The Influence of Abrahamic Faiths in the Religious Pluralism Agenda in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Pluralism is a school of thought that originated in the West. It evolved from the ideas of Liberalism, which advocates for unlimited freedom. Pluralism suggests that truth is relative, not absolute. It allows anyone to claim the truth, even without proof. Religious pluralism stems from this concept, asserting that every religion holds truth even if it contradicts the other. In Malaysia, debates over pluralism have led to discussions about Islam being the final revealed religion, preceding Judaism and Christianity. This claim aims to justify Judaism and Christianity as religions revealed by God by classifying all three as part of the Abrahamic Faiths. Consequently, Jews and Christians are also asserted to have a place in heaven. To address this, the study critically analyses these claims and their relationship with the concept of Pluralism. Using the descriptive content analysis method, this qualitative study examined how the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths and hermeneutic interpretation influence the agenda of religious pluralism in Malaysia. The study's findings indicated that Religious Pluralism, especially within the framework of the Abrahamic Faiths, is part of an organised international political agenda under the global network of Liberalism. In conclusion, defending the sanctity of Islam from the influence of religious pluralism should be the primary focus of Islamic religious authorities in Malaysia.

Keywords: Ideology; Religious Pluralism; Abrahamic Faiths; Hermeneutics; Liberalism

1. Introduction

Pluralism is a school of thought born from the framework of liberalism. Accordingly, pluralism is a general tolerance of differences in worldviews that cannot be reconciled following the notion that no view is more fundamental than others (Zarkasyi, 2013 & 2012). Thus, pluralism is also the primary doctrine of post-structuralism literary theory, which is often combined with relativism and general suspicion of the concept of "truth" (Zarkasyi et al., 2023; Rifa'i, 2020; Zarkasyi, 2012; Blackburn, 2005).

The ideology of liberalism is guided by the principles of thought that fight for freedom, but clear principles do not guide it. This thought was born in the Western world when Western society felt burdened by the church's influence for hundreds of years. This thought or idea was born to trigger their hope to be free from control and oppression (Blackburn, 2005).

However, there are no clear principles that control this idea, so it triggers ideas that are contrary to the Islamic Creed. Among the earliest literature that talks about this matter is Hobhouse's statement (1912), which evaluates liberalism as a characteristic of the modern world. Then, in 1959, R.G. Collingwood defined liberalism as a form of absolute human freedom to choose or act without coercion (Johnson, 2013). Accordingly, in 1968, Leo Strauss stated that liberalism means the sacred human right to be critical of the government (Behnegar, 1998). In summarising the theories of liberalism, Fawcett (2015) stated that liberals hoped for ethical order without appealing to divine authority, as he claimed, "Liberals hoped for ethical order without appeal to divine authority".

Following that, ideas and thoughts built by liberalism have triggered pluralism, which assumes that everyone is free to determine and claim their truth (Johnson, 2017). This idea believes that truth is not singular (Relativism). Religious pluralism is triggered when discussing religion and belief (Wentz, 2018).

In principle, Peter Byrne states that religious pluralism or relativism is based on three premises. First, God is the absolute truth, and the truth does not depend on a set of circumstances. Second, all religions promise safety for their followers. Third, all religions have minimal information regarding the nature of God or the absolute truth (Byrne, 2011). The combination of understanding regarding the latter has underpinned the spread of the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths worldwide.

1.1 Doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths and its Emergence in Nusantara

Efforts to equalise the three (3) religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have been mobilised by supporters of religious pluralism with the use of the term Abrahamic Faiths, which describes the unity of the goals of these

three religions (Shaharud-din & Khambali, 2012). In its terminology, the term Abrahamic Faiths is often used in the West to describe the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam as religions that originated from the Prophet Abraham PBUH (Shaharud-din & Khambali, 2012; Dirks, 2006).

Based on its terminology, the term Abrahamic Faiths, known and popularised in the West, aims to build harmony between religions in the context of understanding and applying dialogue between each other in various religious aspects (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2011). Then, the situation has been manipulated by the figures of religious pluralism to equalise the position and level between the religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity on one characteristic of monotheism, which is the similarity of devotion to the God of Abraham (God of Abraham). In other words, all three religions need to be recognised as the religion of Prophet Ibrahim PBUH (Shaharud-din & Khambali, 2012).

From the Islamic perspective, the use of the term Abrahamic Faiths is rejected and inappropriate because the essence of Judaism and Christianity (Christianity) does not originate from the teachings of the Prophet Abraham. Both religions are new teachings designed after the death of Prophet Moses PBUH and Prophet Jesus PBUH. After all, this denial has been affirmed in the Word of Allah SWT:

مَا كَانَ إِبْرَٰهِيمُ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَـٰكِن كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُّسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ۝

Translation: Prophet Ibrahim is not a follower of Judaism nor Christianity, but he remains based on monotheism as a Muslim (obeying and completely surrendering to God), and he is not from the polytheists. (Surah Ali Imran, 3: 67)

The Quranic verse above clearly denies any perspective that tries to equate Islam's position with Judaism or Christianity. The strictness of Ali-Imran: 67 in this context proves that only Islam is a monotheistic religion recognised by God. Therefore, any space or element leading to disbelief, shirk, and confusion about religion must be dealt with firmly (Azmi & Zaman, 2023).

Nevertheless, the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths, which is based on the agenda of religious pluralism, is still contagious in the archipelago and Malaysia in particular. In the archipelago context, Ulil Absar Abdallah, one of the pioneers of the Liberal Islam Network in Indonesia, stated, "The essence of all religions is the same with all of them aiming towards the path of truth". Therefore, Islam is not the most valid religion (Abdallah, 2003). His claim aligns with the opinion of Frans Magnis Suseno, who claims that each religion only differs in its laws (Ghazali, 2009). Therefore, the agenda put forward by

supporters of religious pluralism is the recognition of the truth and validity of other religions, such as the position of Islam.

In a more specific context, the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths has started in Indonesia as early as the 90s. The teachings were founded by Ahmad Mushaddeq using the name "Millah Abraham", also known as Gerakan Fajar Nusantara (Gafatar) (Musa, 2022; Alvarez et al., 2020). This doctrine was detected spreading in Malaysia in 2013, and it is believed to have been developed by the followers of Ahmad Mushaddeq (e-SMAF, 2016). In his preaching, this teaching has distorted the meaning of Al-Maidah: 46 by claiming that the Quran has recognised the truth of the Torah and the Gospel used by Judaism and Christianity until today. According to them, this understanding aligns with Matthew's Gospel (New Testament, 5/17). Only through the combination of Torah, Injil and Al-Quran can the real *"al-Dīn"* be established (Noor, 2016).

Based on the highlights above, this study analyses the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths and its connection with the understanding of pluralism. For this purpose, this qualitative study will apply the content analysis method to evaluate the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths and the influence of hermeneutic interpretation in the agenda of religious pluralism in Malaysia. In conclusion, this study aims to increase the awareness of religious authority and the global Muslim community to prioritise defending the dignity of Islam from the dangers of religious pluralism (Zaman et al. 2023). Through this effort, the identity of Muslims can be defended holistically to address the challenges of globalisation nowadays.

2. Research Methodology

This study presents a critical analysis of the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths in the agenda of religious pluralism in Malaysia. The analysis started with a theoretical review of the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths, which claims that Islam is the last religion that was revealed before Judaism and Christianity. In addition, the analysis process of this study also covers the method of spreading the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths and religious pluralism through variations in the hermeneutical interpretation of the Qur'an based on liberalism.

For that purpose, this study uses a descriptive content analysis method. The primary data related to Abrahamic Faiths were gathered from various forms of scientific research such as books, journals, etc. Meanwhile, the data related to hermeneutics were focused on studies related to hermeneutic interpretation methods by Farid Esack, following his thoughts often became the basis of the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths. Meanwhile, data related to the agenda of pluralism were collected from various primary sources that contain the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths or elements of religious pluralism. In the end,

the research findings were formulated based on the current reality of religious pluralism at the international level.

3. Findings

Based on research on data related to the influence of the Abrahamic Faiths doctrine in the agenda of religious pluralism spread in Malaysia, this study found a significant relationship between the ideology of liberalism, pluralism, religious pluralism, and the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths. In addition, this study also found that the ideas of equality between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are part of a planned agenda at the international level driven by several stakeholders, such as the RAND Corporation and the Abrahamic Family House (AFH).

In Malaysia, the ideological normalisation agenda of religious pluralism has developed through the spread of the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths and the propaganda of the recognition of the equality of religions. Accordingly, this study also found that the normalisation of the ideology of religious pluralism in Malaysia is based on a planned international political agenda under the worldwide network of liberalism. The chronology can be understood in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Chronology of the Development of Religious Pluralism and Abrahamic Faiths in Malaysia
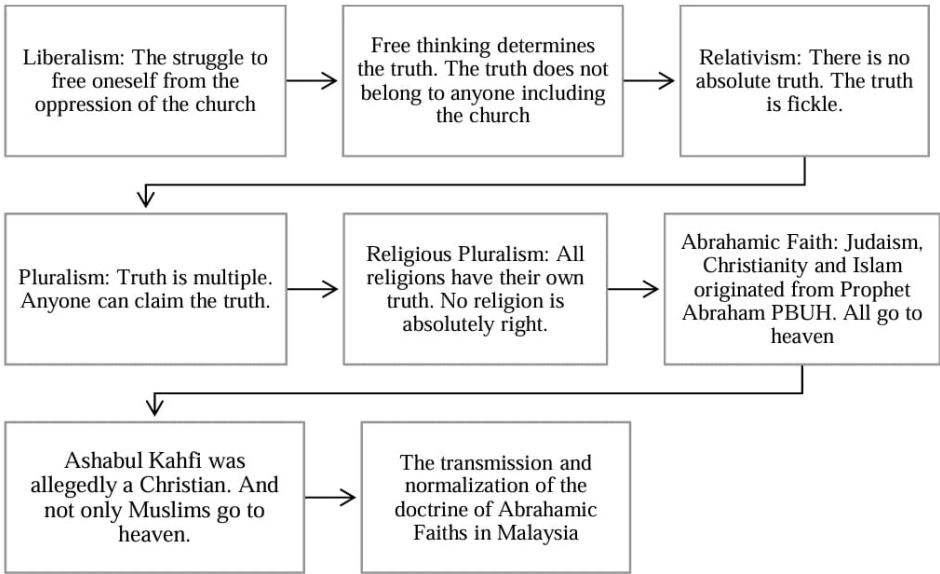
Source: Researcher's Analysis

Based on Figure 1, the ideological fulcrum of liberalism, which fights for individual freedom from the shackles of the church or religious shackles,

has pushed society to switch to the ideology of relativism and free thought (Ryan, 2017; Kymlicka, 2017). The change in understanding became more significant after the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) (Holton, 2021; Ryan, 2017).

Accordingly, the pattern of independent thinking and the rejection of the concept of absolute truth has resulted in the emergence of the ideology of religious pluralism. This ideology is based on the denial of absolute truth possessed by any religion. In addition, religious pluralism also recognises and tolerates the religious diversity of a society or country and promotes religious freedom (Gada, 2016; Hick & Hebblethwaite, 2014). As a result, the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths was triggered as an agenda of religious unity and community unity.

Through that line of thinking, Abrahamic Faiths have spread in the Archipelago and Malaysia. Its spread movement comes in various forms and is embroidered with the slogan of religious freedom guaranteed in human rights principles. (Musa, 2022; Alvarez et al., 2020; Noor, 2016). In Malaysia, the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths is found to be spread either through the teachings of Millah Abraham or entities that support the agenda of religious pluralism (Noor, 2016).

4. Discussion

Based on the findings, the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths has spread in Malaysia under the framework of inter-religious dialogue based on hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur'an and liberalism. In addition, several internationally organised agendas, such as the Human Fraternity Declaration in 2019 (Kucko, 2020; Holy See, 2019) and the construction of the Moderate Muslim network (Rabasa, 2007), also played a role in influencing its spread pattern in Malaysia. Therefore, the discourse related to the following aspects needs to be understood comprehensively to complete the understanding of this study.

4.1 Hermeneutics and Religious Pluralism

Based on its history, the method of Hermeneutics or textual criticism (textual criticism) has been used by Western thinkers to interpret the Bible. The hermeneutic approach has been used following too many ambiguities in various versions of the Bible (Virkle & Ayayo, 2023; Boden & Eatough, 2014). In the agenda of religious pluralism, Alphonse Mingana, an orientalist of the Catholic sect, asserted that; "The time has come for us to criticise the text of the Qur'an as we do with the Hebrew-Aramaic Jewish scriptures and the Greek Christian scriptures" (Ismail, 2006).

Accordingly, the Hermeneutic method has been applied to religious pluralist groups interpreting the Quran. Through textual criticism, the

interpretation of the Quran can be adjusted according to the current context or other interpretations that deviate from the true meaning (Zainol et al., 2018). In addition, the hermeneutic method has been used to interpret the Quran because its content is only in the form of theological imagination (*khayal al-dīnī*), as claimed by Assyaukanie, one of the founders of the Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) in Indonesia in 2005 (Abd Moqsith et al., 2009; Assyaukanie, 2005).

In the interpretation of the Qur'an, supporters of Liberal Islam tend to use extreme hermeneutic methods to the point of ignoring the interpretation guidelines established in Islam. Schleiermacher's study (1978) states that their tendency is "to understand the discourse just as well as even better than its creator" or "to understand the discourse better than its creator". In this context, Arkoun (1994) believes that the Qur'an needs to be interpreted using such a method because he thinks the Qur'an is not a holy or noble book.

In addition, Arkoun claims that the Quran, like other books, can be analysed and studied according to the suitability of a particular situation. In fact, according to him, the historical fact of the writing of the Qur'an is filled with controversies that invite debate, opposing perspectives, intrigue and various forms of fictional content (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2023; Hariyanto, 2018; Arkoun, 1994). Ultimately, the hermeneutic method is essential for spreading Abrahamic Faiths and religious pluralism worldwide.

4.2 Abrahamic Faiths in Farid Esack's Hermeneutic Interpretation

In principle, the development of the Abrahamic Faiths doctrine is based on a pluralism agenda based on hermeneutic interpretation methods. The objective is focused on the production of a perspective of understanding by focusing on the spirit of the Qur'an, which has universal value (*ṣāliḥ li kulli zamān wa makān*). The universal values that are meant include the value of freedom (*al-ḥurriyyah*), humanistic values (*insāniyyah*), the value of justice (*al-'adālah*), equality (*al-musāwāh*), and human rights (*ḥuqūq al-insān*) (Mustaqim, 2016).

In this context, among the main hermeneutic interpretations that are often the basis of the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths is the source of Farid Esack's thoughts. Recently, his name has become synonymous with Hermeneutics and religious pluralism. Farid Esack's thinking is more advanced than that of Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, and Muhammad Arkoun (Said, 2020).

Among Esack's main works in hermeneutics is al-Quran, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression (1997). In this work, he states that his Hermeneutic interpretation method is primarily based on Francis Shcussler-Fiorenza. Mustaqim (2016) states that Farid Esack's work is based on the hermeneutic element of reception (reception hermeneutics), which is well-known in the tradition of Bible

interpretation. Conceptually, reception hermeneutics is a method of studying how the meaning of a work changes and is adapted based on different contexts from time to time.

Technically, Farid Esack often aligns his interpretation of the Qur'an with the content of the holy books of other religions. The argument is to build bridges between religions and create understanding and cooperation between religions. According to him, the action is based on universal values to build a more humane society (Said, 2020). Among the arguments of the Qur'an that Esack wrongly interpreted to support the concept of Religious Pluralism are:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالنَّصَارَىٰ وَالصَّابِئِينَ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Translation: Verily the believers, and the Jews and the Nasora (Christians), and the Sabians, whoever among them believes in Allah and (believes in) the Last Day and does righteous deeds, then for them their reward is with their Lord, and there is no worry (from the occurrence of bad events) for them, and they will not grieve. (Surah al Baqarah, 2: 62)

In interpreting this verse, Farid Esack (1997) states that God promises protection and safety to everyone who believes in Him and the Last Day and everyone who does good without regard to his followers. The meaning of his claim is that the guarantee of safety will be given to anyone regardless of religion; the name of the religion they follow is not essential as long as the individual believes in Him and the Last Day and does good deeds. In this regard, Farid Esack tried to display the manifestation of his struggle, which denied the legitimacy of the origin of religion and built a democratic political system that did not consider aspects of religious diversity.

After all, Esack's description presents a pluralistic point of view that tries to destroy the status of Islam as the only true religion in the eyes of Allah SWT. Esack also claims that the term "*al-Dīn*" mentioned in this verse does not mean an official religion. On the contrary, the term means any form of surrendering to God. Thus, he also tried to deny that the truth of "*al-Dīn*" was only the religion of Islam. All religions that contain the concept of surrender to God can also be understood as "*al-Dīn*" (Said, 2020).

In the context of reasons for the revelation of the verse (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) 62 of surah al-Baqarah, the Quranic exegesis scholars agree that the Jews in the verse in question are those who adhere to the Torah and believe in Prophet Moses PBUH. Meanwhile, the Christians in the verse are firm in the *Injīl* and believe in the Prophet Jesus PBUH. Likewise, the Sabeans firmly believe in Allah SWT and the Last Day. After the arrival of Islam, all of them

believed and obeyed the Prophet Muhammad PBUH and the laws of the Quran. (Al-Ṭabarī 2010, 2:154; Ibn Kathīr 1999, 1:284; Ibn Abī Ḥatim 1998, 1:127).

The obligation to believe in the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, as described in the verse above, is also written in the hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah RA from the Prophet PBUH;

وَالَّذِي نَفْسُ مُحَمَّدٍ بِيَدِهِ لَا يَسْمَعُ بِي أَحَدٌ مِنْ هَذِهِ الْأُمَّةِ يَهُودِيٌّ وَلَا نَصْرَانِيٌّ، ثُمَّ يَمُوتُ وَلَمْ يُؤْمِنْ بِالَّذِي أُرْسِلْتُ بِهِ إِلَّا كَانَ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ النَّارِ

Translation: By (God) in whose hand Muhammad's soul is! There is no one from the human race, both Jews and Christians, who hears about me and then dies in a state of disbelief in the message I brought; instead, he is an inhabitant of hell.

[*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Kitāb al-Īmān*, *Bāb Wujūb al-Īmān bi Risālah Nabiyyinā Muḥammad ilā Jamī' al-Nās wa Naskh al-Milal bi Millatih*, hadith no.: 153]

Therefore, it is an absolute duty for every Muslim to believe that only Islam is the true religion. This obligation is an absolute principle as stated by Allah SWT;

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِندَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ ۗ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِن بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

Translation: Verily, the (valid and accepted) religion in the sight of Allah is Islam. Moreover, the people (Jews and Christians) to whom the Book was given did not differ (about the religion of Islam and refused to accept it) except after it reached them valid knowledge of its truth; (the dispute is) simply because of the envy and jealousy that exists among them. Moreover, (remember), whoever disbelieves and disbelieves in the verses of Allah's revelations, then Allah is very quick to reckon with Him. (Surah Ali Imran, 3: 19)

In explaining the above verse. Al-Ṭabarī (t.th, 6:275) states that "*al-Dīn*" means the sincerity of worshipping only Allah SWT, who has no partners. Al-Baghawī (1997, 2:18) states that "*al-Dīn*" means the witness that there is no God but Allah SWT and the confession of only Islam, the religion prescribed by Allah SWT to mankind. Al-Qurṭubī (1964, 2: 126 & 134) states that "*al-Dīn*" means faith, and Islam is the same. Therefore, non-Muslims are non-believers and cannot be attributed as worshipers of Allah SWT. Thus, Ibn

Kathīr (1999, 1:451) affirmed that Prophet Muhammad PBUH, Prophet Ibrahim PBUH, Prophet Ismail PBUH, Prophet Ishaq PBUH and Prophet Yaaqub PBUH are independent of Judaism and Christianity. All of them cannot be associated with any religion except Islam.

4.3 The Reality of the Influence of Religious Pluralism in the Islamic World

Research into the framework of religious pluralism that originates from liberalism shows that the movement has infiltrated the Islamic world in a very planned manner. In this regard, the West admits that the spread of liberalism is intended to accommodate the failure of secularism in the Islamic world (Binder, 1998). In addition, the current Western agenda also tries to present the concept of Liberal Islam to strengthen the movement of political liberalism in Muslim countries (Bader, 2012; Binder, 1998).

In this regard, the West is also active in arranging the spread of the belief liberalisation strategy through Muslim individuals such as Farid Esack, Ulil Absar Abdallah, Nurcholis Madjid, Alwi Shihab, Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, Hassan Hanafi and others. In addition, the emergence of Liberal Muslim groups such as Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) in Indonesia, Inter-Faith Commission (IFC) and Sister in Islam (SIS) in Malaysia gives a clear picture of the spread of liberalism in the Islamic world is very active (Ismail, 2006; Thoha, 2005).

In a more specific context, the agenda of liberalising faiths pioneered by the West also tries to cultivate the thought of pluralism and Abrahamic faiths through the channel of Sufism. In 2004, a conference themed 'Understanding Sufism and Its Potential Role in U.S. Policy' was held at the Nixon Center to understand the spiritual tradition of Sufism and its potential for the foreign policies of the United States (USA) (Rozehnal, 2019; Baran et al., 2004). Bernard Lewis' keynote address at the conference mentioned the existence of elements of Religious Pluralism in various Sufism trends (Baran et al., 2004);

"Sufism is an amazing thing. It offers something better than tolerance. The attitude towards people of different religions, as shown in Sufi books, has no comparison. It is not just tolerance; it is acceptance. There are poems by Rumi and Ibn Arabi in Persian and Turkish that indicate that all religions are the same: All religions have the same purpose, the same message, and the same communication, and they also worship the same God. They may do it in different ways, but God is still present in the church, in the mosque, and the synagogue (Jewish synagogue)" (Baran et al., 2004).

Bernard also stated, "To me, it seems that the concept of acceptance, which is so different from mere tolerance, is an important contribution that has lasting effects and can also play a role in creating better relationships between different communities. In the present and also in the future. If you look at the Ten Commandments (Which were revealed to Prophet Moses when he was

praying on Mount Sinai, the teachings of the commandments are also practised in Christianity because they are also mentioned in the Bible). You will find that most of them are related to human relationships. Only a small part is related to the relationship between man and God. Most are related to what should not be done to other people. In standard Islamic books, it is the other way around: it has more to do with relationships with God than with other human beings. In this regard, Sufism once again brought a significant change" (Baran et al., 2004).

After all, the reality of the influence of religious pluralism in the Islamic world has spread in various aspects. Recently, the medium of transmission was found to be increasingly dominated by Liberal Muslim groups.

4.4 Abrahamic Family House and Abraham Accord

Among the main religious pluralism agendas that bring the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths is the interfaith negotiation known as Human Fraternity, which was held in 2019 in Abu Dhabi, UAE (Holy See, 2019). Although the negotiation documentation does not touch on the Abrahamic Faiths doctrine, the Abrahamic Family House (AFH) construction, which began in the same year, proves the reality of the agenda. Based on its design, AFH was inaugurated on February 16, 2023, housing a mosque, a Jewish synagogue and a Christian church in one area and facing each other (Abrahamic Family House, 2023).

In 2020, the UAE spearheaded the Abraham Accord, a bilateral agreement on Arab-Israeli normalisation signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and between Israel and Bahrain on September 15, 2020. The USA again acted as a mediator in the agreement to reach its resolution. The agreement's name, Abraham Accord, highlights the general belief that Judaism and Islam originated from the Prophet Abraham AS. Thus, the Abraham Accord contains the aspirations of the Abrahamic Faiths agenda (Krieg, 2023 & 2020).

According to Krieg, the UAE has outlined the elements of Sufism as their foreign policy in line with the aspirations of the USA in a conference at the Nixon Center in 2004. The elements of Sufism are not actual Sufism values as the previous Islamic heritage. In addition, the values of equality between Islam, Judaism and Christianity have been raised in the name of tolerance. Instead, it is a political campaign behind the face of Sufism. These promotions above the slogan of religious tolerance aim to justify the spread of Religious Pluralism (Krieg, 2023 & 2020).

4.5 The RAND Corporation's Strategy Produces Moderate Muslims

The concept of Moderate Muslims is part of the product of Westernization that has been initiated by America to strengthen the policy of US Liberalism (Haddad & Esposito, 2000). This agenda has been included in a report entitled Building Moderate Muslim Networks under the supervision of the RAND Corporation (Rabasa, 2007).

The report discusses the overall plan and strategy of the USA to promote civil liberties and human rights that are based on secularism and move under the framework of liberal democracy. This strategy is seen as the need of the US to curb the rise of the Islamic world, which they describe as fundamentalist and radical. For that purpose, the USA needs to wisely exploit the Muslim community in their own country to compete with the fundamentalists. The Moderate Muslim Network will be developed based on the perspective of the USA (Rabasa, 2007; Hoffman, 2007).

The priority of selecting the Moderate Muslim network is from among Muslim scholars, community activists, women's organisations, journalists and researchers who have a liberal or pro-secular understanding. The network will hide behind the agenda of political, economic and educational reforms, women's empowerment, and the fight for human rights. In terms of its implementation, the Moderate Muslim agenda will be supervised by the US State Department (USAID) and assisted by several NGOs such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), National Democratic Institute (NDI), The Asia Foundation (TAF), Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) and others (Daulatzai & Rana, 2018; Krebs, 2008; Rabasa, 2007; Hoffman, 2007).

In this regard, the USA also requires the selection criteria for membership of the network from among supporters of USA policies such as the human rights agenda, gender equality, religious pluralism or religious freedom (Krebs, 2008). After all, the idea of developing a moderate Muslim network also reflects the seriousness of the USA to dominate the war of thought that is currently raging in the world (Daulatzai & Rana, 2018; Krebs, 2008; Hoffman, 2007; Ismail, 2006). Therefore, Rabasa (2007) stated that this war is no longer a clash between Islam and the West. On the other hand, the battle of ideas among Muslims in determining their position is either radical or liberal, fundamentalist or progressive (Daulatzai & Rana, 2018).

In the context of the spread of RAND propaganda in Southeast Asia, Building Moderate Muslim Networks has recorded appreciation to fifteen community leaders from the archipelago. The list includes one Malaysian, seven Indonesians, four Filipinos and three Singaporeans (Rabasa, 2007). The list proves that the Moderate Muslim network has played a systematic role in Malaysia and the archipelago as a statement of appreciation in the production of the said study.

5. Religious Pluralism Agenda and Abrahamic Faiths in Malaysia

The emergence of the agenda of religious pluralism in Malaysia began as early as the 1950s through a network of platforms for dialogue between religions, such as the establishment of the World Council for Inter-Faith Cooperation in 1958 and the Malaysian Inter-religious Organization (MIRO) in 1963. However, following May 13, 1969, MIRO's operations were halted and later revived in 1986 under the Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) (Yusof & Ab Majid, 2013).

Then, the impact of the wave of Islamization in Malaysia around the 70s prompted the emergence of several other organisations, such as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism & Taoism (MCCBCHST) in 1983 and the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) in 1985 (Yusof & Ab Majid, 2013; Yaacob, 2011). Among the main issues that these organisations are trying to challenge are the ban on the publication of the Bible in the Malay-Indonesian language, the ban on importing Christian religious literature in the Malay language and the ban on the teaching of religions other than Islam in schools during school sessions (Ramli & Awang, 2018).

In addition, one of the earliest initiatives of MCCBCHST was to organise an interfaith conference in 1984 with the theme The Role of Religion in Nation Building. Then, in 2002, the Malaysia Interfaith Network (MIN) was established to coordinate the counter-reaction agenda by MCCBCHST and INSaf in dealing with the impact of the wave of Islamization in Malaysia. In this context, MIN aims to build harmony between multi-racial and religious communities in Malaysia and promote the exploration of traditional differences between religions in Malaysia (Ramli & Awang, 2018; Yaacob, 2011).

However, the emergence of MIN and several other organisations oriented towards interfaith dialogue has invited adverse reactions from the Muslim community in Malaysia (Ramli & Awang, 2018). This polemic has been explained by Guan (2005) in a study entitled "*Managing Sensitivities: Religious Pluralism, Civil Society and Inter-faith Relations in Malaysia*". According to him, the opposition of Islamic NGOs in Malaysia against the agenda of MIN and other similar organisations has threatened the status of Islam as the official religion in Malaysia, promoting the agenda of religious pluralism and the right to freedom for apostasy (Ramli & Awang, 2018; Yusof & Ab Majid, 2013; Shaharud-din & Khambali, 2011; Guan, 2005).

Accordingly, among the main polemics of the religious pluralism agenda in Malaysia is a series of claims that Islam is the last religion to be revealed, whereas Judaism and Christianity were revealed first. The allegations try to justify Judaism and Christianity as religions revealed by God by placing

these three religions in the term Abrahamic Faiths (Shaharud-din & Khambali, 2012; Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2011).

In 2013, this doctrine was detected growing in Malaysia through the Millah Abraham entity, a movement founded by Ahmad Musadeq in Indonesia. This teaching has perverted and manipulated the meaning of Al-Maidah verse 46;

وَقَفَّيْنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم بِعِيسَى ٱبْنِ مَرْيَمَ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ ۖ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ ٱلْإِنجِيلَ فِيهِ هُدًى وَنُورٌ وَمُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ وَهُدًى وَمَوْعِظَةً لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

Translation: And We sent the Prophet Isa Ibni Maryam to follow in their footsteps (the Prophets of the Children of Israel), to justify the Book of the Torah that was revealed before; and We have given him the Book of the Injil, which contains guidance and enlightening light while confirming the truth of what was before him from the Book of the Torah, as well as being a guide and teaching advice for those who (want) to be pious.

Based on this text, Millah Abraham's teachings claim that the Quran has recognised the truth of the Old Testament and the Bible used by Judaism and Christianity until now. According to them, this understanding aligns with Matthew's Gospel (New Testament, 5/17). Only through the combination of Torah, Injil, and Al-Quran can the true concept of 'al-Dīn' be established (Noor, 2016).

Accordingly, the normalisation of the doctrine of Abrahamic Faiths has also been found to be increasingly contagious in Malaysia. The impact is becoming more apparent following public statements related to it involving public figures in Malaysia. For example, on 29 May 2020, Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who is the Prime Minister of Malaysia, in a live broadcast on his YouTube account, stated that *Aṣḥāb al-Kahfī* is a group of Christian youth they lived before the arrival of Islam (Anwar Ibrahim, 2020). This statement was found to have invited polemic and various reactions of concern in the Muslim community in Malaysia.

Specifically, this study found that the polemic of Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim's statement was focused on terminology or the discipline of nomenclature, which parallels the aspirations of the Abrahamic Faiths doctrine (Dirks, 2006). Attributing Christian terms to Nasrani is inaccurate and indirectly gives the perspective of equality of status between the position of Nasrani, which monotheizes God, and Christianity, which believes in the concept of the Trinity (Krieg, 2023 & 2020; Azrin Wahid, 2024).

The fact is that Christian religious terms that monotheize God can only be attributed to Islam. In the context of the discourse about the religion of

Aṣḥāb al-Kahfī, the scholars agreed that the group of young people in question remained monotheistic with Allah SWT as the religion of Islam or known as the Nasrani religion at the time of Prophet Jesus PBUH (Al-Ṭabarī 2010, 17:605; Al-Tha'labī 2015, 3:358; Al-Baghawī 1997, 1:103). On the other hand, the term Christian is more synonymous with the term Messiah (Syihab & Afnan, 2016). Accordingly, the understanding of the Nasrani religion that monotheisms Allah SWT to *Aṣḥāb al-Kahfī* and Prophet Isa PBUH coincides with Quranic verses such as Ali-Imran: 19, 67 & 85, Yunus:72 & 84 and Yusuf: 101. Overall, the fact of the religion of *Aṣḥāb al-Kahfī*, who believe in God, should not be associated with any religion other than Islam.

Overall, the spread and normalisation of Abrahamic Faiths in Malaysia are happening and need to be given serious attention by all parties to ensure that the faith of Muslims is preserved.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that Religious Pluralism, particularly among Abrahamic faiths, is part of a planned international political agenda linked to the global Liberalism network. Malaysia is not exempt from this crisis and controversy. The normalisation of the doctrine of Abrahamic faiths in Malaysia has been systematically promoted since the 1950s through various organisations, accompanied by hermeneutical variations in the interpretation of the Qur'an based on Liberalism. The interfaith dialogue approach has also emerged as a platform for religious pluralism in Malaysia. Inter-religious dialogue initiatives aim to promote harmony in Malaysia's pluralistic society. However, it should be recognised that this platform is often exploited by proponents of liberalism and Religious Pluralism, which can undermine the faith of Muslims and jeopardise the status of Islam as the official religion in Malaysia. Therefore, it is crucial for Islamic religious authorities in Malaysia led by the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding, the Mufti institution, and Islamic religious councils across the country to prioritise the defence of Islam's dignity against the influences of religious pluralism.

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