sowing seeds in the ground, as well as acts of rejection, disobedience and denial.³⁰

Among the basic rules of *takfīr* discussed in the Holy Qur'ān and Hadīth, we chose five rules related to the aim of this study. The first general rule is *kufir* does not always lead to the conviction of a person accused of committing *kufir*. Some acts of *kufir* are dismissed and the charges dropped depending on an individual's character.³¹ For instance, although the act of selling alcohol is wrong, if the seller performs prayers and fasts, he or she is not deemed *kufir*. The second rule is the fulfilment of a promise and postponement of judgement.³² This means that if a believer does good, Allah rewards them in this world. However, for sinners, their fate is in the hand of God on the day of judgement. The third rule is that of accepting *kufir* in and of itself.³³ This means that if you observe an act of *kufir* but do not act against it, you essentially agree with the act. This is why the concept of *amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar* is very important because it sets a foundation for preventing wrongdoing so that everyone is responsible for combating it. During the Abbasid empire, a Muslim ruler ordered the punishment of a group of Muslims who were drinking alcohol, including one person who was fasting but did not drink. He was found guilty for not stopping the party and was first to be punished.

The fourth rule concerns the apparent behaviour of a person which can indicate either *kufir* or *iman* status.³⁴ Hence, the person should be judged according to his or her actions. If they commit *kufir*, they are punished accordingly. The fifth rule concerns acts that display non-belief, including words that express a lack of faith. This is sufficient to render a person *Kāfir* unless he or she was compelled to commit the act or utter the words.³⁵ Under special circumstances, any act done out of fear or to save a life is not considered *kāfir* as what happened to Amar bin Yaser who was tortured by Umayyah bin Salaf. *Takfīr* is a very serious accusation as narrated in one hadith: “If a man says to his brother, O *Kafir* (disbeliever). Then surely one of them is such (i.e., a *Kafir*).”³⁶

This is because a Muslim accused *kafir* basically loses their rights in Islam as a Muslim. They cannot be buried in a Muslim cemetery and their wealth cannot be divided according

³⁰Hussam S. Timani, *Takfīr in Islamic Thought* (Lexington Books, 2017).

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Sahih al-Bukhari 6103, Book 78, Hadith 130.

to *Sharī'ah*. Thus, to call a person *kafir*, one must follow the guideline strictly to ensure no one is mistreated.

3. Discussion on Understanding of Islam

This section evaluates university students' understanding of Islam in Malaysia. In order to achieve this, 300 respondents were engaged based on random sampling; 12 questions were posed and their responses were analysed based on a 5-point scale. Table 2 is an analysis of the survey results.

Table 2. Respondents' Understanding of Islam

Number of Item	Statements	Frequency / Percentage
B23	Islam does not emphasise on great effort.	65 (21.7%)
B22	Islam is synonymous with Arabs.	57 (19.0%)
B25	Refusing Shariah Law is allowed in Islam.	48 (16.0%)
B21	Islam advocates radical change.	45 (15.0%)
B20	Command the good and forbid the bad is not part of religious duty.	43 (14.3%)
B24	Islam does allow takfiri thoughts.	33 (11.0%)

The survey findings suggest that minority of respondents from Middle East and Africa (MEAS) as well as Asia did not fully understand Islam as a complete way of life (*Syumuliyyah*). About 21.7% of the respondents agree that Islam does not require a great deal of effort, and it encourages the Ummah to work hard to achieve their ambitions, but their actions must be *Sharī'ah*-compliant.³⁷ 11.0 % of them believe that Islam allows Takfiri thoughts. Islam in actual fact, strictly forbids its believers to label other Muslims as 'Kāfir'.³⁸ It is also interesting to note that 19.0% of the respondents equated being Arab as being Muslim.³⁹ A total of 16.0% of the respondents accepted that a Muslim must obey the Shariah Law. However, it was disturbing to find out 15.0% of the respondents believed that Islam promotes radical reform, and that it teaches the Muslims to commit killings, despite the fact that it is a religion of peace (Muslims must declare war only if they face conflicts or oppression).⁴⁰ This could be because the respondents considered revolutionary action to be part of Islam and that they were influenced by revolutionary organisations,

³⁷Ghulam Murtaza, Muhammad Abbas, Usman Raja, Olivier Roques, Afsheen Khalid, and Rizwan Mushtaq, "Impact of Islamic Work Ethics on Organizational Citizenship Behaviors and Knowledge-Sharing Behaviors," *Journal of Business Ethics* 133, no. 2 (2016): 325-33.

³⁸Muhammad Haniff Hassan. "The Danger of Takfir (Excommunication): Exposing IS' Takfiri Ideology," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 4 (2017): 3-12.

³⁹Baladas Ghoshal, Report. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2008.

⁴⁰David Smock, Report. US Institute of Peace, 2002.

such as Daesh, Taliban and other extremist organisations in the Middle East).⁴¹ About 14.3% of the respondents, however, agreed that to ‘command good and forbidding bad is not a part of Islam’. However, the Holy Qur’ān states that the Muslims must do ‘*amr bi al-ma’ruf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar*’ referring to the Muslims adhering to doing good and staying away from bad deeds.

3.1. Characteristics of Muslims

The character of a Muslim is vital as it reflects his/her adherence to the Islamic faith. Islam is a way of life which means a Muslim must live his life in accordance with Islamic values, reflected in his mannerism and personality.⁴² The display of proper Islamic values and characteristics are significant, not to mention appropriate, in the daily lives of the Muslims.

The Holy Qur’ān, the holiest book of Islam, alludes to various Islamic values at various occasions.⁴³ The chapter “Luqman” in the Holy Qur’ān provides one of the best examples: “We endowed Luqman with wisdom: ‘Be thankful to God: whoever gives thanks benefits his own soul, and as for those who are thankless—God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.’ Luqman counseled his son, ‘My son, do not attribute any partners to God: attributing partners to Him is a terrible wrong;’ We have commanded people to be good to their parents ... If they strive to make you associate with Me anything about which you have no knowledge, then do not obey them. Yet keep their company in this life according to what is right, and follow the path of those who turn to Me.”⁴⁴

Thankfulness is the very first virtue mentioned in this chapter.

There are still those that are worse off than us, and no matter what happens to us, we can bear that in mind all the time. We are those who need to be grateful to God; if we are not, it is our own fault. Of this reason, gratitude is a significant feature of the Islamic character.

3.2. Confrontational Attitude

A true Muslim should have a good attitude in his dealing with others. He or she should be humble, soft and gentle in speech, and follow the guidance of Islam and the exemplary

⁴¹Angel Rabasa, “The Growth of Radical Islam,” In *Radical Islam in East Africa* (Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 39-70.

⁴²Shukri Ahmad, Mohamad Khadafi Hj Rofie, Mohd Akram Dahaman, Kamaruddin Ngah, and Sobihatun Nur Abdul Salam, “Traditionalist and Salafis Method of Argument in the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama’ah School of Thought in Malaysia,” *Jurnal Sultan Alauddin Sulaiman Shah*, Special Issue (2018): 595-606.

⁴³Khairani Binti Zakariya @ Abd Hamid, Suhaila Binti Abdullah, and Md Saufi Bin Abdul Hamid, “Methods on Moral Development of Teenagers by Luqman Al-Hakim: Application in Religious School Programs,” *Journal of Education and Learning* 7, no. 2 (2013): 75-84. Doi.[10.12928/EduLearn.v7i2.499](https://doi.org/10.12928/EduLearn.v7i2.499)

⁴⁴Luqman 31:12-15.

behaviour of the Prophet (SAW). ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Asr reported that the Prophet (SAW) repeatedly told his companions: “Among the best of you are those who have the best attitude (towards others).”⁴⁵

3.3. Qur’ān and Hadith

Some scholars believe the straight and middle path is the highest goal for the Muslims.⁴⁶ The straight path is an unbiased road. In faith, following the middle path is not blind, biased, or unruly. It is unforced and free of religious beliefs.⁴⁷ There has never been an inquisition in Islam nor indiscriminate killing of pagans. Islam respects Judaism and Christianity and their prophets. The Muslims are taught not to demonise Judaism or Christianity or vilify Moses or Jesus. This is the Islamic concept of harmony.

3.4. The Relationship between the Muslims and Non-Muslims

Islam is a religion of peace in which everyone is treated equally according to what they deserve. Islam guides every aspect of life from marriage to trade, though there are exceptions when it comes to relationships between the Muslims and non-Muslims. The Holy Qur’ān imposes rules and regulations in this realm. Allah clearly says that the Muslims should be fair to those who do not fight Islam or oppress the Muslims.⁴⁸ Allah directs the Muslims to give non-Muslims their due and to be just to them on all occasions. The Muslims therefore are instructed to behave in the best way possible way when dealing with non-Muslims.

Muhammad dealt with non-Muslims fairly when he established Madinah as the first Islamic city state. He had never forced non-Muslims to convert, and they were able to practise their teachings as long as they paid the *jizyah* tax and shared the responsibility of defending Madinah. The Prophet emphasised on the duties of the Muslims towards *dhimmi* (non-Muslim who pay *jizyah*) saying: “No doubt, if anyone wrongs a non-Muslim (*mu’ahid*), violates his rights, burdens him with more work than he is able to do, or takes something from him without his consent, then I will be his advocate on the Day of Resurrection.”⁴⁹

Hence, the Muslims should never hurt or insult non-Muslims using harsh words. Islam also does not promote violence among the Muslims; instead, it teaches compassion,

⁴⁵Muslim bin al-Hajaj al-Naisaburi, *Sahih Muslim*, Ed. Muhammad Fu’ad ‘Abd al-Baqi, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, n.d.), 1810, Hadith sahih narrated by Muslim, no. 2321. See also, Muhammad Ali al-Hashimi, *The Ideal Muslim-The True Islamic Personality of the Muslim Man as defined in the Qur’ān and Sunnah* (International Islamic Publishing House, 2006).

⁴⁶Al Fatiha 1:6-7.

⁴⁷Al Baqara 2:256.

⁴⁸Mumtahana 60: 8-9.

⁴⁹Abu Dawūd, Sulayman bin al-Ash’ath al-Azdi al-Sijistani, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Ed. Shu’aib al-Arna’ut & Muhammad Kamil Qurrah Balali vol. 4, (Damascus: Dar al-Risalah al-‘Ilmiyah, 2009), 658. Hadith hasan narrated by Abu Dawud, no. 3052.

especially if an enemy offers peace during war and it is accepted even if it is unknown what is truly in their hearts. Greeting, exchanging visits, visiting the sick, invitations, offering congratulations on happy occasions and condolences when they are struck by disaster, tragedy or death, and collaborating with non-Muslims are all encouraged to ensure peace and harmony. This situation is mirrored in Madinah and during medieval times.

3.5. Promote National Equality and oppose Narrow Nationalism

Human beings have different skin colour and different nationalities. These heterogeneities often become barriers that hinder unity. From ancient times, racial discrimination and ethnic conflicts have always contributed to social disharmony. The notion of "*Not a person of the same faith, certainly not a good person*" is not only for the Chinese, but also for the Arabs in the era of obscurity. However, the spread of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula broke the back of the Arab racism. The holy Qur'ān asserts that human beings are descendants of Adam. Hence, we are a big family. As for race, skin colour and language, they are different so that we come to know and understand each other. Therefore, Islam is not a religion of nation or skin colour. This verse⁵⁰ is called the *Islamic Declaration of Human Equality* and are of great significance in the elimination of racial prejudice, colour discrimination, and the promotion of equality and unity among nations.

3.6. Respect for Heterogeneous Culture and Inter-civilisational Dialogue

Islam's attitude towards other civilisations and cultures is neutral. It does not completely accept other cultures neither does it oppose them. Instead, it recognises cultural differences and often defers to other cultures so that the Muslims can learn from them. Differences in civilisation, culture and language are not only affirmed and recognised by the holy Qur'ān, but they are also called 'signs of God.' Thus, cultural heterogeneity is endowed with sacred meaning.⁵¹

Language is not only a tool for human communication and thought but it is also a cultural symbol. Prophet Muhammad encouraged the Muslims to learn other languages and gain knowledge from others; for example, he ordered his disciples to study Hebrew and ancient Syrian: "Wisdom is the lost thing of the believer, no matter where it is found, it is most qualified to obtain it."⁵² Hence, the contemporary Muslims must actively learn and accept advanced knowledge from other nations, including language and culture, science and technology, among others. The famous Translation Movement of Islamic history began under the guidance of this verse.

⁵⁰Al-Hujurāt 49:13.

⁵¹Ar-Rūm 30:22.

⁵²Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad bin Yazid al-Qazwini Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Edt., Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut et.al. vol. 5 (Damascus: Dar al-Risalah al-'Ilmiyah. 2009), 269, Hadith no. 4169.

The contemporary Muslim advocate for new methods of teaching, and to keep up with modern times, advocating common ground while reserving differences, peaceful unity, opposing sectarian values and autocracy, and other extremist doctrines or thoughts.

3.7. Believe in Socialism

The sociologist Elliot Turiel proposed the ‘social domain’ theory which suggests the moral development of an individual is influenced by the society in which he or she lives. Moral judgements are affected by interpretations of situations and events that involve understanding the coexistence of moral, social-conventional and personal concepts.⁵³ A person’s social behaviour is influenced by 1) moral values which guides individual behaviour; 2) social conventions or arbitrary rules and norms that structure social interactions; and 3) psychological concepts that include personal and prudential issues (safety, comfort and health).⁵⁴

If one’s own perspective, judgment and experience are the only factors that shape morality, then discrete lines differentiate right and wrong. Sociologically, an individual’s worldview is shaped by their communities and their surroundings as judgments are influenced by characteristics of that society. What is true or normal for a particular group of people may be interpreted differently by another. Differences in moral evaluations can also be influenced by an individual’s descriptive understanding of the nature of reality and their assessment and assumptions of particular situations.⁵⁵ Hence, it difficult to completely rely on Social Domain theory to determine morality because each individual weighs and coordinates moral and non-moral considerations differently across contexts, cultures and development stages.

One’s character and moral judgments may have been shaped by ideological, social, and spiritual contexts embedded within one’s religion. Many religions encourage their followers to have faith while promoting an identity that transcends self, along with a sense of commitment that fosters individual and communal well-being. For the Muslims, Allah has outlined the characteristics of morality.⁵⁶ According to the Holy Qur’ān 2:177, the Muslims should oblige and strive to fulfil these characteristics. Allah encourages its followers to have high morals, have faith in Him, generous, compassionate, devoted to Him, honest and patient. Therefore, religious aspects of these characteristics, that transcend

⁵³Elliot Turiel, *The Development of Social knowledge: Morality and Convention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵⁴Charles Stangor, *Principles of Social Psychology* (BCcampus, 2014). <https://opentextbc.ca/socialpsychology/>

⁵⁵Judith G. Smetana, *Moral Development: The Social Domain Theory View*, In P. D. Zelazo (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Developmental Psychology: Body and Mind*, 832-863 (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁶Al-Baqara 2:177.

cultural backgrounds, unite believers with the same ideology because they are benchmarks of model individuals in that society.

3.8. Belief in Secularism

This section seeks to understand the Muslim view of secularism and examines if it has any relevance in the Muslim world. The Muslims face a variety of challenges that test their faith, belief and strength of character that often foster fundamentalist resurgence. Nonetheless, increasing social problems in the Muslim regions must be dealt with. It is necessary, therefore, to determine causes when seeking solutions. According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, “Western theologians have made a distinction which appears to them as significant between secularization and secularism, where secularism is a name denoting not a process, but a crystallization, as it were, of the process of secularization into a particular and distinct form, an ideology.”⁵⁷ He says that secularism means “to denote not merely secular ideologies such as, for example, Communism or Socialism in its various forms, but encompasses also all expressions of the secular worldview including that projected by secularization, which is none other than a secular historical relativism which I have called secularizationism.”⁵⁸

Secularism has undesirable effects on the Muslims. Ideological attacks against the Muslims are common. Ideology can penetrate the mind and determine behaviour. Secularism liberates man from metaphysical values and removes religion from practical aspects of living. Secularist attack on the Muslims began with Westernisation, which is a process of adopting ideas and behaviours rather than preserving traditional indigenous concepts and ways resulting in negative effects.⁵⁹ Sexual disorders and transgender issues are not new. In verses 80-84 of Surah Al-A‘rāf, Allah condemned homosexuality among the people of Prophet Lūt as a clearly despicable act.⁶⁰

Verses 7:80-84 in the holy Qur’ān describe how the people of Lūt had same-sex relations. Same gender sexual orientation (homosexuality) is called *liwāt* (sodomy) and *al-sihaq* (lesbian). The LGBT group is growing globally, even in the Islamic countries. They seek legal protection and for same sex marriage under the banner of human rights. This movement has a negative impact on the family. According to Ashraf (2008), religious obligations begin with one’s family and spreads gradually to all humanity.⁶¹ Therefore, in producing a good society, religion is a key to reducing social problems. Secularism appears

⁵⁷Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1993), 47.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹Nik Ahmad Hisham Ismail, and Mustafa Tekke, “The Relations between Islam and Secularism: The Impact on Social Behavior in Turkey,” *International Education Studies* 9, No. 8, (2016): 66-74. Doi.: [10.5539/ies.v9n8p66](https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n8p66)

⁶⁰Al-A‘rāf 7:80-84.

⁶¹Shahid Ashraf, *Social Aspects of Islamic Culture* (Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2008).

incompatible with Islam because the former denies divine law as balanced, complete and appropriate for all times and place. This is stated in Al Qur’ān, Surah Al-Ma’idah.⁶²

Most laws governing daily affairs in secular systems contradict Islamic laws and rules. The world and the Hereafter are a continuum because humans were created by Allah to live here. Hence, Islam does not accept secularism.⁶³

3.9. Association with Left Wing

The Muslims look at their fellow believers as brothers while the others as friends. Some believe Islam is religion of the middle-class religion. Various faiths preceded Islam’s monotheism. At the time, in order to explain what the “right path” in scripture was, Muhammad painted a line, then drew a line on the right and left, and placed his hand on the midline’. The current situation appears far from what was described in the holy Qur’ān where the Muslims are considered the best role models for the global community.

4. Result and Discussion on Understanding of the Muslim Characteristics

A total of 19 questions were posed to 300 respondents engaged from local universities in Malaysia to gauge their understanding of Islam and the Muslim characteristics. A five-scale psychometric response in which responders specify their level of agreement to a statement was used: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree.

Table 3. Respondents’ Understanding of Several Muslim Characteristics

Number of Item	Statements	Frequency / Percentage
C32	Have confrontational attitude.	51 (17.0%)
C42	Believe in socialism.	48 (16.0%)
C43	Believe in secularism.	47 (15.7%)
C31	Always associated with left wing.	47 (15.7%)
C37	Accept sudden change.	43 (14.3%)
C44	Believe in salafi takfiri ideology.	33 (11.0%)

The table above shows 17.0% of the respondents agreed that the Muslims should adopt a confrontational attitude, even though in Islam, this kind of attitude is prohibited as this results in a life filled with grudges, and hostility towards others.⁶⁴ About 11.0% believed in the ideology of salafi takfiri while 16.0% believed in socialism and 15.7% in secularism.⁶⁵ Secularism and socialism have been partly responsible for luring Muslims away from the Islamic way of life. On the statement that the Muslims are identified with

⁶²Al-Maidah 5:50.

⁶³Al-Baqara 2:208.

⁶⁴Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Peace and Nonviolence in Islam* (New York: Routledge Books, 2018).

⁶⁵Nikki R. Keddie, “Secularism and Its Discontents,” *Daedalus* 132, no. 3, (2003): 14-30.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027855>

the left wing, radical, extremist or other ideology than true Islamic practice which is wasatiyyah, 15.7% respondents agreed to this. A minority of respondents, 14.3%, accepted that there has been a change in attitude of true Muslims.

5. Conclusion

The fundamental principles of Islam are applicable to everyone. The holy Qur'ān is rich with stories of the prophets, histories of peoples, economic and social aspects, and even knowledge related to flora and fauna. The lessons of the holy Qur'ān must be implemented as it is not only for reading and understanding the text, it should also be acted upon. Islam does not promote terrorism nor terrorist ideology. The dos and don'ts of Islam benefit even the non-believers. Allah SWT is the Most Merciful and Generous and has appointed his prophets and given them Holy Scriptures to guide human life in this material world - *dunya*. The ultimate goal is to live happily in the hereafter and thereafter.

Islam has its own worldview, goals, and how society is integrated, and relationships between men and women, the judiciary, banking and many other aspects of life. The *shahadah* must not be taken lightly by the Muslims as they will be asked of this on the Day of Judgment. If we are determined to enter Paradise, a Muslim should spread the words of Allah SWT so that more people will enter Paradise.

The foregoing discussion on the differences between secularism and Islam shows that the former has resulted in social problems and ruination. Islam commands its followers to fully submit to Allah's ways and practices, and to achieve this, the Muslims use the holy Qur'ān and Hadith as their reference.

This paper has assessed and evaluated the understanding of Islam and several characteristics of the Muslims among MEAS and AS in Malaysia. The findings suggest they have a fairly poor understanding of Islam. It appears respondents who displayed a better understanding of Islam benefited from their learning from religious scholars. Those whose understanding of Islam is poor are influenced by official or mainstream Islam. They believe, therefore, that they are devout Muslims. The respondents did show a relatively good understanding of authentic Muslim characteristics.

Acknowledgement

The authors are thankful to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Management Centre for No.Q.J130000.2653.15J93 grant that supported this research.

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