

On Some Misconceptions Concerning the Meaning and Nature of 'Ulamā'

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Abstract

This article discusses the major views related to the concept of 'Ulamā', specifically on the meaning and the characteristic of 'Ulamā'. It analyzes how this concept is understood and propounded by social scientists as if there exist classifications among 'Ulamā', such as traditionalist and contextualist among 'Ulamā'. Therein lies an inherent misconception and if left unaddressed, will cause confusion among the people especially the Muslim community. This subsequently, has an impact on the aspect of social expectations of 'Ulamā'. This study rejects some of the sociological interpretations on the concept of 'Ulamā' and attempts to correct these misconceptions while emphasizing the characteristic of 'Ulamā' in accordance with Islamic tradition.

Keywords: 'Ulamā'; Sociologist; Modernity; Traditionalist; Contextualist; Essence

Abstrak

Kajian ini membincangkan mengenai beberapa pandangan utama terhadap konsep 'Ulamā' sepertimana yang telah difahami oleh beberapa pihak, khususnya sosiologi, yang seakan adanya kelompok tradisional dan kontekstualis di kalangan para 'Ulamā'. Terdapat beberapa salah faham yang timbul dalam mereka membincangkan konsep 'Ulamā' dan sekiranya salah fahaman tersebut tidak segera ditangani maka akan menimbulkan kekeliruan ramai, khususnya masyarakat Islam, contohnya kekeliruan dari sudut pengharapan mereka terhadap 'Ulamā' dalam hal ehwal sosial dan masyarakat. Kajian ini menolak beberapa persepsi berkaitan dengan konsep 'Ulamā' dan bertujuan untuk memperbetulkan salah fahaman terhadap konsep 'Ulamā' sekaligus menekankan beberapa keperibadian 'Ulamā' sesuai dengan tradisi Islam.

Kata kunci: 'Ulamā'; Moden; Sosiologi; Tradisionalis; Kontekstualis; Hakikat

Introduction

An '*Ulamā*', generally perceived as someone who has the authority to disseminate religious content, remains significant to any Muslim community within society. This is especially so in the current context of a multi-cultural society where socio-religious issues are becoming more complex hence the much needed presence, both physically and online, to guide the community as well as to address contemporary issues where religious matters are concerned.

However, there appear to be conflicting views and tensions between '*Ulamā*' and the people, especially the Muslim community, which are becoming more intense in today's age of the interconnected and technology-driven world. The trend of disrespecting of '*Ulamā*' is not a recent phenomenon, however, the condition is becoming worse lately not only in Malay peninsula but also across the contemporary Muslim societies globally and is increasingly apparent through social media. In fact, as such a phenomenon has possibly appeared in society, the Prophet p.b.u.h. has warned about it, for instance when he firmly says: "*He is not from among us who does not respect our elders, nor shows mercy on our young ones, nor grants the rights of our 'alim.*"¹ It is indeed a form of the internal crisis of the Muslim today reflecting the '*loss of adab*' as propounded by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas².

The challenges faced by the '*Ulamā*' today are multifaceted, with expectations to proactively engage with various groups of people on emerging issues of the modern world. Among these challenges is the challenge of modernity faced by Muslim societies, in which Marcia K. Hermansen, a Professor of Islamic Studies, Loyola University Chicago, while enumerating it together with

¹ Based on the ḥadīth: "لَيْسَ مَنَّا مَنْ لَمْ يُجَلِّ كَبِيرَنَا، وَيَرْحَمْ صَغِيرَنَا، وَيَعْرِفَ لِعَالِمِنَا حَقَّهُ". See: Sulaymān ibn al-Ash'aṭ al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dā'ūd*, taḥqīq by Muhammad 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Khalidī, 3 Vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 3: 291.

² On his elaboration on this, Al-Attas gives an example: "They are like sons who while their good and wise fathers are seriously talking to them, stop their ears in heedlessness, and yet eagerly lend their ears to the words of strangers. They have no adab, for they do not recognize and acknowledge the legitimate authorities in the true hierarchical order, and they demonstrate by example and teach and advocate confusion and error." Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (First impression Petaling Jaya: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (ABIM), 1978; this impression Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 125.

other challenges describes that: "...aside from the intellectual and epistemological stances of modernity and post-modernity, the influx of technology and social change, together with the cultural products and academic perspectives of the West, have flooded and transformed Muslim societies to varying degrees contingent on the particular Muslim society's history of colonial occupation."³ Free speech, being part of the perspectives of human rights today, among others, is one of the emerging issues associated with modernity. Consequently, even on religious-related matters, the society now seems to be more daring in speaking out their disagreements on a legal opinion contradicting with their interest and seeking platforms to be more involved in religious discourse than respectfully accepting the views and thoughts of '*Ulamā*'.

Along with these challenges of modernity there emerge misconceptions among the Muslim community on the very roles of the '*Ulamā*' especially with the impression that '*Ulamā*' should be actively involved in addressing and finding solutions to any emerging socio-religious issues affecting the Muslim community in addition to propagating and conducting religious classes. In Singapore, for example, there have been discussions on the needs and demands of *asatizah* for a more active online presence, especially to engage and outreach to the young on the social media network platforms. Through these platforms, it has been rather visible to see the Muslim community outspokenly questions the involvement of these '*Ulamā*', as well as their participation and responses to the social-religious contemporary issues such as their stance on Muslim youth's supporting the LGBTQ movement, on radicalism, on the debate of Muslim women wearing hijab at work, aside from economic and political issues.⁴

³ Marcia K Hermansen, "The Challenge of Classical Islamic Thought for Contemporary Muslim Intellectuals" in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium on Islām and the Challenge of Modernity: Historical and Contemporary Context*, ed. Sharifah Shifa al-Attas (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, Kuala Lumpur, 1996), 509-534, hereinafter cited as *The Challenge of Classical Islamic Thought*.

⁴ Khairudin Aljunied, "The '*Ulamā*' in Singapore and their Contemporary Challenges" *Working Paper*, No.1 (Singapore: Research Development PERGAS, 2015); For article on Muis embarking on *Asatizah* Manpower Planning Study (AMPS) to better understand the current landscape of the *asatizah* sector, the roles they play, and the aspirations of present *Madrasah* students, see: <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20180407001/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Work%20Plan%20Seminar%202018.pdf>

Here, it is argued that these impressions were not made in a vacuum but rather emerged from an overall situation of discourses and debates by academicians, particularly sociologists, subsequently making their thoughts and views related to '*Ulamā*' accessible to the general public. This undeniably has influenced the mass, allowing them to determine the kind or the criterion of an '*Ulamā*' that they deem suitable with their lifestyle and the modern context. Consequently, the '*Ulamā*' is perceived as, albeit being well-versed in Islamic traditions and text, yet are lacking in the aspect of skills and competencies to address modern challenges.

Speaking of this, Hermansen added, "Also, there arises an issue on why contemporary Muslim intellectuals have been unable to integrate the classical heritage and may have caused the classical text to be ignored or rejected by the majority of modernists and nearly all literalists or Islamists."⁵ As a text does not speak for itself hence needs interpretation, therefore to interpret this text requires one to have the correct framework in order to avoid misinterpretation. Regarding the interpretation of the classical text, Hermansen somehow correctly stated that "texts are never authorities in themselves. They must be gathered together, authenticated, linguistically, and symbolically interpreted by authorized "readers" (the '*Ulamā*'), and legitimated in the context of a discursive and ideological system. It is only once this has taken place that texts acquire meaning and performative status. The '*Ulamā*' depend on revelation to elaborate a homogeneous system of beliefs and representations regarding not only the afterlife but also the religio-socio-political life of the Muslim community."⁶

Correspondingly, debates and discourse on who is the '*Ulamā*' have been popular among sociologists too. As sociologists may have a profound impact on society considering that they study human activities and human behavior, to the extent that some even recommend ways to improvise human life, it is, therefore, crucial to study the views of the sociologists. Some may then question whether their definition or understanding of the nature of '*Ulamā*' is in accordance with the tradition of Islam?

⁵ Hermansen, *The Challenge of Classical Islamic Thought*, 512.

⁶ Ibid

This article, therefore, seeks to clarify the confusion and misconception concerning the concept and the characteristics of ‘*Ulamā*’. It is by no means here to offer a new interpretation of ‘*Ulamā*’ as the term is established in its definition and deeply rooted in Islamic tradition hence its essential meaning remains relevant through time. Rather, this paper hopes to shed light and end the confusion within the society as well as among religious figures concerning the concept and nature of ‘*Ulamā*’. As it discusses only the conceptual aspect of ‘*Ulamā*’, any other discussion such as religious orientations, practices, or activities is beyond the limitation of this paper. The findings from this study hope to be of relevance to the Muslim community in general, in setting forth preliminary discourse and opening new debates for further research and discussion particularly among academicians, sociologists, religious scholars, religious institutions, mosques, and Muslim organizations.

Major Views Concerning the Nature of ‘*Ulamā*’

This section discusses the major views concerning the nature of ‘*Ulamā*’ specifically through the writings of social scientists, broadly categorized into the following three aspects: definition and meaning of ‘*Ulamā*’; characteristics of ‘*Ulamā*’; and role and place of ‘*Ulamā*’.

1) Definition and Meaning of ‘*Ulamā*’

Topic on ‘*Ulamā*’ has been extensively studied by scholars and researchers of various fields and disciplines. This section attempts to highlight the definition and meaning of ‘*Ulamā*’ as commonly perceived by social scientists. Prior to that, it is worth mentioning that it can be observed that the views upheld by social scientists perhaps can be classified in the same category as those of reformists, as both groups consistently call for reform towards changes occurring in the contemporary world, mainly which are taking place in society. In this regard, Azhar Ibrahim stated, “Where the popular understanding of an ‘*alim*’ (Arabic singular for ‘*Ulamā*’) is one who is knowledgeable of religious sciences, the reformists

sought to clarify and expand the term.”⁷ Additionally, in supporting his opinion, he quoted the view of Maulana Jamaludin Effendi, the Sheikul Islam of the Ottoman Empire, during a conversation with the famous Azharite theologian Muhammad Abduh, as follows:

There is no doubt that among those who turn their attention toward the religious sciences, the majority know very little about the conditions of the masses. As for the trends and needs of the present world they are totally ignorant of them. If they had adequate knowledge of the world and those who live therein, they would not only be able to defend the Shariah but also contribute towards the glory of the Muslim world community. The truth, however, is that no one deserves to be called an *'ālim* (a man of religious learning) unless he is also an *'ārif* (man possessed of larger knowledge). An *ārif* is a man of learning who is able to reconcile the *Shari'ah* with those matters which may be of benefit to the people in every age in accordance with its needs. But no one can be called an *ālim*, however learned he may be, if he is ignorant of the actual conditions of the people who live in his time and who is unable to do some constructive thinking on the trends and needs of his time. Such a person may be called “*mutafinnin*” (sic)⁸ that is a person who has knowledge of the sciences of grammar, jurisprudence and other allied subjects. The fact is that a person only deserves to be called an *ālim* whose influence on the minds of his people has some impact. But such influences cannot make any impact unless an *ālim* knows the real condition of the people and makes himself acquainted with their needs.⁹

The term *'Ulamā'* is commonly understood by social scientists as religious scholars; those who are educated in religious institutions (*madrasas*); those who are knowledgeable in the religious sciences, or those who are familiar with Islamic

⁷ Azhar Ibrahim, “An Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experience of Some Muslim Societies” in *Secularism and spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*, eds. Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman & Lai Ah Heng (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006), 99

⁸ The correct term is *mutafannun/ mutafannin* – *fa'il* of the verb *tafannana*, *dzu funun* (pl.fan), is “a master of..”, or “one who has the knowledge of”. See: Abi al-Fadl Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzur al-Ifriqi al-Misri, *Lisān al- 'Arab*, 15 Vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1994), 13: 328.

⁹ Ibrahim, “An Evaluation of Madrasah Education”, 99

jurisprudence.¹⁰ Correspondingly, according to the SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion, “‘*Ulamā*’ (Muslim clerics, religious experts, and academics) are generally defined as those who have extensive knowledge of Islam. The Arabic word ‘*Ulamā*’ means “people who are knowledgeable,” and this is the plural form of the word ‘*ālim*. Although ‘*Ulamā*’ can also be understood in a general way to mean researchers or scientists, the most common usage refers to *religious scholars* in Islam.”¹¹

According to Hatima, ‘*Ulamā*’, conceptually, refers to, “(men of knowledge) in the modern Middle East, who acquired their formal religious training and credentials in established *madrāsas* and religious colleges, and were identifiable by their attire of cloaks and turbans (‘*ama’im*). Ideologically, they did not form a monolithic group but harbored diverse intellectual voices, ranging from quite conservative to relatively liberal.”¹²

In summary, the social scientists define ‘*Ulamā*’ as “selected individuals emerge from a group in a society to provide guidance and leadership in religious matters, also known as ‘religious elite’ or ‘religious scholar’.”¹³

2) Characteristic of ‘*Ulamā*’

The sociologists characterize the ‘*Ulamā*’ as having religious traditionalism in their mode of thinking which inable them to address the modern and contemporary problem¹⁴. In other words, the ‘*Ulamā*’ were perceived to be non contextualist. This trait of traditionalism which was regarded as problematic needs to be analyzed further to better understand how the concept of ‘*Ulamā*’ is

¹⁰ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The ‘Ulamā’ in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 1. See also: Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, “Towards a history of Malaysian ‘Ulamā’” *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2008): 117- 140; *Taylor & Francis, Ltd* (2008): 117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23751023>.

¹¹ Firdaus Wajdi, “‘Ulamā’” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion* Vol. 1, eds. Adam Possamai, & Anthony J. Blasi (U.S.: SAGE Publications, 2020), 870-872

¹² Meir Hatina (ed.), *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: ‘Ulamā’ in the Middle East*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1

¹³ Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, “The Muslim Religious elite of Singapore”, in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Institute of Policy Studies, 2008), 248

¹⁴ Azhar Ibrahim, *Contemporary Islamic Discourse in the Malay- Indonesian World* (Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD), 2014

perceived within 'traditionalist – contextualist' classification among Muslim scholars.¹⁵

Here, it can be observed that on one hand, an '*Ulamā*' is categorized as traditionalist because, as religious scholars who strongly uphold the Islamic tradition and propagating the teachings of Islam, yet they are not forthcoming or openly addressing the modern challenges and the emerging issues affecting the society. Echoing this, Garipova stated, "...the literature often describes the '*Ulamā*' as obscurantist, unable to comprehend and respond to modern changes, and opposing the improvement of Muslim societies."¹⁶ These types of '*Ulamā*' who are not seen actively advocating a campaign or at the forefront of a movement are strongly criticized. The assumption that these '*Ulamā*' are not able or not willing to put forth their stances, and due to their negligence, in addressing the religious and humanitarian concerns of the people has caused the weathering of respect that people have for the '*Ulamā*'. And this is seen as a contributing factor that has caused the people to seek after more attractive ideologies by the liberal modern contextualist such as those influenced by global Muslim intellectuals.¹⁷ Moreover, the Sufis inadvertently are classified in this type of traditionalist '*Ulamā*' with people questioning their role in the society, expecting them to contribute beyond the four walls of class, such as a *halaqah* or *majlis zikir*.

Regarding those who perceive the '*Ulamā*' as 'traditionalist', Noor Aisha observes that, "their stance on these various issues reveals traits of traditionalism in the sense that they dogmatically rely on selective religious opinions of pious savants of the past and assume finality of their views in principle." She then concludes, "This chapter has examined traditionalism as a dominant style of

¹⁵ Due to the limited scope of this study, this paper will only focus on, presumably, the traditionalist and contextualist '*Ulamā*',

¹⁶ Rozaliya Garipova, "The Protectors of Religion and Community: Traditionalist Muslim Scholars of the Volga-Ural Region at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 59 (2016): 127. In this article, she studies the conflict between traditionalist scholar (the '*Ulamā*') and the reformist in Volga-Ural (situated in Central Russia) to which she observed, "The conventional historiography of the Volga-Ural Muslims of the Russian Empire also fits into this narrative, and the Muslim reformists, the Jadids, who championed educational reform and the liberation of women and fought for political representation of Muslims, have been the main focus of historical study."

¹⁷ Khairudin Aljunied, "The '*Ulamā*' in Singapore and their Contemporary Challenges" *Working Paper*, No.1 (Singapore: Research Development PERGAS, 2015)

religious belief of the Muslim religious elite in Singapore.”¹⁸ Similarly, drawing on the works by the likes of William A Graham, Alasdair MacIntyre, Talal Asad, among others, Qasim Zaman stated, “The ‘*Ulamā*’ are hardly frozen in the mold of the Islamic religious tradition, but this tradition nevertheless remains their fundamental frame of reference, the basis of their identity and authority”. He further added, “...Yet, in general terms, it is a combination of their intellectual formation, their vocation, and, crucially, their orientation viz., a certain sense of continuity with the Islamic tradition that defines the ‘*Ulamā*’ as ‘*Ulamā*’; and it is this sense of continuity that constitutes the most significant difference between them and their modernist and Islamist detractors.”¹⁹

On the other hand, for them the non-traditionalist which they refer to as thinkers, scholars, or intellectuals in academia are more acceptable. This is, for example, the contextualist ‘*Ulamā*’ is perceived to be able to provide adequate economic, social, and cultural solutions and alternatives to the needs of Muslims in their countries. The inclination of the social scientists towards whom they regard as “contextualist”, the likes of Tariq Ramadan and Abdullah Saeed, to name a few, can be observed in their writings related to ‘*Ulamā*’. Tariq Ramadan is perceived by them to have challenged the authority of ‘*Ulamā*’.²⁰ As this contextualist ‘*Ulamā*’ dominate the public debate on Islam, being outspoken in giving their opinions, being presence in social media and online platforms whilst actively address current issues, it is to no surprise that they are highly regarded by society.²¹ In addition to ‘traditionalist – contextualist’ classification of ‘*Ulamā*’, the mainstream discourse on ‘*Ulamā*’ also seems to suggest that there are somewhat other classification of ‘*Ulamā*’ addressed by some

¹⁸ Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, “The Muslim Religious elite of Singapore”, in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Institute of Policy Studies, 2008), 266

¹⁹ Zaman, *The ‘Ulamā’*, 55

²⁰ Ahmet T. Kuru, “Shari’a, Islamic Ethics, and Democracy: The Crisis of the “Turkish Model”” in *Shari’a Law and Modern Muslim Ethics*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 164. Ahmet T. Kuru is a Professor of Political Science. Similarly, most scholars and authors mentioned in this paper major in political science and social science.

²¹ Zaman, *The ‘Ulamā’*, 1-17

academicians and social scientists such as Official 'Ulamā', Non-Official 'Ulamā', Liberal 'Ulamā', and Modernist²² 'Ulamā'.²³

Without disregarding the fact that some of these groups in a way do exist in a society as a social movement, a religious network, or a political party in some countries, but what is of concern here is the impact of society being misled into thinking that this classification is legit and the choice to follow one that suits their needs is left to them. The differences surrounding the term 'Ulamā' hence would cause confusion in people's minds that they are likely to think as if there are variations of this term. Society may not realize that these perspectives may lead to the idea of superiority within these classifications and as if one is more relevant and reliable over the other. Such differences had also caused conflicts among the masses to the extent that security forces had to get involved.²⁴

Aside from traditionalist, such debates between contextualist and non-contextualist theories are thought by the society to have come to a standstill, seemingly, with no progress made hence allowing the confusion to perpetuate.²⁵ This has caused a religious identification crisis where the society is likely to believe that the increase of religious consciousness in Muslim society, also known as 'santri-ization', is perceived as being problematic and hence the call for moderation approach, particularly among the Muslim youth. According to Zarkasyi, "This increasing public practice of their Islamic faith, like the consciousness to attend Friday prayers at the mosque, for women to wear the jilbab/tudung (Muslim head dress)

²² According to Meir Hatina, "(embodied by both modernists and Islamists) ... The two groups differed in their perception of Islam: modernists tended to translate religion into an ethical code in order to adapt Muslim reality to the changing circumstances; Islamists, whether moderate or radical, sought to turn Islam into a social and political force—if possible, under their leadership. See Hatina, *Guardian of Faith in Modern Times*, 1

²³ Norshahril Saat, *The State, 'Ulamā' and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia Amsterdam* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 101; 171. See also: Zaman, *The 'Ulamā'*, 8; Moch Nur Ichwan, "Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulema Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy," in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the Conservative Turn*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013), 60. Additionally, it seems that there is also a classification of *Sufi 'Ulamā'*, *Salafi 'Ulamā'*, and *Sunni 'Ulamā'*.

²⁴ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2008), 185

²⁵ Zaman, *The 'Ulamā'*, 2. On debates regarding the concept of contextualism, see: Alex Silk, *Discourse Contextualism: A Framework for Contextualist Semantics and Pragmatics* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

and for Muslims to eat separately from non-Muslim colleagues has also characterized Malaysian and Singaporean Muslims. Although this change might be on the level of religious practice and not necessarily on religious thought or the substance of religious belief, it marked the rise of a greater awareness of Islam's global identity.”²⁶

3) Role and Place of ‘*Ulamā*’

Concerning the role and place of ‘*Ulamā*’ in the society, one of the common ideas perpetuated by the social scientists is the notion of a changing and diverse roles of ‘*Ulamā*’ in society, with the expectation that they should be more actively involved in social affairs. In relation to this, Azhar Ibrahim pointed out “that a learned religious man can never be a true and effective intellectual figure in his community as long as he is ignorant of the general affairs and problems of his community.”²⁷ In fact, discourses on the social expectation of an ‘*Ulamā*’ are more intense now than ever, especially with the increasing case of extremism and radicalism within the Muslim community. In this regard, Zaman explains that:

In many cases, they have also come to play significant religiopolitical activist roles in contemporary Islam. In several other contemporary states, both where Muslims constitute a numerical majority and where they are a minority, the ‘*Ulamā*’ in recent decades have grown increasingly prominent in society and politics. The case of Iran is, of course, the most striking example of the ‘*Ulamā*’s successful leadership of a revolutionary movement. But in Egypt too, where the millennium-old university, the Azhar, continues to be one of the most prestigious centers of Islamic learning, a new generation of politically activist ‘*Ulamā*’ has made its presence felt in the public arena. ‘*Ulamā*’ in Saudi Arabia, in India, in Afghanistan, in the southern Philippines, and elsewhere in the Muslim world are a crucial part of the changes sweeping through

²⁶ Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, “The Rise of Islamic Religious-Political Movements in Indonesia: The Background, Present Situation and Future,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Volume 02, Number 02, (2008): 340, <http://jiis.uinsby.ac.id/index.php/JIIs/article/view/35/35>. Here, Zarkasyi also highlighted the growing influence of liberal movements and their approaches, for example, they consider the Qur’anic verses as irrelevant for today’s needs and therefore they modify their meaning to fit with the global situation.

²⁷ Ibrahim, “An Evaluation of Madrasah Education”, 99

these societies in increasingly significant, often unprecedented ways.²⁸

This implies that sociologists recognize the place of the '*Ulamā*' in society, as Hatina explicitly mentioned that "most of the '*Ulamā*' have been and remain closely affiliated with the state in terms of posts, salaries and institutions, acting as teachers, preachers, judges and administrators in the state religious system. Others, though, were unaffiliated scholars who adopted a more critical and activist stance and often clashed with official '*Ulamā*' and the political authorities over religious and sociopolitical issues."²⁹ However, there seems to be a preference of the modern ones or known as a 'new' preacher over the traditional '*Ulamā*'.

Regarding the involvement of a 'new' preacher in the society, Skovgaard-Petersen claimed that "Several of the new preachers were educated, but lay, with degrees in the natural sciences. They could give classes in the homes of their well-to-do followers, or in clubs or mosques, but they were not official preachers of state mosques. It seems, however, that it was exactly their modern education and manners that made them attractive to an audience that had become estranged from the often quite aggressive style of preaching of traditional '*Ulamā*'."³⁰

With the above perception and understanding of social scientists on traditional '*Ulamā*', and with the aforementioned classification of 'contextualist' '*Ulamā*', the society is led to believe that there exists a 'text specialist' among the '*Ulamā*' whose role in the society is limited due to their limited knowledge in other fields and issues related to science, economic, social, and politic. They consider this category of '*Ulamā*' as being not well equipped to respond to contemporary challenges facing Muslim, thus their literalist understanding of Islam is deserving to be criticized.³¹

²⁸ Zaman, *The 'Ulamā*', 2

²⁹ Hatina, *Guardian of Faith in Modern Times*, 1. Also, with regards to the role of '*Ulamā*' in political and socio-economic development, see: Osman, "Towards a history of Malaysian '*Ulamā*,'" 117- 140.

³⁰ Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, "In Defense of Muhammad: '*Ulamā*', Da'iyā and The New Islamic Internationalism" in *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: "Ulamā" in the Middle East*, ed. Meir Hatina (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 299

³¹ Kuru, "Shari`a, Islamic Ethics, and Democracy," 163.

Another aspect that can be observed from the writing of the social scientists is their emphasis on the importance of the affiliation of ‘*Ulamā*’ to any society, organization or institution, such as *Madrasah* or *mazahib*. Indeed, there are significant roles played by such institutions and it can be considered as among the basic needs of today’s society.³² However, without proper conceptualization on the real meaning and function of such institutions, especially in relation to the affiliated scholar who is the real active person in such institutions, certain misconceptions on the real role of the scholar vis-a-vis the role of the institution will arise. Furthermore, this affiliation with a school, college, or university would implies that the nature and role of ‘*Ulamā*’ have been reduced for instance within a discipline; a specialization of a subject; or within an academic portfolio and environment.

Correcting the Misconception

This section seeks to clarify some of the misconceptions arising from the perspectives of the social scientists regarding the ‘*Ulamā*’, mainly concerning the definition and meaning; role and place; and the characteristics of ‘*Ulamā*’. And to support the explanations in addressing these misconceptions, this paper uses evidence (*dalil*) based on:

- 1) The Quranic verse³³:

[إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ]

“Surely those who really fear Allah among His servants are those who have knowledge”³⁴

- 2) A ḥadith, as the term ‘*Ulamā*’ is also evident in a ḥadith reported by Abi al-Darda’ RA that Rasulullah s.a.w. said:

وَإِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ، وَإِنَّ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ لَمْ يُورَثُوا دِينَارًا، وَلَا دِرْهَمًا وَرَثُوا الْعِلْمَ،
فَمَنْ أَخَذَهُ أَخَذَ بِحِطِّ وَافِرٍ

³² Paul B Horton and Chester L Hunt, *Sociology*, 6th ed. (New Delhi (India): McGraw-Hill, 2007), 210

³³ Ibn Manzur al-Ifriqi al-Misri, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 416.

³⁴ [35: 28]

Which means: “The ‘‘Ulamā’ are the heirs of the Prophets. The Prophets did not leave behind gold and silver coins rather they left behind Knowledge. Whoever has acquired it, really has acquired a great share”. [Sunan Abu Daud (3641)]³⁵

This Quranic verse and ḥadith are the bases in our arguments in countering the sociologist’s perspectives concerning these three aspects: definition, characteristic, and role of ‘Ulamā’ which is elaborated in the following sections.

1) **Misconception Regarding the Definition and Meaning of ‘Ulamā’**

On correcting the misconception of the definition and meaning of ‘Ulamā’, one must first understand the method to define a term, both linguistically and conceptually. Any kind of error and confusion about ‘Ulamā’ at the epistemic level creates the condition for the loss of adab³⁶ and injustice towards the ‘Ulamā’ due to the inability to recognize the characteristic of ‘Ulamā’ and to distinguish between a true ‘Ulamā’ from the false ones resulting to the dilemma of who to follow, and gradually turn into rejecting the authority and levelling them to the same level as everyone in the society.

With respect to the definition of ‘Ulamā’ found in the works by social scientists, while it is a good attempt for academicians and social scientists to study and put forth their understanding of this concept, it is however important that this concept is to be analyzed carefully and to give due justice to it. One must not explain a certain concept beyond his limited authority if it is incongruent to his own

³⁵ From the ḥadith: “*The one who treads a path seeking the knowledge of Din, Allah Ta’ala will make his path to Jannah easy. The Angels spread out their wings under the feet of the one seeking the knowledge of Din in expression of happiness for the path he has adopted. All the creation in the heavens and the earth, even the fish in the ocean seek forgiveness on behalf of one seeking knowledge. The virtue of an ‘Alim over a worshipper is like the superiority of the moon over all the other stars. And certainly the ‘‘Ulamā’ are the heirs of the Ambiya. The Ambiya did not leave behind gold and silver coins rather they left behind Knowledge. Whoever has acquired it, really he has acquired a great share*”. al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dā’ūd*, Vol.2, 523, No. 3641.

³⁶ Adab here does not simply mean mannerism as commonly understood by many, rather, it refers to the right action based on the right knowledge. See also: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (First impression Petaling Jaya: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (ABIM), 1978; this impression Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 110

field or his specialization. This is especially so if the term is rooted in Arabic, such in the case of '*Ulamā*', of which, is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition, thus, to define it in the worldview of others or conceptualize it at a scientific or social level may not be adequate to define this term.³⁷

In finding the meaning of the term '*Ulamā*', there is clearly no disagreement among social scientists and Muslim scholars with respect to the foundation of the term '*Ulamā*' which is ingrained in the concept of '*a-li-ma*. However, there seems to be a variety of definitions where the concept of '*ilm*' is concerned. While generally, it means knowledge, it is important to analyze the definition of '*ilm*' as denoted by Muslim scholars. Epistemologically, Muslim scholars also speak about methods in finding the meaning of definition.³⁸ In short, not all terms can be defined at a degree of *Hadd*, meaning that it does not require a specific definition, and this is, for example, the term '*ilm*', according to scholars such as al-Ghazali and al-Attas affirm that '*ilm*' cannot be defined at its essence, but it can still be defined by describing its characteristics³⁹. Therefore, since the term '*Ulamā*' is derived from '*ilm*', this paper argues that '*Ulamā*' is a term that cannot be defined specifically at

³⁷ Considering that the term '*Ulamā*' is mentioned in the Quran, it is therefore important to note that in interpreting Islamic traditional sources, there are two concepts in Shari'ah that one must clearly understand prior to interpreting religious text. First, known as the *thawabit*, which means definite, absolute, or permanence; secondly, its opposite, *mutaghayyirat*, which means relative and changeable with time. This paper asserts that the definition of '*Ulamā*' remains unchangeable over time, hence, is *thawabit*. Conceptually, a term is determined by its essence and its ontological aspect, and that this reality and essence of a thing remain permanent which does not change over time. This is, for instance, terms such as 'father', 'mother', 'daughter' and 'son' are distinct in nature and its essence, and by knowing the reality of these terms respectively conveys its own rights, the relationship as well as the right action towards one another.

³⁸ It is based on this method and through the epistemological process adopted by past scholars such as Ibn Hazm and al-Ghazali in finding the meaning of a definition that we have deduced the meaning and nature of '*Ulamā*' in this paper. To put it simply, definitions can be distinguished into two types: 1) a concise specification of the distinctive characteristic of the object defined, known as, *Hadd*; 2) a description of the nature of the object defined, known as, *rasm*. See also: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (First impression Petaling Jaya: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (ABIM), 1978; this impression Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 144.

³⁹ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Mankhul min Ta'liqat al-Usul*, Tahqiq by Muhammad Hussain Haitu (Damaskus: Dar al-Fikr. 1980), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-usul* (Cairo: Maktabah Taufikiyah: 2010) . See also: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (First impression Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995; this impression Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2014), 124.

its essence but rather, an attempt can be made to understand the definition of '*Ulamā*' by the description of its nature. This is especially so, the singular of '*Ulamā*' is '*ālim*', which is also one of the additional attributes of God pertaining to His eternal attributes, *kaunuhu 'āliman*⁴⁰. And since this term refers to God's attribute of knowledge, this paper corresponds with those views of al-Ghazali and al-Attas that it is impossible to conclude the term '*ilm*' with a specific definition⁴¹.

Accordingly, in order to clear the misleading concept, this paper proposes an alternative definition of the term '*Ulamā*' as not simply a 'religious scholar', but rather, to mean the 'man of knowledge' (ذو العلم). This alternative term accurately reflects the relationship of '*Ulamā*' with '*ilm*', and his process- of- knowing that brings him to receive divine illumination, hence lead him to a higher position as the true '*Ulamā*'. This relationship of '*Ulamā*' with '*ilm*' implies that '*Ulamā*' is not merely a scholar who has profound knowledge in a particular field in an academic and scientific sense, but involves the activity of the soul apprehending the Truth directly from the Divine⁴², that made him live to seek and learn deeper about the highest and noblest knowledge, which is the knowledge of knowing God; as well as to glorify Him; and to be close to Him hence making this as an essential part of their *da'wah*.

Additionally, in view of the above ḥadith which mentions '*Ulamā*' as the inheritors of the Prophets, this also gives an idea of the intended meaning of '*Ulamā*'. They are noble people whose knowledge reaches the Prophet through a chain of transmission, whose speech is full of wisdom, whose work is to guide others which mainly involves propagating and educating others to know the Truth. The relationship between the '*Ulamā*' and the Prophet is

⁴⁰ On the attributes of Allah, *sifat ma'ani* and *sifat ma'nawiyah*, see Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī, *Matn al-Sanusiyah* (Mesir: Mustafa al-Bābī al-Halabī wa-Awlādihi, 1934) 2. See also: Syed Muḥammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript : a 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqa'id of Al-Nasaḥī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1988), 56, 67, 122; Sa'd al-Dīn al-Tāftāzānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam : Sa'd al-Dīn al-Tāftāzānī on the Creed of Najm al-Dīn al-Nasaḥī*, translated with introduction and notes by Earl Edgar Elder (New York: Columbia. 1950), 55.

⁴¹ Here, Al-Attas provides an epistemological definition of knowledge as, "...with reference to God as being its source of origin, is the arrival of meaning in the soul; and with reference to the soul as being its active recipient and interpreter, knowledge is the arrival of the soul at meaning. See: Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 133.

⁴² Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 165.

also discussed at the later part of this paper to understand the role of '*Ulamā*' within the society.

The possible causes of the misconception on the definition of the term '*Ulamā*' may be due to the misinterpretation of the concept. The term 'scholar', being commonly translated or referred to the '*Ulamā*', while may deem suitable, however is a fall short of its true meaning in accordance with the Quranic verse and ḥadith mentioned above. In expressing the importance of having a clear understanding of the meaning of '*Ulamā*', Asham Ahmad stated that, "to understand the meaning of '*Ulamā*' requires one to understand first what knowledge is. A person who does not know what knowledge is will not be able to tell the difference between a scholar and the one who pretends to be one or a pseudo scholar. He might be deceived by the external appearance of someone who claims to be a scholar, when as a matter of fact, knowledge, in reality, is the attribute of the soul."⁴³ It is therefore crucial to understand the meaning of '*Ulamā*' within the worldview of Islam.

2) Misconception Regarding the Characteristics of '*Ulamā*'

A careful study of the social scientists' perspectives on the characteristics of '*Ulamā*' reveals as if there exists a traditionalist and contextualist class amongst Muslim scholars. While we can agree with the views of social scientists that '*Ulamā*' exist simultaneously with the existence of a society, however, it is argued here that it is not necessary for '*Ulamā*' to help solve the community problems by addressing a particular social issue directly. Rather, '*Ulamā*' contributes by way of upholding the religious tradition, disseminating the message of the Quran and the sunnah, and to call for the society to be close to God, to which, ultimately, solve the problem at its very root.

The classification of '*Ulamā*' within traditionalist-contextualist as perceived by social scientists can be traced back to the time of Muhammad Abduh, a reformer, known for his

⁴³ Asham Ahmad, "Who are the Real '*Ulamā*'?" in *The Star* (31 March 2015), <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/ikim-views/2015/03/31/who-are-the-real-ulama/>

inclination towards Western thoughts and Western sciences.⁴⁴ This misleading idea may then be used by the society as distinguishing feature to identify an '*Ulamā*'. As this should not be the criterion in determining the characteristics of '*Ulamā*' hence it is necessary to replace this incorrect understanding with an established fact that conveys the characteristics of '*Ulamā*' more accurately. This section therefore attempts to clarify the qualities of '*Ulamā*' beyond the traditionalist-contextualist classification by taking into account the Quranic verse and ḥadīth mentioned earlier.

Based on the Quranic texts mentioned above, we can deduce that one of the key characteristics of '*Ulamā*' is يَخْشَى, generally means 'fear'. One must first understand that the term يَخْشَى is distinct from other terms mentioned in the Quran that carry the same notion of fear, such as خوف.⁴⁵ However, due to the limited scope of this study, the distinction between these terms will not be discussed here. Rather, more importantly is to discern this presence of 'fear' that leads the '*Ulamā*' to give priority to worshipping Allah as His servant first, whereas to serve mankind second. The fear of '*Ulamā*' towards God exerts them to a much higher purpose which is to be knowledgeable i.e. to seek knowledge for oneself, also to have the knowledge about bringing people closer to Allah, and to prepare themselves for what is certain i.e. death⁴⁶, in reference to the '*alam akhirah*'. They are not interested to be known by many and they regard this status as a gift from God, and keep it hidden, as a *sirr*, a secret or something that is restricted only between him and Allah swt.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ An-Naim, *Islam and The Secular State*, 195. In this book, An-Naim briefly explained on Western-oriented bureaucratic class in the context of the Ottoman state to which young men were sent to France for education after 1789 and later returned to serve as statesmen and form a new educational system within the Ottoman empire to challenge the traditional educational system. An-Na'im also talked about the attempt to combine 'the best aspects of Islamic and Turkish tradition with Western modernity' by the young Turks leader, a sociologist, named Ziya Gökalp.

⁴⁵ Likewise in English grammar, the word 'scared', 'frighten', 'terrified', 'fear' and 'afraid' although may describe 'fear', however it suggests a specific condition that may or may be used interchangeably at times.

⁴⁶ [15:99]

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazali has elaborated on the concept of direct knowledge from God in his "*al-Risala al-Laduniya*" (Al-Ghazali's Treatise on Direct Knowledge from God), which is a chapter from, *Majmu'ah Rasā'il al-Imam al-Ghazali*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1416H)

This is unlike a doctor, a lawyer, or a policeman whereby these are classified as professions.⁴⁸ Similarly, unlike an *Ustāz*, a *qādhi*, a *mufti* or a religious officer, '*Ulamā*' is not a title to be conferred to or criteria that can be set by the society. Rather, it is a special authority gifted by God to His obedient servant fearful of Him, based on the Quranic verse mentioned earlier. A true obedient servant (*'ibād*) of God is he who truly understands the purpose of creation, which is to worship God, and to perform '*ibadah*' as how the Prophet performs his '*ibadah*'. Thus, loving the Prophet is not just by offering *Salawat*, but more importantly by seeking to emulate the example of the Prophet, as the perfection of '*ibadah*' was done by the Prophet himself. '*Ibadah*' does not only mean worship as it is commonly understood by many. According to al-Attas, "it is an act of service for the sake of God alone and approved by Him..." and "in its final, advanced stages, (*'ibadah* means) knowledge: *ma'rifah*."⁴⁹

This concludes the viewpoint held by this paper that the characteristics of the '*Ulamā*' are shaped out of the "fearful" (يَخْشَى) that a servant (عَبَاد) feels towards his God. For this reason, he will then act accordingly (*adab*) as a servant of God, by willingly and continuously serving God and for His sake alone, whilst seeking to know and to profoundly understand God. Thereupon, God, to whomsoever He pleases, will then revealed his Knowledge to this true loyal servant on the basis of the 'intimacy' that one gains with his God, and ultimately conferred him with a rank of an '*Ulamā*', as a gift from God.⁵⁰ The '*Ulamā*', in turn, as the heir of the Prophets, convey the knowledge to the people whom must conform to it, of both individual and society. The guidance and transmission of knowledge by the '*Ulamā*' is the focal point here to counter argues the position held by the social scientists that '*Ulamā*', by having trait of traditionalism, are not forthcoming in addressing issues affecting the society. On a contrary, a true '*Ulamā*', having

⁴⁸ This is, however, without dismissing the fact that when the right *niyyah* is placed, their profession is also considered as an '*ibadah*'

⁴⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (First impression Petaling Jaya: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (ABIM), 1978; this impression Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 70. Also in another paragraph where Al-Attas stated, "...'*ibadah*' in its entirety is but another expression", pg 107

⁵⁰ Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 71

the intellectual and spiritual discernment and virtue⁵¹ qualities, prepare the society for the best in all aspects of life, placing the principles of ethics, social, economics and politics in a meaningful context. Through the educational process, it produces a good man with self-recognition and self-discipline who observes praiseworthy manners, and gradually, produces a good society.⁵² This, in a way, emphasizes the role of 'Ulamā' in society while continuing the tradition of the Prophets which is elaborated further in the next section.

3) **Misconception Regarding the Role and Place of 'Ulamā'**

The discussion of the role of 'Ulamā' within the society insinuates as if the 'Ulamā' is accountable and owned by the people hence is expected to be responsible for addressing issues affecting the Muslim community. It is not the intent of this paper to dismiss the role of 'Ulamā' in society. While it is true that 'Ulamā' should be involved in social affairs, however by only focusing on such aspect will overlook the true role of 'Ulamā'. This section will analyze and eliminate common misconceptions about the role and place of 'Ulamā' as perceived by the social scientists, categorized into three types:

a) 'Ulamā' as a form of specialization

This misconception may have resulted from the term 'scholar' that is commonly used to refer to 'Ulamā' and have caused the society to have the perception of an 'Ulamā' as having an affiliation to any society, organization or institution, such as *Madrasah* or *mazahib*. Consequently, the society is likely to think that 'Ulamā' is a form of a discipline; a specialization of a subject; or within an academic portfolio and environment. It is therefore important that this paper clarifies this misleading term and provides a proper understanding of the role and contribution of 'Ulamā' in the society.

Concerning the role and place of 'Ulamā', one first need to understand that there exist ranks and degrees among human being, and one is potentially to be more noble in the eyes of God than

⁵¹ On true and false ulama, see: Al-Attas, *Islam & Secularism*, 124.

⁵² On the connection between 'ilm and adab, Al-Attas refers to the ḥadīth, (أَدَّبَنِي رَبِّي فَأَحْسَنَ) (تَأْدِيبِي), which means, "My Lord educated me and so made my education most excellent". See: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1999), 25.

another.⁵³ Therefore to have a perception that all mankind is equally at the same level, reflects an error and misinterpretation of knowledge. Allah SWT says in al-Qur'an:

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

Meaning: "Allah will raise those of you who have believed and have been granted knowledge in ranks"⁵⁴

This verse clearly points out that man should not be placed equally in the same ranks and degrees. Consider this, for example, during the Covid-19 pandemic or any global virus outbreak, while we recognize the vital role of the front liners, it is also important that we identify and distinguish their role and characteristic as an essential and frontline worker in terms of its order and of its importance. The role and contribution of a doctor, for example, demands a greater risk, responsibility, time, and effort compared to the nurse. Similarly, Imam al-Ghazali in his *Kitab al-'Ilm*, categorized those who guide people to the path of God into four categories: The Prophets, caliphs and kings, the 'Ulamā' and the preacher. It is important to identify these different roles and recognize that one is excellent than the other, i.e., having its own rank, so as to put them in their rightful positions and for us to see where we stand in terms of our qualifications that we don't supersede a position of someone who has more authority than we do. The various degrees and levels of authority and hierarchy in the arrangement of beings are indeed the order of God hence only He knows best of the underlying wisdom behind these differences.⁵⁵

According to Abu Yazid al-Bastami⁵⁶,

لو بدا للخلق من النبي ذرة لم يقم لها ما دون العرش

Which means: If even a single atom of the Prophet is manifested to the creation, it will not be endured what is beneath the Throne.

⁵³ [49:13]

⁵⁴ [58:11]

⁵⁵ Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 107-108. Refer also: [17:55]

⁵⁶ Abu Bakr al-Kalābādhi, *Al-Ta'arruf liMazhab Ahli al-Tasawwuf*, ed. Ahmad Shams ad-Din (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1413H/ 1993CE)

This further emphasizes the importance of recognition and acknowledgment of the hierarchy and different stages of authority between one man to another, especially between Prophets and a man in general. Abu 'l-'Abbās ibn 'Atā said: “*The least of the stages of the messengers is the highest of the ranks of the prophets, and the least of the stages of the prophets is the highest of the ranks of the true believers, and the least of the stages of the true believers is the highest of the ranks of the martyrs, and the least of the stages of the martyrs is the highest of the ranks of the pious, and the least of the stages of the pious is the highest of the ranks of the believers.*” Most of the Sufis agreed that the Prophets are more excellent than men and that no man can contest with the Prophets in excellence, be the true believer, saint, or any other, however great his power and mighty his position.⁵⁷

The rank of an ‘*Ulamā*’ as the heirs of the Prophet thus is a high rank granted by God and for that reason, there must be a clear distinction between the term ‘*Ulamā*’ and the term ‘scholar’ or a religious teacher. This resonates with the ḥadith of the Prophet,

“Allah does not take away the knowledge, by taking it away from (the hearts of) the people but takes it away by the death of the religious learned men till when none of the (religious learned men) remains, people will take as their leaders, ignorant persons who when consulted will give their verdict without knowledge. So they will go astray and will lead the people astray. [Sahih al-Bukhari]”⁵⁸

This ḥadith clearly indicates that a real ‘*Ulamā*’⁵⁹, ought to be regarded as leaders in religious knowledge, are ready to address any issues and give their verdict when consulted. This, however, must be done in a proper respectful manner and on the right platform.

In summary, this misconception may have arisen because of the term ‘*Ulamā*’ being literally translated as a “scholar”, which is generally understood as one who is an expert of an area of study; an

⁵⁷ Ibid. Original text in Arabic:

وأجمعوا جميعاً: أن الأنبياء أفضل البشر، وليس في البشر من يوازي الأنبياء في الفضل (لا صديق، ولا ولي، ولا غيرهم)، وإن جل قدره وعظم خطره

⁵⁸ Original text in Arabic:

“عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عَمْرٍو بْنِ الْعَاصِ، قَالَ سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَقُولُ " إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَقْبِضُ الْعِلْمَ انْتِزَاعًا، يَنْتَزِعُهُ مِنَ الْعِبَادِ، وَلَكِنْ يَقْبِضُ الْعِلْمَ بِقَبْضِ الْعُلَمَاءِ، حَتَّى إِذَا لَمْ يَبْقَ عَالِمًا، اتَّخَذَ النَّاسُ رُؤُوسًا جُهَالًا فَسْتَبَلُوا، فَأَفْتَوْا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ، فَضَلُّوا وَأَضَلُّوا " .

⁵⁹ Regarding true ‘*Ulamā*’ and false ‘*Ulamā*’, see: Abu Hāmid al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum ad-Din*, Book 1 (Jeddah: Dar al-Minhaj, 2011); al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 118-119

academician; or one who teaches at a college or university. This section, therefore refutes the foregoing perspectives by sociologists concerning the role of 'Ulamā' in society that implies the role of 'Ulamā' that has been reduced to; a discipline; a specialization of a subject; or within an academic portfolio and environment; hence the need to clarify the role of 'Ulamā' so as to place them at their rightful position. Notwithstanding that some of our 'Ulamā' had taught and some even had established a center of learning, this is, however, must not be considered as a requisite role or responsibilities of an 'Ulamā' as this is not by necessity, but rather by choice. The 'Ulamā' are free to choose medical, business, engineering, or accounting as a profession. Regarding this, Asham Ahmad emphasized that "According to the Quran and the prophetic tradition, the 'Ulamā' are the heirs of the Prophet, and they are the truly fearful of God among His servants. Being the heirs of the Prophets, they inherit the teachings of the Prophets, preserve those teachings, and convey them to the rest of mankind. In every generation, they are the ones who protect Prophetic knowledge from alteration, corruption, and false interpretations. Without them, true Islam would have been non-existent. Knowing their true contribution to the religion of Islam, it would be a gross injustice to undermine, let alone to deny altogether the place and the role of the 'Ulamā' in the Muslim community."⁶⁰

b) 'Ulamā' are not well-equipped with knowledge and skills in social sciences

Another aspect found to be a common perception among social scientists is that although 'Ulamā' may be very knowledgeable in Islamic tradition, but their knowledge in other fields and issues related to science, economic, social, and politics are still limited and lacking. It causes the society to think that 'Ulamā' have not been responsive in dealing with challenges faced by modern society and do not have the capacity to deal with social issues.

On the contrary, this paper suggests that 'Ulamā' truly care for the people and their well-being, and while they regard life in this world as important but that will not distract them from focusing on

⁶⁰ Asham Ahmad, "Who are the Real 'Ulamā'" in *The Star* (31 March 2015), <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/ikim-views/2015/03/31/who-are-the-real-ulama/>

the ultimate purpose of being created, that is to worship and to know God.⁶¹ The worldly matter, to them, is just one part of the six *maqṣad* or aims of the Quran as classified by Imam Al-Ghazali in his book, "*Jawāhir al-Quran*". Rather, what is of more significance to them are seeking of the other five aims of the Quran: 1) Knowledge of God, His Attributes and His Works; 2) Knowledge of the path of advancing towards God; 3) Knowledge of conditions when attaining to God; 4) Knowledge of those who denied God and deviated from His path; 5) Knowledge of the infidels, of their humiliation and falsehood. These five aims remain the focal point of their obligation as an obedient '*ibad*, or servant. As this world and worldly matters also forms one part of the six stages of the path to God, the journey undertaken by '*Ulamā*' to some place near to God therefore cannot be completed if the affairs of his livelihood, such as preserving good health, sound mind, offspring, are neglected.⁶²

This is also to refute the idea and quest for equivalency⁶³, a concept posed by the postmodern that may have caused the error and confusion in the perspectives of the social scientists specifically concerning the nature of '*Ulamā*'. Subsequently, it raised the issue of generalization in the context of '*Ulamā*' among the people in society, and ultimately caused loss of *adab* towards the '*Ulamā*' that is apparent among the laymen being outspokenly question and share their views on religious matters in which they may have no prior knowledge of the Islamic sciences.

The demand for the right to express opinions, being one of the problems caused by modernity, while may be helpful in some cases and protect the interest of a certain group must have a limit to it as it may not be appropriate in some circumstances, as in cases where it may harm the public interest. Restrictions must be placed so as

⁶¹ On the purpose of creation, see [51:56]

⁶² Abu Hāmid al-Ghazali, *Jawāhir al-Quran* ed. Muhammad Rashid Rida al-Qabbani (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Ulum, 1411H/ 1990C.E) 23

⁶³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf: Preliminary Thoughts on An Islamic Philosophy of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: ASASI, 1981), 9. Here, Al-Attas stated: "The notion of right or proper places involves necessity for things to be in that condition; to be deployed in a certain order, arranged according to various levels' (*marātib*) and 'degrees' (*darajāt*). Ontologically, things are already so arranged, but man, out of ignorance of the just order pervading all creation, makes alterations—both conceptually and actually—and confuses the places of things such that-injustice' (*zulm*) occurs."

not to allow this freedom of speech to be abused. Muslims, especially, need to possess the proper attitude and to be more responsible in expressing their rights. This culture has somewhat unconsciously put one into a mansion of, as Imam al-Ghazali mentioned it as, “self-deception” (*ghurur*)⁶⁴. Concerning this, according to Al-Attas, “they all have become conscious and unconscious agents of Western culture and civilization”.⁶⁵

The remedy of *Ghurur* is by purifying it with ‘*Aqidah* and *taṣawuf*’ of which ‘*Ulamā*’ have been studied, practiced, and constantly emphasize this, whether in their teachings or teachings. However, ‘*Aqidah*, a fundamental subject of which ‘*Ulamā*’ consistently give great emphasis in their teachings, sadly is perceived today as a passive Islamic science, whereas, as a matter of fact, its practicality has so much influenced in human actions. For example, when some unfortunate incident happens unexpectedly, one will not blame God knowing that matters related to fate and destiny, as well as the sovereignty of Heaven and the Earth, belongs to God and thus will not regard it as a tragedy, rather, as a means of humility and invocation to Allah, seeking for His help in facing of adversity. While this approach may give an impression as if the ‘*Ulamā*’ are not being actively responding to the issues affecting the society, but, on a contrary, this is, as a matter of fact, the way of ‘*Ulamā*’ in dealing with problems in life, that is by means of education and prevention of wrong actions and evil doings, known as *munkarāt* and *ma’siyat*.⁶⁶

The slow response or silence of ‘*Ulamā*’ therefore should not be regarded as a lack of intelligence or uneducated as they’d prefer to restrain themselves from speaking and only offer opinions when being consulted.⁶⁷ However, this does not make the ‘*Ulamā*’ less of

⁶⁴ *Ghurur* is a disease of the heart as explained by Imam al-Ghazali in a chapter of his book *Ihya 'Ulumiddin, Kitab Dhamm Al-Ghurur*. He divided this disease into four groups, namely ‘*ulamā*, ‘*abid* (worshippers), professing *Sufis*, and wealthy individuals who are deceived by the world. From a linguistic point of view, it means to be deceived by oneself, while in other terms, *al-ghurur* means a person who feels proud of himself to the extent that he despises everything that others do.

⁶⁵ Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 128

⁶⁶ For example, in his *Ihya*, Imam al-Ghazali dedicated one book on the *Munjiyat* i.e. the virtues or ways to salvation that will bring one closer to God and *muhlikat* i.e. the vices or ways to perdition.

⁶⁷ ‘*Ulamā*’ is a plural of ‘*alim*, which must not be confused with *al-mu'allim*, means teacher. An ‘*alim* may or may not choose to be *al-mu'allim* as his profession, as discussed at a later part of this paper under the role of ‘*Ulamā*’ in society.

a 'contributing' member of society which is elaborated further in the next section.

c) **'Ulamā' are expected to play a changing and diverse role in society**

The perspective on the social expectation expressed by the social scientists that '*Ulamā*' ought to adopt changing and diverse roles in the society is inaccurate and this may influence the perception of the society on the contributions of '*Ulamā*' towards the society. Here, this section not only stresses the importance of '*Ulamā*' in the society but also provide some insight into the form of contributions of '*Ulamā*' to the society.

Given the evidence established from the ḥadith mentioned above, it is also important to take into consideration the relationship between '*Ulamā*' with *anbiyā*', the Prophets, to better understand the role and contribution of '*Ulamā*' in the society. Apparently, despite that the ḥadith of "*'Ulamā' as being the heirs of the Prophets*" is commonly being quoted, however, the concept of prophecy is rarely found in the discourse of this subject matter. It is important to understand this connection as it gives an idea of the roles played by the Prophet in the society, hence provide a clear explanation in the context of contribution by '*Ulamā*' in the society.

Past scholars and philosophers have discussed the concept of prophecy, debated, for example, its conception between the soul and its powers of cognition. Fazlur Rahman defined 'prophet' (*Nabī*) as "a man whom God sends a message." He further explained that "The ordinary prophet is a reformer: he brings a message to a people who do not contest the truth of the message but are simply morally not living up to what they recognize as true. The prophet's function is to reform them morally. But when a people refused to accept the very truth, the task of the prophet is of a revolutionary character. His function is that of a socio-moral crusader (like Moses and Muhammad) and very often such a kind of prophet (called *Rasūl*) brings with him a new Sharī'a —a socio-moral code to establish a new order of society."⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*, reprint ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 104

Therefore, concerning the involvement of Prophets in society, it is fitting to note here that the Prophet p.b.u.h is an excellent example of building a civilization, carrying the mission of mercy⁶⁹, contributing to the goodness of the world, whilst realizing that the ultimate goal is for the Hereafter. Together with his people, the Prophet faced the challenges and trials of life while guiding them on knowing God and to fear Him, reminding them from committing sins or deeds that are against the commandments of Allah. The Prophet's contribution to society can be seen through his successful effort in uniting the multi-religious society during his time. This clearly indicates that maintaining peace within society remains one of many conditions to build an excellent community as envisaged by the Prophet.

To an equal extent, there are verses from the al-Quran which clearly mention the involvement of other Prophets in social and familial issues amidst their commitment to educate and remind people of the higher purpose in life, which is *Taqwa*, meaning "piety", or "to focus to God".⁷⁰ Therefore, it is important to highlight here that this paper is not in any way suggesting that '*Ulamā*' should not be involved in a social or any emerging issues affecting the society, but rather it must not be perceived as a reactive approach as if it is an obligation upon the '*Ulamā*' to fix social problems emerging in the society.

In other words, a true '*Ulamā*' rely solely on Allah, believing that Allah is sufficient for them. However, the society will need the '*Ulamā*' for survival in this world and the Hereafter, and for protection from transgression, oppression, and injustice. This is especially so for Muslims who constantly need guidance from '*Ulamā*' being the carriers and transmitters of religious knowledge and traditions. The '*Ulamā*' also actively do *da'wah* i.e. inviting people to know about God, His Names, His attributes, and His Works, similar to the duty of the Prophets and the Messengers. Therefore, contrary to the common misconception of a changing role of '*Ulamā*' in society, it is argued here that the role of '*Ulamā*' does not change over time yet remains dynamic without changing its essential nature.

⁶⁹ [21:107]

⁷⁰ [33: 1], [33: 59], [65:1], [66:9]

In conclusion, the misconception in the nature of 'Ulamā' has led to the confusion of the role as well as the contribution of the 'Ulamā'. No doubt it is good that the community expects the 'Ulamā' to possess the competency and the skill to help solve the emerging issues affecting the society, however, more importantly, the society needs to see the contributions of the 'Ulamā' at a bigger picture. The contribution of the 'Ulamā' in educating and propagating Islamic traditions covers a bigger aspect of nurturing a human being so as to become a good man. This inculcation of *adab* will make him into a better person which gradually shapes a better society, and subsequently address the social issues affecting the society. In a nutshell, the main contribution of 'Ulamā' is not just the transmission of knowledge but also a manifestation of right action⁷¹. This constitutes the point of similarity between an 'Ulamā' and the Ṣūfīs in terms of piety, intellectual and spiritual excellence. Referring to this, Al-Attas stated:

“When the Ṣūfīs speak of the truth', they refer to the knowledge whose real content is the truth of the highest degree of certainty (*haqq al-yaqīn*), because it is gained by direct experience. This direct experience alludes to a trans-empirical state of awareness such as we have already mentioned in which they 'see' the reality of the Multiplicity of phenomena in the Unity of the One Real Being, and the Unity of the One Real Being in the Multiplicity of phenomena.”⁷²

Conclusion

Our analysis of the sociologists' view indicates that there seems to be a misconception of the term 'Ulamā'. It is also apparent that the concept and the role of 'Ulamā' have been misunderstood by many due to the confusion that resulted from the impact of postmodern ideas that has surreptitiously crept into our culture in our borderless world today. This concept has not only influenced but has also spread and led to a greater acceptance by society.

⁷¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1999), 22. See also, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (First impression Petaling Jaya: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (ABIM), 1978; this impression Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 151

⁷² Al-Attas, *Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf*, 9

This paper argues that this misconception is real hence the need to clarify the role of '*Ulamā*' so as to place them at their rightful position within the society. It is by no means that this study intends to understate the works of sociologists, rather, the aim of this study is to provide a conceptual view related to the meaning and the nature of '*Ulamā*'. The meaning and the role of '*Ulamā*' need to be clearly understood also among religious figures to ensure that the trust and deposition is to be fulfilled with just, which is in accordance with the verse, "*Verily Allah commands you that you restore deposits to their owners, and when you judge between people, you judge with justice; verily good is the admonition Allah gives you; verily Allah is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.*"⁷³

The perspective of the sociologists may have stemmed from the fact that there exist people who projected themselves as '*Ulamā*' who follow the so-called "Traditionalist" or "Contextualist" group set by intellectuals yet in their minds seems to have confusion in their worldview, and lacking a framework of religious authority in Islam, as opposed to how it was clearly understood by the great past scholars i.e. the true '*Ulamā*'.⁷⁴ It is important to stress here that '*Ulamā*', unlike an *Ustāz*, *qādhi*, *mufti*, *al-mu'allim*, or religious officer, is not a title to be conferred to or criteria that can be set by the society. Rather, it is a special authority gifted by God to whomsoever He pleases amongst His true obedient servant fearful of Him the most. This paper hence concludes by humbly proposes the meaning of '*Ulamā*' as someone who has the authority in speaking about Islam, who represents Islam fully, not as merely a discipline, regardless of his profession, and with the aims of inculcating *adab* and instilling goodness in man.

⁷³ [4:58]

⁷⁴ Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 123-125. Regarding this, according to Al-Attas, "Not only have the '*Ulamā*' of less authoritative worth and those who are downright false, having undermined the authority of the great, neglected to inculcate correct knowledge of Islam and its worldview in the Muslim mind through systematic organization of knowledge in structured educational formula, but, to add to the general confusion and ignorance that such neglect entails, the rulers among Muslims have contributed significantly to the chaos."

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