

Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī (1904-1970 A.D.) –
The Perlis Legendary Figure of Iṣlāḥ

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ABSTRACT

Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī was a leading and respected scholar of the iṣlāḥ (reform) movement in the state of Perlis, Malaysia, especially in the 1960’s. With the spirit as a graduate of al-Azhār University in 1932, Chairman of Malay Student Organization at the university in 1349-1351/1930-1932, as well as a follower of the well-known reformer, Muhammad Rashīd Ridā (d. 1354/1935), he initiated a reform movement in his village, Kampung Makam, Bayan Lepas, Penang, Malaysia, to spread the idea of iṣlāḥ. On the other hand, as an associate writer of a newspaper, he blamed those who forced the society to follow their fatāwā and teaching. Although he faced a strong critique, he refused to give up, and with the full support of the Perlis leaders, he furthered the iṣlāḥ cause in Perlis from 1355/1936. Assigned as the First Imām of ‘Alawiyah Mosque in Kangar, he expressed his views and called people to do right and consistently act according to al-Sunnah. He also prepared speeches and gave fatāwā for the Perlis leaders to help them widen the teaching of the Sunnites as well as challenged the standpoint of the traditionalists. He published some books, one of them entitled Kemerdekaan Berfikir Dalam Islam (The Freedom of Thought in Islam) in 1374/1954 to ensure that his major focus in combating taqlīd would reach as many people as possible as well as for the sake of the Malay struggle for independence. For the leaders of the reform movement, his migration to Perlis brought new ideas for the benefit of the people and established the movement as a respectable one.

ABSTRAK

Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī adalah seorang tokoh utama gerakan iṣlāḥ yang sangat dihormati di negeri Perlis, Malaysia, khususnya di tahun-tahun 1960an. Berbekalkan semangat seorang graduan Universiti al-Azhar pada 1932, Pengerusi al-Jam‘iyyah al-Qāhīrah al-Malayuwiyyah, sebuah Persatuan Pelajar Melayu di universiti tersebut (1349-1351/1930-1932), serta seorang pengikut tokoh iṣlāḥ terkenal, Muhammad Rashīd Ridā (d. 1354/1935), beliau telah menubuhkan gerakan iṣlāḥ di kampungnya, Kampung Makam, Bayan Lepas, Pulau Pinang untuk menyebarkan idea-idea iṣlāḥ. Di samping itu, sebagai seorang pembantu penulis di sebuah syarikat akhbar, beliau mengkritik mereka

yang didakwa 'memaksa' masyarakat mengikut ajaran dan fatwa mereka. Sungguhpun beliau menerima kritikan hebat, beliau enggan berhenti dan mengalah, dan atas jemputan para pemimpin gerakan islāh Perlis, beliau meneruskan perjuangannya di sana dalam tahun 1355/1936. Perlantikan beliau sebagai Imam Utama Masjid 'Alawiyah, Kangar, Perlis telah dipergunakannya untuk menyampaikan pemikiran beliau, mengajak masyarakat beramal mengikut kehendak al-Sunnah. Beliau juga menyediakan ucapan dan memberi fatwa kepada para pemimpin Perlis untuk membantu mereka menyebarkan ajaran Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah serta menjadi hujah dalam menghadapi pendirian dan cabaran Kaum Tua. Di bidang penulisan, beliau telah menerbitkan beberapa buah buku, salah satunya bertajuk Kemerdekaan Berfikir Dalam Islam pada 1374/1954, buku yang bermotifkan seruan membasmi amalan taqlīd di kalangan masyarakat di samping sokongan padu ke arah perjuangan kemerdekaan negara. Kepada para pemimpin islāh, penghijrahan Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash'arī ke Perlis telah membawa idea-idea segar yang memberi manfaat kepada masyarakat dan turut menjulang nama gerakan islāh Perlis sebagai satu gerakan yang disegani dan berpengaruh.

INTRODUCTION

Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash'arī was a leading and respected scholar of the *islāh* movement in Perlis. For the movement leaders, his presence in Perlis brought new ideas that would benefit the people and establish the movement as a respectable movement.

LIFE AND STRUGGLE

Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash'arī was born in Bayan Lepas, Penang, Malaysia in 1322/1904. His father was Sha'arī bin Musa and his mother was Fatimah. He is supposed to be descended from Bugis, a tribe in Indonesia, and his father migrated to Penang and worked as a police officer. He had a sister named Fatimah (Harsah 1985: 6). His education started at the Malay School, Chowrasta, Penang, but then he subsequently entered the Anglo Chinese School, Penang, which was an English medium school. Later, he made up his mind to return to the Arabic medium through further studies at *Madrasah al-Mashhūr* which was founded by Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi (Harun Din. In Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah 1992). He was an excellent student and had a strong desire to learn about Islam in depth. Thus, in 1344/1925 he went to Egypt and studied at al-Azhār University where he earned a degree in Islamic Jurisprudence in 1932. Through his success, he came to be known as Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash'arī (Harsah 1985).

While Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash'arī was an undergraduate in al-Azhār, he

took the chance to learn and understand the views of Rashīd Ridā (d. 1354/1935) (Abdul Rahman 1992). He was also an activist in the Malay Indonesian Student Union and with his friend Abdul Kahar Muzakkir and some others, they founded a Malay Organization in 1349/1930 which became known as *al-Jam‘iyyah al-Qāhīrah al-Malayuwiyyah*.¹

Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī became a follower of the reformers and prepared himself to be a knowledgeable scholar. Hence, when he returned home in 1351/1932, he and his friends such as Ibrahim Aqībī or Haji Wantih b. Muhammad Aqīb (born in Kampung Makam, Penang in 1317/1899) initiated a reform movement in his village to spread the idea of *islāh* (Mohd. Radzi 1991). A national newspaper, *Berita Minggu*, on 12th. April 1970/1390, in memory of his death on 30th. *Muharram*, 1390/6th. April 1970, named him as the founder of the *Kaum Muda* movement in Penang declaring it to be a radical and progressive movement (Harisah 1985). Possibly because his progressive ideas were too advanced for the local masses at that time,² he got into trouble through his teaching. Therefore, he changed his strategy, from the tongue to the pen. He worked as an associate writer on al-Hadi’s newspaper *Bahtera* and *Saudara* and used the chance to spread his radical thoughts. (Harisah 1985).

Although most people, especially *Kaum Tua* discouraged him and disliked his contradictory views, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī refused to give up. However he found it necessary to leave Bayan Lepas and move to Kedah where he lived at Seberang Perak, Alor Star to continue the struggle. But, there he faced a strong critique particularly from (traditional) ‘*ulamā*’ He failed to convince them and was boycotted and faced a hard life. He managed to support himself through a petty trader at Pekan Rabu, Alor Star by selling slippers and small household goods (Harisah 1985).

Fortunately, his views and firm stand attracted some Perlis leaders. With their invitation and full support, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī confidently furthered the *islāh* cause in Perlis from 1355/1936. He was appointed as a religious teacher of a girls’ school at Jalan Kampung Sena, Kangar. He also founded the first religious girls’ school in Perlis at Pengkalan Asam and taught Arabic language to the masses around Perlis. He also delivered religious lectures in many places such as Kampung Paya, Arau and Jalan Kuala Perlis. Later on, he was assigned as the First Imam of ‘*Alawīyyah* Mosque in Kangar, Perlis (Harisah 1985) This gave him a good platform from which to express his views and call people to do right and consistently act according to *al-Sunnah*, and people supported his action to repeal the practice of hitting the *tabuh* in the mosque (Abdul Rahman 1992)³ Today, the *tabuh* is no longer used in Perlis, or in many mosques in Malaysia,⁴ and, in general, people no longer pray for mercy at any monuments or graveyards (Mohd. Radzi and O.K. Rahmat 1991).

Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī also condemned some of the practices of the *khurāfat* among the Malay people e.g., performing *nazr* in certain places,⁵ such as at graves, believing in the power of ghosts and praying (to ghosts) that

someone would recover from some illness. He insisted that these practices are heretical in terms of Qur'anic precepts because they imply a denial of the Unity and the Transcendence of God. By equating God, man and superstition, these practices imply plurality of powers and consequently are *shirk* (polytheism) in Islam. Therefore, he called all Muslims to resist such practices and appeal only to God for their needs and happiness. Besides the task of the imam, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash'arī also prepared speeches and gave *fatāwā* about any religious matter for the Perlis leaders in order to help them widen the teaching of *Ahl al-Sunnah* as well as challenge the standpoint of the *Kaum Tua* (Harisah 1985).

ABŪ BAKR AL-ASH'ARĪ – KEMERDEKAAN BERFIKIR DALAM ISLAM

As mentioned before, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash'arī was an assistant writer on al-Hadi's newspaper while he was in Penang, therefore his talent for writing had given him many opportunities to spread his dynamic thoughts in order to change the traditional orthodox thinking of Malay society. As well as his duty as a teacher and a respected imam in Perlis, he wrote some books to ensure that his ideas would reach as many people as possible. In 1374/1954, as part of his major focus in combating *taqlīd*, he published a book entitled *Kemerdekaan Berfikir Dalam Islam* (The Freedom of Thought in Islam) or known more usually as *Pembasmu Taqlīd* (The Abolisher of *Taqlīd*). A year later, he concentrated on liberating Malay women from *pemikiran kolot* (old-fashioned ideas), i.e. that 'the place of women was only in the kitchen'. He wrote, *Pergerakan Kaum Wanita di dalam Islam* (Women Movement in Islam). He also wrote *Ibadat Rasulullah* (The Prophet's Worship), published in 1377/1957, *Sejarah Nabī-nabī* (The History of the Prophets), *Panduan Puasa* (The Guideline for Fasting), *Puasa Rasulullah* (The Fast of the Messenger of God) and some others (Abdul Rahman 1992).

Based on his book, *Kemerdekaan Berfikir Dalam Islam*, it seems that the book contains his criticisms on several issues regarding *taqlīd*, *ijtihād* and the need to use 'aql (intelligence) in understanding the principles of religion as well as his analysis of the political and economical thought. His criticisms were meant to attract people's attention, especially Malay society, to the agenda of reform in the struggle of *islāh* movement in Perlis.

THE ISSUE OF TAQLĪD

Literally, according to S.M. Qadri (1983), the word *taqlīd* means to wear a necklace or something round the neck. As a term of *fiqh*, according to Taha J. al-'Alwani (1992), the classical *fuqahā'* define *taqlīd* as "one's acceptance of

another’s opinion *madhhab* without knowing the other person’s justification or trying to substantiate it” In other words, it means, the adoption of the utterances or actions or another as authoritative with faith in their correctness without investigating the reasons behind their rulings. In this sense, *taqlīd* is the opposite of *ijtihād* (Van Donzel et al. 1960).

Regarding the position of *taqlīd*, whether it is prohibited or permissible, there are two different views. Some scholars accept *taqlīd* of any of the recognised schools of *fiqh* as compulsory (*wājib*) for all Muslims in the present age. According to al-‘Alwānī (1992), Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728/1328) determined that *taqlīd* is permissible for those who are incapable of *ijtihād* due to conflicting evidence, insufficient time, or a complete lack of evidence. This is because when one cannot undertake *ijtihād*, the necessity to do so no longer remains. Instead, the alternative in this case is *taqlīd*.

In the matter of *taqlīd*, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī (1954) defined it as the acceptance of another’s statement without using the intellect to study the evidence in the holy sources. He said that *taqlīd* leads to imitation and the decline of everything including ‘*aqīdah* and ‘*ibādah*. In the Prophet’s time, the term was basically applied to refer to the formal reference of the companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h). When the four major *sunnī* schools of Islamic law were established, *taqlīd* was adjusted to mean confidence in the teaching of a highly respected scholar by his followers.

“In the meantime, four prominent *madhāhib* among *sunnī* Muslims emerged and they contributed their own treatises on Islamic law. Pupils and followers of these *madhāhib* spread and propagated the views of their masters in Muslim countries until they had established the influence and authority of these *madhāhib*” (Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī 1954).

What is more, the common people were no longer concerned about the authority of any *fatwā* or views of the ‘*ulamā*’ but trusted the piety of their respected scholars absolutely (al-Ash‘arī 1954).

What was more, he wrote, was the emergence of some *turuq* that damaged the rule of *Sharī‘ah*. Although the founder of some of the *turuq* had good objectives in their practices, i.e to combat the evil of very intense desires, etc., they became more extreme by isolating themselves from all matters of real life. Sometimes, he indicated that they hated the life in this world, became stagnant and forbade certain food for themselves, although the law of God has permitted it for everyone. Unfortunately, not a few in number followed their doctrines and as a result, the unity of the Muslim society was broken.

“There were quarrels and clashes between adherents of *tariqat* and the followers of the *madhāhib*. Each one of them felt that only they were true and therefore entitled to the mercy of God. Finally, the incursion of the Mongol army had toppled the rulers and wiped out the great civilization of the Muslim empire in the 6th century H / 12th century CE.” (al-Ash‘arī 1954).

A CALL FOR REFORM

In view of the situation understood by Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī as outlined above, he called the masses to learn about Islam comprehensively in order to avoid *taqlīd*. He said that the belief in *al-Qur‘ān* means to follow its directions and it forbids *taqlīd*. He quoted several verses in *al-Qur‘ān* which clearly indicate that the matter is prohibited such as this verse (Harun, n.d):

“Then would those who are followed clear themselves of those who follow (them): They would see the chastisement and all relations between them would be cut off. And those who followed would say ‘If only we had one more chance, we would clear ourselves of them, as they have cleared themselves of us.’ Thus will Allāh show them (the fruits of) their deeds as (nothing but) regrets. Nor will there be a way for them out of the fire.” (*Al-Baqarah* 2: 166).

Therefore, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī (1954) called for a big change among the followers of the *madhāhib*. He called them to stop fighting each other and to try to understand one another. He reminded them that the support of their own *madhāhib* was the prime reason for the destruction of the Muslim reputation.

It is interesting to read his simple reason why new generations at this time should move from *taqlīd* to *ijtihād*. Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī (1954) said that if Muslims confess that Islam is the religion of God and Muhammad is His Prophet (p.b.u.h), any information about or directives regarding the religion should come directly from both sources and should not have been added to by anybody. In addition, he said that God tells us that the creation of the universe is a sign for people who consider (*al-Baqarah* 2: 164). This means that human beings can increase their knowledge through a study of the universe in addition to what the revelation states.

“Islam definitely demands that everyone see, hears, feels, reads and learns in order to understand the message of God and to become a good practitioner, not just a good imitator.” (al-Ash‘arī 1954).

Otherwise, Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī added, the four *a‘immah* of the *madhāhib* never forced anybody to imitate their views but would surrender their words to the truth of *al-Sunnah* (See also Muhammad b. Ismail 1985). He added that even imām al-Shāfi‘ī had declared that if his word opposed that of the Prophet’s *sunnah*, his word should be thrown away. *Al-Sunnah* should be his absolute *madhhab*.

“There was no reason for anyone to imitate the *a‘immah* blindly, regardless of their ability to use Qur’anic principles in line with present conditions and different cases. Rather they should exert themselves in an effort to understand the two holy sources.” (Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī 1954).

Accordingly, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī (1954) criticized the Malay people who have never fully accepted and practised all the principles of Islam. Conversely, they place their ancient customs (*‘ādat*) above everything and regarded *‘ādat* as the natural way of life. He reminded them that not all *‘ādat* are accepted by Islam, but some of them are counted as *bid‘ah* as noted above.

“They have to choose only *‘ādat* which are not against the principles of Islam and to throw away the rest.” (Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī 1954).

He said that anything that is forbidden by Islam is illegitimate and what ever practices bring benefits to the society and life and suit Islamic principles are accounted as *‘ibādah*.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī (1954) holds that *taqlīd* has no basis in Islam. As far as he is concerned, it is strictly prohibited. It creates disunity by dividing the believers into many sects, develops prejudice and may bring a great clash between people. He also regarded *taqlīd* as the prime factor for the stagnation of Muslim life and the cause of the loss of great Muslim civilisations. It blocks individual skills and creativities and the ability to use the intellectual capabilities awarded by God, thus causing stagnation. As an alternative to *taqlīd*, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī (1954) proposed the practice of *ittibā‘*, following.⁶ He explained that in *ittibā‘*, a person would follow and practise any *fatwā* or view of the *‘ulamā’* after he or she understood and was satisfied with the evidence provided. The person should also ensure that the reasons are in line with the basic sources. Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Ash‘arī concluded that this is a practical way in avoiding *taqlīd* and to make sure that everyone continues to learn about Islam.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Through this organization he was chosen to be the representative to the Islamic conference in Jerusalem, Palestine in 1931 (Badrul Amin Bahrom 1995).
- ² He blamed *Kaum Tua* or (he called them) *panglima-panglima taqlīd buta* (warriors of blind imitation) who forced the society to follow their *fatāwā* and teaching. He questioned some of their practices such as the practice of *talqīn* after the dead body had been buried and suggested that these were *bid‘ah* (Harisah Hasan 1985).
- ³ In Malaysia, *tabuh* also known as *ketok-ketok*, an onomatopoeic Malay word, is almost equivalent, according to the Malay interpretation, to *naqus* (a church bell or gong). The *ketok-ketok* is a log about twelve inches in diameter and four feet long; with its interior scooped out to make it hollow, so that it produces a sound when beaten with a stick, loud enough to remind Muslims to attend the obligatory prayers.

The conflict here was over whether the *ketok-ketok* is permissible or prohibited. The event began in 1932, when al-Shaykh Hasan b. al-Shaykh Sa'id al-Yamani, said to be a former Wahabite *muftī* in Mecca came to Malacca and gave lectures in many mosques, in the course of which he gave a *fatwā* that the *ketok-ketok* was *haram* (prohibited). A Traditionalist, Haji 'Abd. al-Latif bin Haji Tambi insisted that the physical features of the *ketok-ketok*, as used in Malaya, could not definitely be interpreted as *naqus* which was prohibited by Islamic law. In this particular case, Latif was very much in line with several *fatāwā* of Meccan *muftis*, who felt that the instrument was not prohibited, provided that it was not used with the intention of imitating Christians. Latif further argued that even if the *ketok-ketok* could be equated to *naqus*, then the question of imitation did not arise because the Christians were no longer using *naqus*, but bells, in their churches. Thus he drew the conclusion that the use of the *ketok-ketok* in mosques or prayer halls (*suraus*) was permissible (Safie bin Ibrahim. 1987).

- ⁴ The writer lived in Perlis for years (since 1990) and visited many mosques in states in Malaysia. Today, many mosques have used microphones for *adhān*, to announce prayer times. It might be possible that the using of the modern instrument caused the *tabuh* or *ketok-ketok* to no longer be used.
- ⁵ *Nadhr* - an expressed vow to do any act or to dedicate property for any purpose allowed by Muslim Law (Ahmad Ibrahim. 1965).
- ⁶ In *ittiba'* according to Ibn Hanbal a person knows and then follows his imam, while in *taqlid* the *muqallid* follows his imam without knowing the sources or implications of the provision (*Islamic Culture* 1983).

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