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LIBERAL ISLAM AND ITS THREATS TO MUSLIMS' SOCIETIES

ADIBAH ABDUL RAHIM^{1*}

¹ Department of Usul al-Din and Comparative Religion and Philosophy AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (AHAS KIRKHS), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 53100 Gombak, Kuala Lumpur
email: adibahar@iium.edu.my

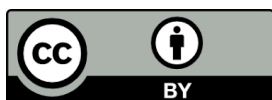
Corresponding Author email: adibahar@iium.edu.my

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Abstract

Liberal Islam is considered as a significant threat facing the Muslims today. Its advocacy for freedom and unlimited rational interpretation of Islam might not only undermine the truth of Islam but also cause doubts among Muslims in society. Therefore, this study is important to create awareness about the danger of liberalists' thought and various challenges posed by them. It explores the perceived threats of liberal Islam to Muslim beliefs and practices, focusing on four selected challenges, namely, religious pluralism and the freedom of religious belief, the acceptance of diverse sexual orientations, misconception of gender equality, and the misinterpretation of aurah. This study employs a qualitative method with library research in which the data was obtained through various sources of books, manuscripts, articles, and other relevant documents. The study found that liberal Islam is motivated by Western ideologies, and it is an agenda of the West to diverge Muslims from their religious beliefs and to free themselves from the religious guidance. Therefore, it is recommended to strengthen an Islamic educational system for the Muslims to maintain their self-esteem and help them from easily influenced by the liberal thought. Besides, the government should empower shari'ah court jurisdiction to prevent any act of challenging the shari'ah law. Lastly, the media should play a role to confront the liberal thought that creates misunderstanding in the society.

Key Words: Freedom of religious belief, Gender equality, Islam liberal, religious pluralism, Sisters in Islam (SIS)



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INTRODUCTION

Liberal Islam is regarded as one of the most significant ideological challenges facing Muslims today. It has the potential to impact Muslim beliefs (*aqidah*) and, ultimately, to undermine Islam itself (Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor 2011). Unlike other Western modern ideologies, liberal Islam engages with issues by referencing Qur'anic verses, hadith, the opinions of scholars, and Islamic terminology. Additionally, it is endorsed by some Muslim scholars with religious backgrounds who claim to represent moderate Muslims, aiming to improve Islam's image, which has sometimes been associated with terrorism, fanaticism, and anti-Western or anti-modern attitudes. Their goal is to rescue Islam from rigidity and defend it through liberal progressive thought. This approach has made liberal Islam appears more appealing to some people within Muslim communities. However, this ideology has posed serious challenges due to the issues it promotes and its ideological principles, which conflict with the teachings of the *Qur'an*, *Sunnah*, and the views of *ahl sunnah wal-jama'ah*.

METHODOLOGY

This study analyses the concept of liberal Islam and its threats to Muslims' beliefs and practices. It is based on the qualitative method in which it employs descriptive, analytical and evaluative approaches. The descriptive method is mostly applied in the definitions of liberal Islam and its main features. Meanwhile analytical and evaluative approaches are mostly applied in the discussion of ideological challenges of liberal Islam and how it posed its threats to various aspects of Muslims' beliefs and practices. Since the topic is theoretical in nature, this study is confined to library research in which references are obtained through both primary and secondary sources of books and articles in journals.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Definitions of liberal Islam and its Main Features

Liberalism, in general, put the importance of freedom and its fundamental principle is ensuring the liberty of man. There are four features of liberalism: first, individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and meliorism (Ronald Chau 2024). The first feature, that is, individualism places a high belief in man's accountability due to his position as a rational being who is liable for his actions. In this sense, man is free to think and speak, to express his ideas, and to conduct actions according to his wishes as man is considered to have the ability to reason. It regards individual conscience as a keystone, instead of God's sovereignty. The second feature of liberalism is egalitarianism. It promotes parity and equality in which all must achieve the same or to be treated equally. Meanwhile, the third feature is universalism which implies that principles of liberalism are relevant to all human beings regardless of religion and culture. The last feature of liberalism is optimism, which implies the probability of upgrading human society. The term liberal Islam specifically was initiated by Leonard Binder in his book entitled *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* and developed further by Charles Kurzman in his book *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* in which both works then became the main source of

references for the study of the subject matter. While there is no single definition of liberal Islam, it can be described as encompassing elements of openness, change, and progressive thought. Its core principle is to advocate for human freedom, emphasizing independence from control by any authority, including religious authority. Thus, liberal Islam can be associated with anti-feudal as its advocates tend to oppose any law which restricts their rights, freedom, and interests. For example, liberalists disapproved of religious moral enforcement by Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan (JAWI). They were opposed to the approach of JAWI immoral deterrents to ambush the night clubs and pubs and considered it as a denial of individual personal rights. For them, religious and moral issues should not be controlled under the means of religious authority and enforcement.

Liberalists also claim that the enactment of *khalwat* needs to be reviewed or dropped as it is related to moral issue and personal right of man. G25 and Sisters in Islam (SIS) which represent the Muslim liberal groups in Malaysia argue that the act of *khalwat* is a personal choice which does not disturb others. Religious arrestment and enforcement on *khalwat*, according to them, is the act of *tajassus* and Islam prohibits stalking in private sphere. However, the concept of *tajassus* is understood as stalking people purposely without any suspicious reason. In contrast, arrestment on *khalwat* is done by religious authority based on valid suspicions, evidence and witnesses using the complete standard operating procedure (SOP). In the context of Malaysia, depriving of moral policing will bring a great disaster to the moral decay among Muslims in society. Unlike the Western world, Malaysia has its own religious and cultural identities which had been instilled to its people since the primary level. Freedom should be exercised within the limits of religious and cultural values.

In addition, Muslim liberalists advocate for reinterpretation of Islamic understanding and practice. In this sense, they divide revelation into two categories, namely, written revelation (*Qur'an*) and unwritten revelation (human mind). They argue that *Qur'an* is the explanation of religious purposes and the human mind is responsible for interpreting the *Qur'an* according to contemporary needs. For example, Qur'anic verses highlight the necessary to impose punishments on Islamic criminal acts while the forms of punishments should be determined by the human mind in line with contemporary circumstances. Therefore, the Qur'anic text has been revived to suit with human desires, and this made them independently rely on their own thought. In a more specific sense, liberal Islam asserts that religion should not limit individual freedom but rather allow people the space to interpret it according to their own perspectives. Thus, Muslim liberalists argued that Islam should be interpreted in various ways, not limited to one stagnant view only. Within this view, they advocate for reinterpretation of the Qur'anic verses, *hadith*, rules of *syari'ah*, and judgments of religious authorities grounded in an intellectual framework of *ijtihad*. In doing so, the advocates of liberal Islam tend to deny the established Islamic traditions and *syari'ah* including the *qat'i* rules determined by '*ulama*'. According to them, any rule which does not suit the human rights must be abolished or reinterpreted according to the changing circumstances of contemporary time (Khalif Muammar 2024 and 2018).

The task of revival of religious thought is not wrong; indeed, it is strongly encouraged in Islam, however, the framework of liberalists is problematic. They employed a complete freedom, at the same time placing an over emphasis on the role of reason. For example, they claimed that the Qur'anic interpretation should not necessarily bound by the classical texts or the previous

tafsir of '*ulama*' because they are not scientific, not timely, and no longer relevant to contemporary time. At the same time, they do not take into consideration the necessary principles of *tafsir*, such as, *asbab- al nuzul*, *nasakh mansukh*, and the views of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), companions and '*ulama*'. They considered those views as rigid, stagnant, and outdated. In addition, Muslim liberalists declined the methods applied in the disciplines of Islamic sciences, such as, *tafsir*, *hadith*, *fiqh*, *usul fiqh* and claimed that those sciences are all the composition of '*ulama*'. Therefore, an interpretative approach of liberal Islam has not been conducted within an Islamic epistemological framework grounded by religious traditions, instead it is based on their own logical reasoning.

Muslim liberalists tried to align the Islamic teachings and rules based on their own interests although those interests are obviously wrong from religious and ethical perspectives. In doing so, they seem to propose for a new understanding on Islam and challenged the authority of '*ulama*'. In one statement, Zainah Anwar from SIS said.

“The process of interpretation and codification of the laws, dominated by male jurists and scholars, eventually led to an orthodox mainstream view that men and women in effect are not equal. ...the '*ulama*' have great control over women's lives by what they say...once again we come back to the rights accorded to man over women and how it being done under the name of Islam. So, if we do not challenge this authority and monopoly then it is the '*ulama*' understanding of Islam that dictates public policy and lives of women daily” (Zainah Anwar 2007).

She also said: “Fourteen hundred years ago the '*ulama*' might be the main repository of knowledge in Muslim world. Today, decision making on any matters of religion can no longer be the sole responsibility of the '*ulama*' of our society. The world is far more complex today than it ever was. No one group can have the exclusive monopoly on knowledge” (Zainah Anwar 2007).

Additionally, liberal Islam is founded upon secular ideology of secularism as it holds that religion should be limited in scope and should not influence public aspects of human life. In this sense, it regards *shari'ah* is not relevant to regulate the affairs of man's life and it could be a hindrance for his progress. The *sunnah* of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) is also regarded as irrelevant and outdated to be practiced in the modern time instead, it is only relevant to Arab society and culture. The liberalists regarded Qur'anic and prophetic messages are only appropriate to the Arab culture since both were conveyed in Arabic language by an Arab messenger. By this claim, liberal Islam has doubt on the authenticity of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. For instance, it rejects the *mu'jizat* of *isra'* and *mi'raj* and asserts it as a dream of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) and has been exaggerated by his fanatic followers. Some liberalists even claimed that paradise, hell, and the hereafter do not exist, and interpreted them as psychological force of man's happiness and sorrow as well as his psychological phase to reach a perfect matured life. Moreover, they tend to reject *shari'ah* law especially *hudud* and claimed that it is irrelevant and inapplicable for a contemporary multi religious society.

Ideological Challenges of Islam Liberal

The liberal ideas had been popularized by many liberal organizations, such as Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL), Sisters in Islam (SIS), and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) apart from individual

figures from different parts of the world, such as, Taha Hussein, Ali Abdul Raziq, Qasim Amin from the middle east, Harun Nasution, Nurcholis Majid, Siti Musdah Mulia from Indonesia, and Astora Jabat, Kasim Amin and Siti Kasim from Malaysia. People are attracted to their ideas because they brought attractive issues, such as, religious tolerance, the stagnation of religious thought, the universal values, and human rights. The liberal idea of Harun Nasution is expressed in his book *Pembaharuan Dalam Islam* (Sejarah Pemikiran dan Gerakan). He argued that the backwardness of Muslim was due to conservative theology of *Ahl Sunnah wal Jamaah and Asha'riyyah*. He said that the thinking of *Asya'riyyah* must be replaced with the rational thinking of *Mu'trazilah*.

In Malaysia, SIS is considered one of the Muslim liberal organizations that has called for the comprehensive implementation of human rights, making several demands. These include; first, that Malaysia recognizes and validate Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI), particularly LGBT rights; and second, that Malaysia sign the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which promises freedom of religious belief (Nurazimah Abdul Aziz & Nurul Syafini Abdul Rahman 2018). The liberal agenda brought by liberal Muslim NGOs and individuals seem to be compatible with the demands of non-Muslims in few lawsuits in Malaysia.

Among the ideological challenges posed by the advocates of Islam liberal are:

1. Religious Pluralism and Freedom of Religious Belief

Liberal Islam promotes the concept of religious neutrality, which gives rise to the ideology of religious pluralism. In principle, religious pluralism considers the truth claims of all religions are correct. The truth has been interpreted in different ways or perspectives. Every religion is equally valid, and no religion is in position to claim that it is the most absolute one or superior to the others. All religions are equal; they speak of the truth in different terminologies, such as, Allah in Islam, *Yehweh* in Judaism, Trinity in Christianity, and Brahman in Hinduism. In addition, religious pluralism also recognizes all methods of salvation in different religions. Also, it claims that the sacred books of all religions are subject for revision. This is in line with the claim of John Hick that religions are limited and cannot judge one another.

One of the leaders of JIL, Ulil Absar Abdallah stated that, "All religions are the same. Everything is headed for the path of truth. So, Islam is not the most correct religion" (Ulil Absar Abdallah 2002).

He also wrote,

"Without hesitation and shame, I claim that all religions are on the right path, a long road to the truth. All religions, therefore, are true, with different levels of understanding towards the religious path. All religions belong to one big family: a family who love the path to the truth that never ends"(Ulil Absar Abdallah 2002).

Another leading representative of liberal Islam in Indonesia, Nurcholish Madjid said that every religion is an expression of the faith of the same God. God is the hub of a wheel, and the finger is the way of all religions. He is very much characterized by the perennial philosophy when he divided religion into esoteric and exoteric levels. For him, one religion differs from other religions at an exoteric level, but relatively similar in its esoteric level, which he called it

as *sunnatullah* (Nurcholish Madjid 1995).

The idea of religious pluralism has brought a great impact on religious understanding among the Muslim liberalists. For example, JIL in Indonesia advocated for a legal inter-religious marriage, and it has become a common practice in Indonesia nowadays. In Malaysia, the idea of religious pluralism has been manifested in a shared festival celebrations among the adherents of various religions, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. This practice was declared as prohibited in Islam by *muftis* and religious scholars through *Muzakarah 'ulama'* in 2006, however, the Muslim liberalists declined the view and accused them as backward and narrow minded.

Also, due to the idea of religious pluralism, few Muslim ministers and the Muslim NGOs supported the establishment of Inter-faith Council (IFC) which was suggested by *Majlis Kristian, Budha, Hindu dan Sikh Malaysia* (MCCBCHS). IFC has submitted the controversial memorandum to the Lawyer Council on 21st August 2001. It was considered as controversial since it contains fourteen demands which obviously challenge the position of Islam as an official religion in Malaysia. Among the demands are to legalize LGBT, the use of the word Allah in Malay version of bible, opposition to *hudud*, insulting the ceremony of *qurban* during *aidl adha*, abolishment of Malay privileges, no status of religion in identification card of newborn until they reach eighteen years old, and freedom for apostacy. For instance, liberalists supported the case of Azlina Jailani or Lina Joy for apostacy and claimed that she should be allowed to apostate without any religious and legal restrictions. For them, freedom of religious belief for Muslim has been restricted as Muslims are not allowed for apostacy. They also criticized the rule that non-Muslims who want to get married with the Muslims should convert to Islam. Liberalists regard these conditions as discrimination against other religions.

Through IFC, with Ambiga as a key person, liberalists fight for a freedom of religious belief. Her loud expression in this issue has been recognized by the West, and she was awarded with US International Women of Courage in 2009. The demand of IFC for a freedom of religious belief can be fulfilled if the government signed an agreement on International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 18 in the agreement stated that any individual has a right to belief in any religion and to convert to any religion at any time. This article, somehow, allows Muslims for apostacy.

The proposal to establish the IFC has been declined by Islamic organizations in Malaysia which then led to the establishment of Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN). ACCIN stated that the establishment of the IFC would endanger Islam because; first, it opened the widest possible space for non-Muslims to interfere in Islamic religious affairs; second, through IFC Islamic law must be subject to international secular law which might affect the faith; third, IFC will give Muslims absolute freedom to do anything they wished; fourth, IFC will allow Muslims for apostacy; and fifth, IFC reserves the right to determine individual's religious status, and anybody who wishes to apostate may submit his/her application to IFC.

The idea of freedom of religious belief, according to liberalists, is in line with the Article 11 (1) of the Federation Constitution which states the right of anyone to belief in any religion. However, they tend to ignore the further elaboration of the Article 11(4) which 'guarantees the right of every person to profess and practice his or her religion, and subject to certain restrictions, to propagate it. Federal and state law may control or restrict the propagation of any

religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam’.

It is clear from this article that the Federal Constitution law has placed Islam as an official religion in Malaysia, at the same not refuting other religions. Islam acknowledges the concept of freedom of religion as reflected in the verse ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly from falsehood’. Ibn Kathir has interpreted that this verse is only applicable for non-Muslims, whereas Muslims are not allowed to leave Islam or apostasy. Punishment of apostasy has not been prescribed in the *Qur’an* directly, however, the majority of classical Muslim jurists claimed that an apostate should be condemned to the death penalty. The Prophet (p.b.u,h) had imposed the death penalty upon apostates due to their treason and hostile attitude towards Islam. In Malaysian context, the enforcement for apostasy depends on the state jurisdiction of the *shari’ah* court. Apostates will be fined amounting to RM5000 or three years imprisonment or six times whipping. They will also be placed at refinement of Aqidah Centre with series of counselling sessions.

2. Freedom of Sexual Orientation

Based on the freedom of expression and individual rights on sexual orientation, liberal Islam sees no reason to reject the practice of LGBT. JIL clearly acknowledges LGBT and claims that it is natural and normal acts. The idea is supported by Prof Siti Musdah Mulia, who said that the practice of LGBT is legal since it is based on *fitrah* and created by God himself. For her, the condemnation of LGBT among *‘ulama* and Muslims was based on their narrow-minded interpretation of Islamic teachings. In The Jakarta Post, Siti Musdah Mulia stated that ‘Islam recognizes homosexuality. Homosexuals and homosexuality are natural and created by God, thus, permissible within Islam’ (Siti Musdah Mulia 2008). Meanwhile, in her session of Indonesia Conference of Religions and Peace, she cited the Qura’nic verse in *surah al-Hujurat* (49:13) that all men and women are equal, regardless of ethnicity, wealth, social positions or even sexual orientation. Thus, she said there is no difference between lesbians and non-lesbians. In the eyes of God, people are valued based on their piety.

Other liberalists who support LGBT also used this *surah al-Hujurat* (49:13) to justify their views; First, the necessity to be tolerant of the diversity of sexual orientations created by God. Second, LGBT is innate (*fitrah*), in which they cannot choose or change the sexual orientation that has been embedded in them. Third, LGBT is not a bad thing because God does not judge humans based on their sexual orientation but based on their piety (*taqwa*). The first view, that is, to be tolerant of diversity of sexual orientation, has violated the meaning of the verse itself. The actual meaning of the verse is the prohibition to distinguish people based on nationality. In his interpretation of the verse, al-Maraghi explained that humans are born from the descendants of Adam and Hawa. So, there is no reason to insult each other (Ahmad Musthofa al-Maraghi Syaikh 1946). Meanwhile, Ibn Kathir, al-Qurtubi (al-Qurtubi 2006) and al-Baghawi further explained that all groups, tribes, or descendants come from Adam and Hawa. The wisdom behind the difference of nations is to get people to know each other. Based on prominent scholars’ interpretations, tolerance of diversity of sexual orientation is contradict to the essence of the verse. This is because God created humans as pairs, male and female (Adam and Eve), and this relationship is essential for the preservation of descendants, leading to the formation of various lineages and ethnicities. In the verse, the emphasis on respecting

people of different races and nations is not about tolerating sexual orientation, but about the command to understand one another and not to dispute lineage or ancestry. In this context, Islam strongly forbids and condemns LGBT, viewing it as a grievous act. Legitimizing LGBT, especially same-sex marriage, is considered as degrading the institution of marriage. Meanwhile, the second view which justified LGBT as *fitrah*, an unchangeable destiny or nature is also contradict to the verse, which states that men are created as partners of women. By saying LGBT as *fitrah*, its supporters have limited knowledge and understanding on the concept of *fitrah*. The concept of *fitrah* is not based on neutral condition, instead it is based on good potentialities to abide by the wills of God. Regarding the third view of supporters of LGBT which claims that Allah does not judge humans based on sexual orientation but piety (*taqwa*), this is clearly contradict to the meaning of piety (*taqwa*) itself. Piety means obeying Allah's commands and staying away from His prohibitions. In short, all the arguments used by the LGBT supporters in *surat al-Hujurat* verse 13 are not strong and contradict to the prominent scholars' interpretations. They seem to ignore the essence and core meanings of the verse.

In Malaysia, liberalists also fight for the right of LGBT. Many attempts through various platforms have been made to attract the society to support LGBT including among the school students. For example, in 2019, the organizer of debate competition for Tun Razak Cup had given the topic on *Islam tidak Menghalang Homoseksual* to debaters from Sekolah Menengah Agama Wilayah Persekutuan (SMAP Kajang). This topic has triggered a polemic and is considered controversial as Islam clearly prohibits LGBT and its prohibition has been spelled out both in the Qur'an and hadith. Thus, the topic should not be the subject to debate. As a result, the Department of Islamic Religious Affairs of Negeri Sembilan and the Mufti of Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur have taken decisive action by arresting the organizers for violations under Section 50 of the Negeri Sembilan Syariah Criminal Enactment (Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan 2019).

In other occasion, liberalists even gave an open support to the coming of Irshad Manji to Malaysia to launch her book *Allah, Liberty and Love* which approves LGBT. This book was banned by few Muslim countries due to her liberal views on LGBT. In her book *The Trouble with Islam Today*, Irshad Manji stated that homosexuality is a gift from God to people who are destined to become LGBT (Irshad Manji 2012 and 2005). A person who is naturally born in such a way does not need to hide or deny it, but to accept it. She believed that if God has given something to humans, then it is impossible for Him to ban it. She also added that the scholars do not provide strong justification for the prohibition of LGBT. According to Manji, homosexuality does not oppose religious teaching but merely opposed the 'Islam-tribalism', an infiltration of pre-Arab culture to the current religion of Islam (Irshad Manji 2012).

LGBT activists also argue that the absence of Qur'anic text on the law against LGBT perpetrators means that it is not included in major sins such as adultery. The absence of punishment in the *Qur'an*, according to them, means that it is not forbidden. They argued that types of punishment determined by Muslim scholars have been influenced by psychological and social factors that were not sensitive to the LGBT group. Therefore, a new interpretation of the verses of the *Qur'an* should be done based on sexuality sensitivity to LGBT people. In fact, the liberal organization called Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) in Malaysia called for the abolishment of *shari'ah* law for LGBT. In 2015, an activist for transgender rights, Nisha Ayub received an award from the Asia LGBT Milestone Awards (ALMA) as Hero of the

Year. In 2016, he received an award from the United States government on behalf of the International Women of Courage Award, and he was the first transgender to receive this award publicly. This evidence shows that liberalists played active roles to be acknowledged in society and publicly promoted LGBT as a right of sexual orientation that must be accepted by all parties.

For liberalists, the act of LGBT is considered as private sphere, thus, nobody or any authority is supposed to interfere one's lifestyle and his or her sexual orientation. However, in Islam, the private misdeed may affect society at large. If LGBT is allowed uncontrolled, the group may freely create their own websites and promote this unethical culture among the society. LGBT may eventually cause the spreads of various diseases, such as, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). This will lead to chaotic and problematic society.

In Malaysia, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) has been working closely with the Health Ministry to address the issues of LGBT. Among JAKIM's involvement in programmes with Health Ministry include Training of Trainers (TOT) for Youth Health. JAKIM also organized series of *Mukhayyam* programmes aimed at providing religious guidance, motivational talk and health awareness to the LGBT community. However, liberalists have made false and baseless allegation about the *Mukhayyam* programme by saying that it is 'conversion therapy' with elements of violence and intimidation. To the contrary, numerous representatives from the local LGBT communities who have participated in *Mukhayyam* programmes have denied that those programmes are violent in nature, and that they were pressured or compelled to attend such programmes. In fact, they affirmed that *Mukhayyam* programmes organized by JAKIM aimed at educating Muslim LGBT group on the basic tenets of Islam, and their participation in the programmes was completely voluntary with no elements of coercion. The testimony of these representatives obviously invalidates any assertions that *Mukhayyam* programmes harm the LGBT participants.

In addition, liberalists considered LGBT as aligned with one of the universal human rights. Therefore, they urged the government to remove Section 377A-D penal code (Act 574) which prohibits sodomy and carnal intercourse against order of nature. This perception is contradicted with the Quranic verse, "You lust after man instead of women! You are certainly transgressor" (Al-'Araf;81). The act of LGBT is against the nature (*fitrah*) that Allah has created man in pairs, and it violates the rules of *syari'ah*. Some Muslim intellectuals regard the LGBT group is even worse than animals as it may harm a normal *aql* which made them disable to differentiate the right pair based on *fitrah*. It will eventually affect the lineage and descendants, at the same time decrease the generation.

3. Misconception of Gender Equality

Another significant challenge posed by liberal Islam is its misunderstanding of gender equality. Due to its incorrect interpretation of the concept of gender equality in Islam, liberal Islam criticized the Islamic law of inheritance which is claimed to provide unfair distribution of property between man and women. The opposition of gender inequality has been manifested by the establishment of the *Musawah* program by Sisters in Islam (SIS). *Musawah* is funded through the generous support of Oxfam Novib, the Ford Foundation, the Global Fund for

Women, the Sigrid Rausing Trust, and Hivos. Through *Musawah*, SIS basically opposed few enactments of Islamic family laws and argued that Islamic family law is oppressing women by not giving freedom and denying their rights. For example, they fight against issues of polygamy and law of inheritance from the feminist perspective. In this sense, they have challenged and questioned the validity and reliability of interpretations of certain Qur'anic verses related to women, asserting that commentators have offered biased interpretations that place women in a subordinate position to men. As a result, this group believes there is an urgent need to re-examine the *Qur'an* to determine whether the text genuinely supports the oppression and mistreatment of women.

Based on her belief in gender equality, a liberal activist Amina Wadud has taken initiative to lead the Friday congregational prayer and reading the *khutbah* at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church in New York City on March 18, 2005. Many Muslim scholars have responded to her act and opposed it. For example, Dr. Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi explained that under Islamic law, women are prohibited from leading men in prayer, whether during Friday prayers, the five daily prayers, additional prayers, or any other prayers. He stated that a woman may only lead prayer for other women, as it is inappropriate for men to view her body while she is leading them in prayer. This view is supported by Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi, who noted that prayer in Islam differs from Christian prayer, as Islamic worship involves physical movements such as standing, sitting, bowing, and prostrating. If a woman leads men in prayer, she will have to bow in front of them, which makes it unsuitable for men to look at her body; instead, they should focus solely on the prayer. Al-Qaradawi also pointed out that, historically, there has been no instance in Islam of a woman leading Muslims in Friday prayers.

Muslim liberal feminists advocate for the right to serve as *Imam* and *khatib* during Friday prayers and to be appointed as *khalifah*, arguing that women possess the same capabilities as men to hold these roles. However, this perspective contradicts the concept of justice in Islam. From an Islamic viewpoint, justice entails granting rights to those who are deserving of them. It does not mean that everyone should have equal rights in every situation; rather, justice is about placing things in their proper context, considering suitability, capability, and natural disposition (*fiṭrah*), ensuring that those appointed are capable of fulfilling their responsibilities (Yusuf al-Qaradawi 1996).

The distinct roles and rights of men and women in certain areas of life do not imply that they are unequal in terms of their inherent human dignity. Several Qur'anic verses (33:35, 9:71-72, 4:124, 3:195, 40:40, 16:97) address both men and women, granting them equal roles and responsibilities in the spiritual realm, with equal rewards and punishments for their actions. Therefore, while it is true that Muslim men and women share equality in religious obligations, it is not accurate to say that they have the same responsibilities in all aspects of life. Certain rights and responsibilities are designated for men, and others are specific to women. It is incorrect to claim that justice can only be achieved if both genders receive identical rights in all areas of life. Due to their natural differences, men and women cannot be perfectly equal in every aspect, as such equality would be contrary to nature (Maulana Wahiduddin Khan 1995).

Therefore, assigning the same rights and responsibilities to both men and women in all areas of life would be unjust, as certain roles are not suitable for a specific gender. Men possess unique qualities that are necessary for leadership and sustaining the family, while women have distinct characteristics that are essential for managing the home and raising children. As leaders,

men are not considered superior to women in terms of human worth, just as women are not regarded as inferior to men in their roles as wives and mothers. The responsibility of childbearing is entrusted solely to women due to their biological, physiological, mental, and emotional traits, which are unique to them. This does not imply that women hold a lower status than men. Rather, the task is given to women because their inherent qualities, such as devotion and patience, are crucial in nurturing children. Viewed from this perspective, this responsibility is a privilege for women, not a form of discrimination. There is wisdom in the division of duties between men and women, with each gender being assigned roles that align with their distinct qualities. Cooperation between the two genders fosters balance and harmony within the family (Khalif Muammar and Adibah Mukhtar 2009). While they differ in some respects, men and women complement each other, and these differences should not be seen as a form of discrimination.

Since men and women are not biologically or psychologically identical, their rights differ in certain aspects of life. The physical and biological distinctions between the genders lead to variations in the rights assigned to each. In this context, justice does not require that both genders receive identical rights in all areas. To achieve justice, Islam grants rights to individuals based on their physical and biological capacities. The issue arises when liberal advocates argue that these distinct roles constitute gender discrimination. Fighting for gender equality is problematic itself because equality does not mean equivalence. By the nature of creation, man exactly cannot be a woman and will never be able to get pregnant and to give birth. God created man and women in different ways of functions.

4. Misinterpretation of *Aurah*

Again, based on the freedom of expression, liberal Islam claims that there is no compulsion in covering *aurah* in Islam. Also, there is no clear *shari'ah* provision for obligation of *hijab*. *Hijab* is associated with the tradition of Arabs only. For liberalists, wearing *hijab* is a sign of backwardness, thus, women should be given freedom from the rigidity. Based on the Qur'anic verse *Libas al Taqwa*, they interpreted the most important garment is *taqwa* and women do not necessary to physically cover their head or body. They also considered *aurah* as subjective which means the dress code should be based on the suitability of the position and background of women. For SIS, the verses 26 and 31 in *surah al-A'raf* emphasize on the concept of politeness and humility. Based on their interpretation, clothing to cover *aurah* in the verse means clothing that represents *taqwa* as the best. Based on their understanding, both verses emphasized that *shari'ah* demands Muslim to cover their shameful acts. What is more meaningful, according to SIS, is the importance of *taqwa* compared to cloth that covers our body (Mazlan Ibrahim, Latifah Abdul Majid, Jaffary Awang, Muhd Najib Abdul Kadir and Fadlan Mohd Othman 2012). SIS further argued that neither state nor religious authorities are supposed to force women to cover their *aurah* by the means of law. Since religion depends on faith and willingness and wearing *hijab* is related to someone's faith, SIS believed that enforcing rules and regulation on attire will not help in improving one's *taqwa*.

Liberal feminists have voiced various opinions on the issue of *aurah*. Siti Musdah Mulia argues that *aurah* is heavily influenced by social context, culture, and tradition (Razali Musa 2021). Aminah Said, a Muslim feminist from the Arab Republic of Egypt, believes that the

hijab is merely a replica of the Christian nun's habit, stating that it is a literal copy (Al-Barazi, 2000). On the other hand, Fatima Mernissi, a prominent Muslim feminist from Morocco, views the *hijab* as a social construct, a community agreement, and a reflection of male dominance over women. She argues that the *hijab* is a tool of oppression and a symbol of women's subjugation. In her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Mernissi claims that the obligation of wearing the *hijab* was not issued by the Prophet but was instead the opinion of companions who were misogynistic and opposed the idea of women in leadership roles. Another liberal feminist who criticized the *hijab* is Taslima Nasrin, a Bangladeshi activist. In a tweet on March 22, 2019, she expressed her frustration with the Prime Minister of New Zealand for wearing the *hijab* as a sign of respect for the Muslim community she met in Christchurch. Based on the article *The Times of India* (2020), Nasrin has also criticised an Indian composer's child, Khatija for wearing *hijab* through her Twitter and she uploaded a picture of Khatija wearing a burqa on 11 February 2020.

Another liberal view on *aurah* can be referred to the writings of Muhammad Syahrur. According to him, the *jilbab*, a garment that covers the *aurah* and body, is not required by *Shari'ah*. Therefore, its use is influenced by various factors such as the social context and the specific circumstances of the community. Regarding verse 59 of *Surah al-Ahzab*, it is believed by some that the directive for covering the *aurah* was only applicable during the Prophet's lifetime, and the extent of *aurah* coverage should be based on a woman's personal comfort and her environment. Furthermore, it is argued that the *jilbab* was a cultural norm in ancient Arab society and is no longer relevant in modern times (Azkiya Khikmatiar 2019). According to this view, the first factor influencing its use relates to natural conditions, such as weather, where the veil was primarily worn to protect against heat and cold, given the four distinct seasons in Arab countries. The second factor concerns social discomfort; if exposing the *aurah* does not cause embarrassment, there is no crime in a woman revealing her limbs, and the obligation to cover the *aurah* is no longer relevant (Muhammad Syahrur 2015).

Meanwhile, Irshad Manji considers the veil or *hijab* not to be an Islamic requirement but rather a cultural practice from pre-Islamic Arab society. In addition to viewing the *hijab* as part of ancient Arab culture, she also critiques it as a form of sexual acclimatization for Muslim women, considering it a form of 'fetishization' (Irshad Manji 2012). She stated that,

"...I choose not to wear it (*hijab*), and if another woman decides the opposite for herself, I won't stop her. But what I will do is express my judgment that choosing *hijab* makes her a billboard for the most chauvinistic aspects of Arab tribal culture. Far from protecting herself against the "Western" disease of sexualizing breasts and other bodily bits, she's fetishizing her entire body as genitalia" (Irshad Manji 2012).

Some of the Muslim liberalists tend to interpret Qur'anic verses by relying solely on personal rational thinking, which is strictly prohibited in the discipline of Qur'anic interpretation as it can lead to misinterpretations. Interpretations of the *Qur'an* based on an individual's limited understanding not only have a negative impact on the Islamic community but can also distort the true meanings of the revelation itself. This serious misconception will affect the way women look at the concept of *aurah* and might not be concerned to cover the *aurah* accordingly.

According to Ibnu Manzur, the term '*aurah*' in verse 59 of *surah al Ahzab* appears to denote something shameful. Additionally, it can be noticed that this *aurah* is highlighted for men, where it extends from the centre to the knee, and for women, where it encompasses the

entire body except for the face and palm of the hand. According to *al-mausu'ah al-Fiqhiyyah*, *aurah* refers to something that a man or woman is forbidden to see. Meanwhile, according to Musa'id bin Qasim al-Falah, *aurah* refers to the disadvantages, errors, and anything that makes something look terrible. From *shari'ah* perspective, *aurah* refers to something or a portion of the body that is prohibited from being exhibited or displayed to a non-halal person. Therefore, liberalists' interpretations of *aurah* obviously contradicted to the definitions of *aurah* from an Islamic perspective.

CONCLUSION

The Muzakarah of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs of Malaysia has declared that liberal thought is a heretical belief that deviates from *Shari'ah*. Additionally, the Selangor Fatwa Bureau, in its meeting on 17 July 2014, issued a prohibition on the understanding of liberalism and religious pluralism, including the group Sisters in Islam (SIS), with the following resolutions; 1) SIS along with any individuals, organizations, or institutions supporting liberalism and religious pluralism, are considered deviant and in conflict with Islamic teachings; 2) Any published materials promoting liberalism and religious pluralism must be prohibited and may be seized; 3) The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (SKMM) is tasked with blocking social media pages that contradict the teachings of Islam and *Shari'ah* Law; 4) Anyone who subscribes to the ideas of liberalism and religious pluralism should seek repentance and return to the true path of Islam.

Liberal Islam is obviously influenced by Western liberalism. Like other Western modern ideologies, liberalism is a Western agenda to deviate Muslims from their religious beliefs and to free themselves from the religious guidance. This can be related to the statement of William Gladstone that the West realized Muslims will never be able to be defeated so long as they uphold the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. We must be cautious of the terms used by Liberal Islam, such as "liberating the rigid mind," "progressive Islam," "freedom of thought," and "freeing Islam from rigid thinking." The liberal approach could undermine Islam as a religion, as it often exceeds the boundaries set by the faith.

Of the ways to curb Islam liberal is through education. It is important to strengthen an Islamic educational system to maintain the self-esteem of Muslims in facing the challenges posed by the Western ideologies. Today, Muslims are considered weak to protect their religion against those ideological assaults. Therefore, Muslim students should be well equipped with the Islamic knowledge related to Arabic language, *tafsir*, *fiqh*, hadith, philosophy, and other religious disciplines. This knowledge will help Muslims from easily influenced by enemies of Islam or any ideological assault against Islam. Besides, the government should empower *shari'ah* court jurisdiction to forbid liberalists to challenge the *shari'ah* law. The *shari'ah* court should play a greater role and it should be uplifted to the same position as civil court in terms of power and influence. Moreover, mass media should play a role to spread the right teachings of Islam based on the Islamic framework, at the same time should be able to confront the liberal thought to avoid any misunderstanding in society. The media should also create awareness about the dangers of liberal thought and its implication on Muslim society, through various platforms, such as, forum, TV programs, campaign and others. In addition, more research on liberalism should be conducted due to its dangerous position in society today. Apart from the

academics, different Islamic NGOs should cooperate each other in organizing programs, such as, seminars, forums or conventions that could create awareness among Muslims about the treats of liberalism to religious faith. Most importantly, the government should take an aggressive initiative to curb the ideology of liberalism taking into consideration that Islam is an official religion in the federal constitution of Malaysia. At the same time, as a multi religious and multi racial country, the rights of non-Muslims will not be deprived.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors agree that this research was conducted without any self-benefits or commercial or financial conflicts.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author is the sole author of the paper in which she has carried out the research, wrote and revised the article all by herself.

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