

Public Opinion (COMM4451)

**Structured Interview: The Perceptions of Atheism among Youth**  
**(3rd Assignment)**

Submitted to:

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## **1.0. Introduction**

Belief is a state of mind in which each person has faith in the world they experience, and this mutually supporting faith can form a belief system. And this belief system is also linked by humanity and spirituality through religion. (Religion and Belief, n.d.) The definition of religion also varies according to belief. According to Horton (1960), British Anthropology viewed religion as belonging to a collection of metaphorical words and acts that signify social ties and social status assertions indirectly, a spiritual belief system and human activity without strongly established limits while Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger (2014) states that religion is classified freely as the personal belief in a Deity or gods, and structured or formal religions and activities like involvement in the Church, the share of congregational beliefs, while spirituality is identified as a faith in the greater force or divine encounters, with less participation in conventional worship. Most people in the world will have their own religion. Religion can be used as a religious quality and state, which can usually be understood as a personal belief in God or gods. And religion can also affect their daily life and habits. Just as the Malaysian constitution states that Malaysia is a country where Islam is the official religion, Islam is also one of the most important factors that distinguish Malays from non-Malays. However, there will be other religions in Malaysia as well. The Federal Constitution also protects the right to freedom of religion or belief, including the right to profess, practice, and propagate one's religious beliefs, provided that the status of Islam and the propagation of other religions to Muslims are not compromised.

According to Cohen, Shariff, & Hill (2008), religious beliefs are an excellent area for researching certain topics, because the content and actual intensity of the religious belief varies greatly. Religious belief and practices are usually undertaken by the existence of divinity called 'God'. Adams (1967) refers to God as immortal and all-knowing which means God exists for every moment as well as knows all that exists in the created universe. However atheism can be interpreted as a lack of belief in the existence of God. This happens more in today's young generation, where the pressures of school, and life make them less and less knowledgeable about religious beliefs the older they get. According to Barna, the number of teenagers who bond with atheism is twice as high as the general population. (Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z, n.d.) This also shows that the values of teenagers are changing with it.

## **2.0. Problem statement**

Religion plays an important role in regulating human life. This means that religion does not only provide moral values but also makes it the foundation of belief. Malaysia is a country that has the majority of Muslims. In 2017, the existence of the Atheist Republic Consulate of Kuala Lumpur organized an event to gather all atheists in Malaysia to strengthen the solidarity of those who are often under pressure and raise the attention of Malaysian Muslims especially. However, some have supported these groups for the sake of freedom and harmony in living together in a multi-cultural Malaysian society (Lim, 2017). Atheists in Malaysia claimed that the persons' ideology as disbelief to any god is also protected by Article 10(1)(a)'s right to freedom of expression, stating: "The Federal Court has recognised that it includes the right to privacy. Every citizen has the right to live his/her life according to his/her own belief."

The Malaysia government asserting that becoming an atheist is a violation of the prevailing laws. This statement was conveyed by Deputy Minister for Prime Minister Asyraf Wajdi in response to a question from the member parliament. Asyraf underlined that atheism is against the constitution and national principles of the state or Rukun Negara. Quoting the first principle in the pillars of the country which reads 'believe in God', Asyraf emphasized that atheists will not have a place and are legally prohibited in Malaysia. Further, looking to the Article 11(4) that prohibits the spreading of other religious beliefs & doctrines among Muslims as well as the sedition act which responded in regarding the article 10(1) which argues the right to freedom of expression (Shagar, 2017). Apart from that, this study will be used in an interview approach in order to reveal the perceptions of atheism among youth.

### **3.0. Objectives**

The study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify what Malay youth understand by Atheism.
2. To identify their understanding of what makes a person become an Atheist.
3. To identify the general perception of the Malay youth concerning Atheism.
4. To identify the perception of Malay youth about religious preachers (eg. Imams, Dai', Religious teacher and PU), who are involved in sexual misconduct.

#### **4.0. Significance of The Study**

The significance of this research is that it focuses on understanding the perceptions and knowledge and awareness of young adult Malaysians about atheists and libertarians. The structured interviews can also provide a detailed analysis of young people's perceptions of atheism and liberalism. As far as we know, for Malays, they have been practicing Islam since birth, and Malaysia is a pluralistic society, Chinese, Indians, they all have their own religious beliefs, so this social environment is conducive to Malaysian youth's knowledge of atheism and liberalism through the analysis of public opinion. In addition, through the findings of this study we can also obtain different definitions of atheism and libertarianism from different respondents, which can show that people are informed differently by today's media news dissemination. This makes our study even more relevant for research in this area.

#### **5.0. Methodology**

##### **5.1. Research Design**

This section addresses the nature of research use. Since this study is meant as an exploratory research, this study was conducted using a qualitative research method. We were using qualitative data to see the expression, response, experience and opinion on their perception on atheism. Qualitative research seeks to establish social explanations phenomena that will help us understand the social world we live in and why things are happening (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2001).

##### **5.2. Sample**

A well-defined collection of persons or artefacts considered to have identical characteristics is often known as the sample population. In a certain population, all persons or artefacts typically have a common, linking feature or characteristic. The study is designed as an exploratory analysis of the daily lives, concerns and opinions of Malay youth regarding atheism. The interest group for this study is Malay students aged between 20 to 30 years old in all levels of study such as Foundation, Bachelor of Degree, Master and PhD, in Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak.

##### **5.3. Data Collection**

We collected primary data by spreading questions using an online platform such as Email, Whatsapp and any other digital communication engines which were spread out to fifteen Malaysian youth, students aged between 20-30 years old. The data were collected through structured interviews consisting of six questions asking respondents their opinion and experience on atheism. The questions were distributed through an online platform. Participants were given freedom to fill in the survey anonymously and the answers from each respondent were carefully constructed. Analyzing the answers by creating a table and writing all the answers accordingly, then comparing the answers. The structured questions consisted of five questions:

Q1 - What do you understand by the word Atheism?

Q2 - What makes a person to be an atheist?

Q3 - How can a person become an atheist when they were born in a family that practices religion?

Q4 - Do you know anybody (or your friends) that is an atheist?

Q5 - Can you give your opinion about people or your friends who are practicing atheism?

Q6 - Can you give your opinion on preachers (eg. Imams, Dai', Religious teacher and PU), who are involved in sexual misconduct?

#### **5.4. Data Analysis**

All interview answers were collected and constructed in the table provided in the appendix section. The data of all participants including the first five participants from the previous assignment on atheism and liberalism will be examined to identify the common denominator or differences regarding their experience and concerns.

## **6.0. Related Literature**

### **6.1. Understanding Atheism**

Atheism, which denies the reality of God, generally refers to the criticism and denial of the metaphysical belief in God or spiritual existence. Therefore, it is usually distinguished from theism. According to Nielsen (2020), atheism rejects all belief in "spiritual existence" and religion. In general, a belief in a spiritual existence determines the religious significance of a system if religion is defined by a belief in a spiritual existence. Atheism is therefore not only a rejection of the core beliefs of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, but also a rejection of all religious beliefs. Atheists assert that no possible evidence can give a person reason to believe in God. On the contrary, atheists justify their unbelief, and how well their claims are accepted, that there is no evidence that they believe in God. Some atheists believe that the scope of reference for "God" is so uncertain and the concept of God so problematic that it is impossible for anyone who is fully aware of it to believe in God reasonably. Believers, however, believe in "God," even though the scope of reference for "God" is uncertain.

Atheism is more aptly defined as being an atheist who refuses to believe in God for the following reasons. In the case of an anthropomorphic God, atheists refuse to believe in God because the existence of a God is wrong, or may be wrong. He refuses to believe in a non-anthropomorphic God because the concept of such a God is either meaningless or incomprehensible. He refused to believe in God, as described by some theologians or philosophers, because the concept of God merely disguises the essence of an atheism. For example, "God" is just a symbolic term for a moral ideal (Nielsen, 2020).

According to Bainbridge (2005), atheism is not a belief system, nor is it a religion, but atheism is protected by many constitutional rights that protect religion. It just means that people who hold beliefs they lack are protected as much as other people's religious beliefs. It doesn't mean that atheism is a religious belief. One thing that unites all atheists is a lack of faith in God. This is because atheists do not have a common belief system and they come from a wide variety of beliefs and backgrounds, which means they often disagree on many issues and views.

## **6.2. Factors Influenced People to Be Atheist**

Based on Stauner (2018), atheists fall into six categories: intellectual, emotional, social, religious negative experiences, empirical, and intuitive.

Many people become atheists because of the way they were raised or educated, or they simply accept the beliefs of the culture in which they were raised. Because of the educational system and culture, atheists take it for granted that there is no God. Atheists believe that because everything in the universe can be explained in a satisfactory way, without using God as part of the explanation, there is no point in believing that God exists.

Background factors may influence the relationship between atheism and child-rearing preferences. Religious background and collectivism will influence the culture of individualism, while religious background factors will influence people's values, so atheist parents will influence their parenting values. As for the religion they grew up with, one survey found that 27% of "non-religious people" (those who reported no religious affiliation) had at least one non-religious parent (Stauner, 2018). Atheists, compared with believers, have grown up with fewer religious beliefs. Parents may teach their children values that they believe will help them succeed in their society. The study found that education and expressive individualism are both reasons why atheist individuals prefer autonomy over other individuals. Education will go hand in hand with atheists having higher cognitive reasoning development and more liberal views.

Some of the related reasons why atheists do not believe include disappointment, anger, or mistrust focused on the existence of a god they once believed in, or the belief that God is cruel or punitive. Some occupations focus on negative views of religious belief (Ecklund & Park, 2009), which may lead to a shift of social pressure towards non-belief. The existence of social pressure may be the reason why atheists do not believe in God, and this pressure tends to subconsciously affect belief.

## **6.3. Perceptions on Atheism**

According to Brewster, Robinson, Sandil, Esposito, & Geiger (2014), the few studies that have examined the characteristics of the atheists indicate that they are more open, non-rigid, feminist, uncertainty tolerant, self-reliant and introverted than religious persons (as cite in

Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Barna Research Group, 1999; Bainbridge, 2005). A 2006 Gallup Poll showed that 84 percent of the people investigated agreed that America is not willing to live with an atheist president and almost 50 percent agreed that most parents couldn't marry their children with an atheist ” ( as cited in Edgell et al., 2006; Jones, 2006). In placing more emphasis, survey statistics regularly indicate that in a long list of traditionally disadvantaged and vulnerable minorities, including African Americans, members of Islamic and Jewish faiths, and lesbian, homosexual, and bisexual persons, atheists are considered more problematic than other classes of people (as cited in Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). These studies can be supported by Doane & Elliott (2015) where they state that the views of bigotry forecast low psychological and physical well-being among atheists remain among the less tolerated classes of citizens in the United States as those from other ethnic minorities.

According to Dubendorff & Luchner (2017), research on the biases of atheists has in general concentrated on large features, which suggest a likely bias to narcissism by certain features such as auto-centricity, snobbery, egoism and hypocrisy. A study by Morgan (2013) states that connected religious belief and health similarly denounced atheism as being unhealthy and few surveys have found that lay people are less happy than religious people, but foreign comparisons suggest that the highest rate of happiness in their peoples are the most secular nations in the world. Speed, Coleman III, & Langston (2018) added that it is often believed that living without gods entails being without the sense or intent of life for atheists and other nonreligious people. In Malaysia where most of the community have strong religious belief even varies regarding their ethnicity, they were expected that everyone should believe in the existence of God (Kasmo, Usman, Mohamad, Yunus, & Hassan, 2015). It shows that Malaysians were not exposed and uncomfortable with individuals that have no faith in religion and spiritual activities and even the existence of God. The positive tendency towards religiousness and the negative inclusion towards non-religiousness indicate assumptions which exist towards both classes and which affect biases towards the atheists (Dubendorff & Luchner, 2017).

#### **6.4. Agenda-setting Theory**

According to Zain (2014), the theory of agenda setting is a concept that explores how the mass media influences as a strategy platform in establishing a certain issue as it builds on the connection between the focus imposed on the topic by the mass media and the media audience or



the public response or features of this issue (as cited in Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The ability of the mass media to set up the agenda for a community to concentrate public focus on a couple of main public issues is a tremendous and well known impact and, since it focuses a subject in the media, people not only gain factual knowledge from media, but also the readers and the listener learn how important it is to place an event on it when the media emphasizes it on the subject (McCombs, 2002). Freeland (2012) states that press and media represent no reality, but filtering and shaping and concentrating on some of the problems and topics which brings the public to see these issues as being more relevant than others (as cited in (Agenda Setting Theory, 2012).

According to Aruguete (2017), the appearance and financial problems faced by the conventional media have been followed by the advent of a variety of alternative outlets, which challenge the massive capacity of demarcating a general opinion, partly as people collect and exchange information without resorting to journalists or other sources. Nowak (2016) states that the rapid growth of the new media has led to the incorporation of blogs and social media into the media field, and they are viewed not only as public representation, but also as members of the media or political agenda. Studies of the world's issues and the world's most widely debated topics from 2002 to 2003 have shown the fact that the agenda and the findings of observational studies have revealed instances in which social networks, including bloggers, will affect the popular agenda where they typically perform the function of resuscitators of existing or formerly outdated issues and placing it on the agenda and also perform the task of reframe by shifting the understanding of conventional media structures (Nowak, 2016). This statement can be supported by Aruguete (2017) where between 2000 and 2005, they reported a higher number of website references in media reports on politics, culture, business and sports in a report on the use of conventional media and new media outlets. There is no denying that various social media platforms build a cultural identity in particular type which can influence what users are willing to express but social media consumers are not representative of the population (Russell Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, & Bae, 2014). Thus this study will find the correlation between agenda setting by the media towards Malay youth perception on atheism.

## **7.0. Findings**

### **Q1- What do you understand by the word Atheism?**

- **Disbelief in God**

According to the answers collected from the respondents through structured interviews, Seven out of the fifteen respondents define Atheism as an act of disbelief in God. This can be supported by Nielsen (2020), where in the study it states that Atheism is a disbelief in God or any spiritual being. Atheism “is a lack of belief in gods” according to this definition anyone who lacks an active belief in any god or gods, is considered as an atheist. (What is Atheism? | American Atheists, 2020). There are atheists that do not believe in the divinity of god but are aware that god exist (Cragun, 2016)

- **Disbelief in the Existence of God.**

While the other eight of the respondents define Atheism as the disbelief in the existence of God. This view can be supported by Cragun (2016), where the study states that ‘atheism’ is defined as a person who does not believe in the existence of God. Atheism should be interpreted as the proposition that God does not exist or, in a broader sense, the proposition that there is no god or gods (Draper, 2017). Smith (2010) claimed this kind of understanding of atheism as explicit atheism where atheists reject the existence of God. Cliteur (2009) claimed that atheism is the faith of an independent and logical human being who insists that rationality will reveal and articulate the universe's fundamental realities, from the workings of the rising sun to humanity's existence and eternal destiny.

### **Q2- What makes a person to be an atheist?**

- **Internal and External Factors**

After gathering and analyzing all data from respondents, most of them believe that an atheist was not born to be an atheist. They were influenced by various internal and external factors. Most of the respondents agree that the practices of atheism is one of the ‘family traditions’. They believe that family could be the biggest factor for an individual to not believe in God and deity. When a person was raised in an environment that did not practice any religious activities, they had

a tendency in not believing in religious things. Bradley, Exline, Uzdevins, Stauner, & Grubbs (2018) states that atheists had less emphasis on faith during their childhood compared to believers (as cited in Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Apart from that, the respondent also mentioned that ‘peer pressure’ could be one of the reasons. According to Phelps (2016), friends give us a sense of identity, add fun and happiness, give us an extra hand, provide moral encouragement, and provide encouragement which can be convincing factors of a person’s belief and behaviour. An idea of how happy and free our friends can be when they become an atheist somehow influences a person’s belief system and makes them think that living without religious belief can bring more comfort and peace.

One of the respondents from the previous data said “Media sometimes could be one of the factors because people are spending a lot of time with social media, reading online materials, watching television and etc, without noticing the materials or contents at these media platforms influenced their thought and belief system”. The idea of the goddess to be an atheist people shows on social media has changed a person’s belief system. “Choose cheeses not Jesus. #proudatheist” (Grow In The Dark, 2020). With all hashtags, pictures, status updates from other atheists's social media can influence the idea of atheism and attract them to be an atheist too. There were also a bunch of famous and influential atheists in social media that can indirectly influence a person to be an atheist.

“British actor Daniel Radcliffe, known for his role as Harry Potter, declared he was an atheist in a 2009 interview. “I’m an atheist, but I’m very relaxed about it,” he said. “I don’t preach my atheism, but I have a huge amount of respect for people like Richard Dawkins who do”. (“Famous atheists and their beliefs”, 2015)

In the statement by CNN news article above, a famous actor became an atheist because he was influenced by another famous atheist. It shows that the media contribute to be one of the factors a person becomes an atheist.

- **Logical and Scientific Factors**

Most of the respondents agree that atheist belief systems are ‘disconnect’ in all aspects of religion. They believe that a person who decided to be an atheist because they have a principle that everything happens in the world must have ‘logic and scientific’ evidence. Thus, atheists don’t

believe in any 'spiritual' powers including the existence of God and its deity. Islam for instance, belief that God is almighty, has not been created, Hindu and Buddha belief that there are spiritual powers that controls everything in this world. This belief system is contradictory with atheism. It can be supported by BBC (2009), atheists believe that, since everything can be clarified in the world satisfactorily without using God, there is no point in claiming that God exists.

Apart from that, most respondents believe that atheists are actually a person who finds their true self and because of their continuous curiosity on the world, they cannot find any scientific evidence on God's existence and refuse to believe it. This can be supported by Bradley et al. (2018) where they state that the topic and grounds for atheists should be seen as phraseological reasoning based on logic, theory or science instead of other possible spiritual explanations.

- **Past Experiences**

Two of the respondents believe that past experience could influence individuals to be atheists. They believe that atheists were not born to practice atheism. Post 'traumatic' experience leads towards losing faith in God and results in declaration to be atheists. Respondent 8 said that "could also be because the person has gone through traumatic episodes that lead them to denounce their previous religion" and respondent 5 mentioned that a person can be an atheist "when people suffer from hardships, but they don't get an answer from God". The statement from the respondents can be supported by Bradley et al. (2018) where they state that some atheists have also supported similar explanations for scepticism including perceptions of dissatisfaction, rage and resentment, which have concentrated on a once believed Deity, or which have conceived God as cruel or punishing (as cited in Bradley, Exline, & Uzdavines, 2017).

**Q3- How can a person become an atheist when they were born in a family that practices religion?**

- **Influence of family environment**

According to the respondents' answers, three respondents (1, 7, 10) their views are similar, they think that in a religious family, because the parents are very strict and traditional about their religion, it leads to their children will be very rebellious and when the parents are not around, they will try to find or try some things forbidden by their religion when they leave home. In addition, due to the parents' low level of knowledge and lack of higher education as well as knowledge of religious beliefs, they do not guide their children to correct religious thinking leading to rebellion and doubts about their own faith. Even though some parents have faith themselves, their children do not follow them.

- **Forming their own values**

In the responses of 7 respondents (2, 4, 6, 9, 11, 12, 14) they believe that being born in a religious family, they follow their parents when they are young, but when they grow up, they have their own ideas and they become doubtful about their beliefs and then start to disbelieve in the existence of God as well as misunderstand and misinterpret any matters related to religion. In addition, they become confused about their faith, lack knowledge about Islam, develop their own values, worldview, and become atheists by not believing in the existence of God.

- **External influences**

External influences can be of many kinds: friends, family, books, movies, media, idols, etc. These are all influences that can make a person become an atheist. These are all influences that make a person living in a religious family become an atheist. In the interviews of the interviewees (3, 7, 9, 12, 13, 15), we can conclude that they believe that it is more due to some external influences that cause people living in religious families to become atheists. Barbour (1994) indicates that giving up religion is also related to the struggle for independence and identity in a religious family environment. For example when they leave their families to go to college they are influenced by other ideas and even become atheists due to something they have experienced that leads them to believe that there is no God in the world to protect them and that all religious activities do not do them any good and lose faith.

**Q4- Do you know anybody (or your friends that is an atheist?**

When asked if they have a friend who is an Atheist or know atheist, the majority of the respondents, being eight of the fifteen respondents answered yes. Five of the respondents who had atheist friends are female. According to Mahlamäki (2012) Men have shown to be more resolute than women when it comes to religious beliefs. In other words, both atheists and fundamentalists are more often men than women. One of them said a very close friend of his is an atheist and the father converted to Islam but the mother is also still an atheist. Another respondent, a female, also has a very close friend being an Atheist. And the remaining seven the respondents said they do not have an Atheist friend or know anyone who is an Atheist.

**Q5- Can you give your opinion about people or your friends who are practicing atheism.**

- **Respect for Human Rights**

From the question given, 7 respondents (respondent 1, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13 & 14) have the same perceptions that they value religious tolerance from a human rights perspective in Malaysia. Despite the presence of the Atheism community in Malaysian society, most of Malay youth were accepting their existence. Respondent 10 stated, “I really respect human rights and religious freedom. I have tried many times to ask them convert into Islam. I used a lot of possible ways to motivate them. But, it did not work”. As we can see, living in the different backgrounds of religious belief does not lead to hostility or even its aroused respondent 8 intent to understand the diversity situation. Respondent 8 said, “I tried to be more understanding of his painful struggles he had to go through when he was practicing religion. As someone who follows a religion, I do hope that he hadn't lost that little hope he had left before he decided to leave his religion but I also respect his decision and I hope that he would find better paths that would help him restore his faith in God”. Tolerance in respecting religious differences according to Islam is coming from the principle of firm and tolerance with attitude (Jaffary, 2008). This previous study shows the importance of accepting the difference in the principle of religious belief.

Therefore, according to answers by respondents, they accept the existence of atheists, it does not mean that they agree with the atheists who do not believe in God. But simply to maintain harmony, for the sake of human rights, the majority of respondents did not have any problem with this. However, they also have high expectations for atheists to believe in the presence of a creator.

For example, respondent 1 he said “Atheists have their own beliefs and thinking. We as Muslims should not treat them bad treat them according to Islam”. This shows that young Malaysian have high religious tolerance. Nevertheless, according to Rahman & Hambali (2013) religious tolerance in Malaysia faced some challenges, one of them is the lack of a guidance module to practice it. Consequently, different levels of understanding of atheism might be harmful for young generations. As for example, there is a confusion between Muslim and non believers to practice religious tolerance which might lead to religious conflicts.

- **Logical Criticism**

Atheism in general is an understanding that rejects the existence of God and religion. Many people have different perceptions in interpreting the concept of atheism itself because their understanding is different about the concept of God. Seven of fifteen of the respondents were aware of the logical reasoning regarding the existence of god as answered by respondent 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11 & 15. According to respondent 9, “They cannot think logically thinking that all things in this life have it’s own creator, like a car and it’s creator which is human, then a human also must have his creator, God.” Moreover, respondent 4 also said “It is clear that they have a wrong understanding and need to be convinced that there is only one God”. As supported by respondents 11 statements, “I hope you are not just using logic to prove something happened in this world. Learn to know Allah instead just accept all the destiny of your life”. As stated in the previous analysis, logical and scientific factors played a role in influencing people’ perceptions. Supported by Karl Marx ideologies in the early 1980s, stated:

“Religious myths serve an important function and cannot be destroyed by the mere application of the logical and scientific method. Knowledge alone cannot liberate people from religion or the condition which produce it” (P. 319)

Respondent 7 also shared her friends’ reason for becoming an atheist, “My friends are indigenous who live in the forest, they don't have anyone who preaches them properly about religion etc. They are used to holding on to what their older people taught them”. In spite of her positive comments, respondents 7 doesn't bother in having friends who have different opinions about the existence of God. To her, as long as her friends do not threaten her religion it should be okay. But it would be better if she can go and preach them, talk about her religion and Allah.

- **Materialistic**

Could someone who is money oriented cause inflammation for people's beliefs? One of our respondents believed that when money is everything for them will lead people to forget with their creator. Tang et al. (2008) defined the concept of love money as people's behavior towards money, as well as one's desires and aspirations for money. For respondent 6, the response is "I think they don't need a God or someone to ask for because they can buy anything or do everything with their wealth in this world". These responses clearly show that when individuals put overwhelming concern for wealth in this temporary world. Tang & Chiu (2003) stated that Most people negatively view the term love of money and their research reveals that money is the root of all evil. Respondent 6 also added that "They cannot buy peace of mind, soul, and heart by praying to God, so they replace it by drinking alcohol until drunk to forget their big problem in a moment and willing freedom from obeying any rules of religion". Respondent 8's perception is understandable, because according to her, if a person has a belief that does not believe in the existence of God. As a result, people's lives are based solely on money and hedonism. As we can see, she has a perception of the relationship between material possession and atheism's belief in resulting in a negative outcome.

**Q6- Can you give your opinion on preachers (eg. Imams, Dai', Religious teacher and PU), who are involved in sexual misconduct?**

- **Feel completely disappointed**

Of the 15 respondents, three expressed total disappointment at the behavior, saying that religious leaders involved in sexual misconduct were very disappointing, and that it was not a good thing and a disgrace to humanity. They also believe that what the missionaries do will tarnish the image of the religion itself, ruin the reputation of the religion and bring shame to the believers. Because they can't control their attitude, can't listen to their own will. Since religious missionaries had certain religious and social attributes, they were guided and restrained by religious rules. According to Garland & Argueta (2007), the offended people were confused by the misdeeds of the missionaries, and afterwards, most of the missionaries said they were sorry for what had happened.



- **Should be punished accordingly**

Two of the interviewees believed that their behavior should be punished accordingly. If religious missionaries are found guilty of sexual misconduct, they should be punished as they should be and treated like any other criminal. Maybe they will still try to protect them or give some excuse. And that people should stop respecting their religious preachers.

- **The essential reason of the phenomenon should be analyzed objectively**

However, more interviewees believe that people should objectively analyze the essential reasons behind this phenomenon and should not blindly follow the behavior of religious scholars. Their personal behaviors have nothing to do with religion, but have an impact on the secular significance of religion, so they should be calmly analyzed and rationally treated. We can't entirely blame them, because everyone has nafs and desires. This is a personal issue and should not be associated with their religion or beliefs.

- **Should be given a chance to turn over a new leaf**

And one of the positive views is that they should be given a chance to turn over a new leaf. That if they want change, if they want another chance, then they should first be able to accept their mistakes. Pray for them, may God guide them, because they are also people who make mistakes.

From the overall perspective of the survey, more respondents hold a reflective and dialectical attitude to conduct objective analysis of this behavior phenomenon.

## 8.0. Discussion

It is clear that Malay youth understand the word Atheism differently. The fifteen respondents defined Atheism in two different denominators, disbelief in God and disbelief in the existence of God. Both these two definitions are accepted as cited in different studies.

As discussed in the findings, eight of the respondents said they had Atheist friends. Five of them were female. Even though a study states that, Men have shown to be more resolute than women when it comes to religious beliefs. In other words, both atheists and fundamentalists are more often men than women (Mahlamäki, 2012). But we can see some contradictions from this study with our findings. Since most of those who had Atheist friends are females, we can say females interact more with Atheists and might be more likely to be resolute than males when it comes to religious beliefs and acceptance. This might also be the influence of media and society, which can be related to agenda setting theory.

According to Smith & Cimino (2012), in recent years, websites and blogs have arisen that encourage, explore, reference, focus upon and critique atheism, and have opened an accessible room for atheists to create and express mutual issues about their circumstances. Based on the findings, it shows that the media plays a major role that influences people to become an atheist. It is undeniable that the agenda-setting of media can influence people's perception on atheism and atheists. With all the ideas on atheism, the sharing on how a person decided to be an atheist, exposed by the media, managed to influence most of the respondent's opinion on atheism. The hashtag #proudatheism that has been one of the atheists agenda on media platform to expose and control public opinion on atheism. It is undeniable that the idea of atheism portrayed by atheists on media has successfully influenced public perception on their beliefs system and lifestyle. Findings show that most of the respondents have the same common understanding of atheism. Even some of them some of the respondent has different opinion on the factors that contribute a person becoming atheist, all of their opinions leads to the same concept of atheism portrayed by media: Disbelieve towards Gods and its deity.

The electronically replicated and transmitted Web Website, which is public spaces, is a significant component of atheistic advocacy, especially with regard to the dissemination of knowledge and raising consciousness which results to what happens in the online realm of atheism, both privately and personally, has a possible public impact and this is precisely in establishing a community awareness focused on broadly related agendas and concepts, as well as the identification of their commonality and expressions by atheists in joint action online and beyond, where the positive qualities of the secular cyber operation are most influential. (Smith & Cimino, 2012).

Analyze the views of 15 respondents on missionary involvement in sexual misconduct. Three of the views expressed total disappointment with the behavior, and two of the views held that the behavior should be punished accordingly. However, more people believe that the objective analysis of the essential reasons behind this phenomenon should not blindly follow the behavior of religious scholars. Their personal behavior has nothing to do with religion, but it has an impact on the completion of the secular significance of religion, so they should be treated calmly, while one positive view holds that they should be given a new opportunity to reform.

From the overall perspective of the investigation, more reflective and dialectical attitude to the behavior of the phenomenon of objective analysis. At the root of it all is the commercialization of religion, and one's level of religious knowledge becomes a competition. Some missionaries pursue religion for fame and success. One should not assume that all missionaries are the same. That would be unfair. The individual is wrong, not all groups are wrong. If they want to change, then they should first be able to accept their mistakes. In short, just because someone seems to have a religious status and title doesn't mean they're a good person. Being good is a choice, and so is being evil.

According to our study of adolescents' perceptions of atheism, whether they live in a religious family or in a non-religious family, adolescents are greatly influenced to change their thinking when they grow up. In recent years, the mass media has been reporting more and more about atheism, and in the process, as the media reports more and more, the public will feel that the influence of atheism is slowly becoming greater. This theory was also first proposed by Bernard Cohen in 1963, who pointed out that the media may not be able to tell people what to think about

the matter, but the media can tell people what to think. For teenagers born into religious families, when they grow up and enter society, they will find that there are all kinds of people in the world and their views on religion, and through the media, they will think that what the media says is true and the information they have received since childhood is false, which will make them feel skeptical.

In the three results obtained, it is also clear that family, external as well as self-influences are one of the important factors for the youth to change their religion to become atheists. Since our respondents are all Malaysians who have embraced the faith since birth, they are better able to appreciate and understand the process of becoming an atheist. In Islam, this kind of behavior is also considered as apostasy, and they doubt the existence of God through doubting the main tenets of the religion and being influenced by secular doctrines, and also because of some injuries they have gone through and the pressure from their family environment. (Julie, 2013) Therefore, through our study, there should be some changes in the education of the next generation in religious families to stop this phenomenon.

Based on the analysis, the majority of respondents have a neutral perception on people who practice Atheist belief. Interestingly, this study discovered that Malaysian showed a high level of religious tolerance among those who have different religious beliefs. For them, as long as the atheism community does not treat their religion is acceptable. Moreover, the recent study conducted by Tamring & Mahali (2020) examined 731 Bumiputera tolerance towards Chinese in Sabah. The results found that the level of tolerance of Bumiputera students towards the Chinese is high. This means that in Malaysia despite having a high level of ethnic and religious tolerance but at the same time they still want to respect the religious differences that exist in Malaysia. Nevertheless, religious controversies will occur when there is no guideline for Malaysian Muslim in having lack of Islamic knowledge (Rahman & Hambali, 2013).

Apart from that, according to one respondent, she has a different perception on another factor that influences someone to become atheist is money oriented person. Respondents also believed that atheism was always looking for worldliness and dismissed a holistic pleasure. Her perception is supported by Loftuf (2006) in his book entitled *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former*

Preacher Rejects Christianity, mentioned that free from any religious commitment is one of the reasons behind his decision to be an atheist. Moreover, Grasmick et al. (1991) stated that religion is believed to control individual behavior. The more religious a person then the individual is more able to control their behavior, by avoiding unethical attitude. Conversely, when a person does not believe in god and not belongs to any religions, they do not have a holistic goal in this world and hereafter.

## 9.0. Conclusion

The topic of atheism among youths has become rampant. This study aims to know what Malay youths especially, understand by the terms Atheism, to know their understanding on what makes a person an atheist and to know their perception about, and their opinions on preachers, who are involved in sexual misconduct. In order to achieve these objectives, few questions were asked through structured interviews. What do you understand by the word *Atheism*? What makes a person to be an atheist? How can a person become an atheist when they were born in a family that practices religion? Do you know anybody (or your friends) that is an atheist? Can you give your opinion about people or your friends who are practicing *atheism*? Can you give your opinion on preachers (eg. Imams, Dai', Religious teacher and PU), who are involved in sexual misconduct?

The findings show that different people understand and perceive atheism differently. While others defined atheism as an act of disbelief in God, some said it means disbelief in the existence of god itself. External factors such as family, environment, peer pressure, media, and the seeking of freedom, leads a person to become an Atheist even when they were born in a religion practicing household. Based on the findings, it shows that the media plays a major role that influences people to become atheists. It is undeniable that the agenda-setting of media can influence people's perception on atheism and atheists. Logical and Scientific factors can also lead one to become an Atheist, such as, people who do not believe in any 'spiritual' powers, some of the respondents said curiosity and lack of understanding of God also leads a person to become an Atheist. Eight of the fifteen respondents said they had friends who are Atheist. Five of the respondents who had atheist friends are female.

From the findings we can also say that, Muslim Malaysian youths are open minded and do not hate or criticize anyone who chooses to be an atheist, from this new research, we can also say that, female youths are more likely in accepting atheists as friends than males, since five out of the eight who said they knew/have atheist friends were female. Which is opposite to what we found out from the previous research, where most of those who had Atheist friends were males.

As to what their opinion was about religious leaders who engage in sexual misconduct, the majority of interviewees believe that people should objectively analyze the essential reasons behind this phenomenon and should not blindly follow the behavior of religious scholars, some

expressed total disappointment at the behavior and others think those religious leaders should be punished.

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## APPENDIX

(Laraiba Abdul Rahman 1714238)

	<b>Respondent 1 (Male)</b>	<b>Respondent 2 (Female)</b>	<b>Respondent 3 (Male)</b>
Q1	It is a believe that does not belief in God	Not believing any god	Disbelief in god or gods
Q2	Family influence when the family is already atheist. And also lack of religious education and guidance.	Denies the existence of god.	Lineage or lack of believe in supreme power
Q3	Most people from religious homes become Atheist because their parents are very strict and conventional with religion so they try to find freedom and happiness when they are not closer to their parents.	Grow to question their beliefs and then started to disbelieve god in their journey to find their purpose of life	External influence such as movies, books, idols and friends
Q4	No	Yes	No
Q5	Atheists have their own beliefs and thinking. We as Muslims should not treat them bad treat them according to Islam.	I believe that they are misguided by their own judgement and maybe it is better to find people who could truly guide them and help them understand their beliefs better.	They can practice what they want because it is their rights to do so but they also need to respect others rights to practice their own religion or belief
Q6	It is very disappointing for	I believe that everyone is	It is an individual problem and

	us normal people to know this about religious leaders because they have knowledge of the religion so we look up to them. But we also can not fully blame them because every person has <i>nafs</i> and desires. But their actions might lead others to become Atheist.	different. We cannot judge them only by their words and appearance. A true preacher does not come from a 1-month religious program. We should not blindly agree to everything they do.	should not be linked with their religions and beliefs; however, it will stain the image of the religion itself by what the preachers have done.
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(Anisa Rasyida-1715252)

	Respondent 1 (male)	Respondent 2 (female)	Respondent 3(female)
1	From my understanding, atheism basically means a belief that there is no God.	I understand by the word Atheism that it is the belief in which people think that no gods or deities exist. People believe that there are no gods or there is not a single god, that there is no superior being who made us.	Atheism means strong disbelief or lack of disbelief in the existence of a god
2	Believing that there is no God and not worshiping any God.	I think that when people suffer from hardships, but they don't get an answer from God, they don't get a	Disappointed in God and religion - Willing freedom from

		<p>solution - they lose their faith. In addition, when people start to question their religion, when they study further, some of them lose their faith by questioning. Some people may even believe in an entity that created them but they don't credit it for interfering, intervening in their lives. Also nowadays there are ulterior motives behind teaching religion, and some people lose their faith at that time.</p>	<p>rules and regulations of religion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not introduced God from childhood in a family</li> <li>-Incomprehension of hikmah being a religious person</li> <li>-Assuming that religion and science are a contradiction</li> <li>-Becoming an atheist is a family tradition</li> <li>- Disbelief of life after life and accountability of deeds in the world</li> </ul>
3	<p>From misunderstanding and misinterpretation about anything related to the religion and lack of knowledge about the truth.</p>	<p>I think the aforementioned reasons can play an important role in this. If you find out that the person teaching you the religion is the same person who molests children, your belief in your religion lifts slightly. Similarly, if you don't think that the principles of your religion are good/okay, then you will learn other religions</p>	<p>I have read the article about this. Usually, it comes from their mindset personally, they started to ask themselves and doubted about God and His existence so they are learning from all religions and get the conclusion that all religion is the same and confusing, just follow your</p>

		and this can sometimes lead to you becoming an atheist and not believing in a single religion.	heart and your desire
4	No	No I don't know anyone who is an atheist	Some Hollywood artist
5	It is clearly that they have a wrong understanding and need to be convinced that there is only one God.	Yes I can. I think that such people who don't believe in religion should take a look at their surroundings. Does science explain everything to them? Whom can such people look up to at times of need? If they really do think that there is no God then who created them? Who created everything? I think they should reflect, once again, on their belief that there is no God. They should study different religions. And if they really are an atheist then I just want them to answer the question of what or who made them.	I think they feel don't need a God or someone to ask for because they can buy anything or do everything with their wealth in this world, but they cannot buy peace of mind, soul, and heart by praying to God, so they replace it by drink alcohol until drunk to forgetting their big problem in a moment and willing freedom from obeying any rules of religion.

6	In my POV, it is not a good thing for anyone to get involved in sexual misconduct especially for preachers of course, as they are being more trusted and respected among the communities	I think that such people should reflect on what made them do such a thing? For me such people are a disgrace to humanity as those people were supposed to be the light of the believers, they were given this responsibility by God and in my case Allah, but it was not a burden. It was their duty. But if they want to change, if they want another chance then they should be able to first accept their mistakes.	Na'udzubillahi min syarri dzalik, may Allah save us from any bad deeds. My opinion is we should not follow their discourse anymore and pray for them may Allah guides them after they give people advice because they are also human who can make mistakes
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(Ma Ruo Nan 1619462 )

	Respondent 1 (female)	Respondent 2 (female)	Respondent 3 (male)
1	Atheism is someone who does not believe in any God. Does not believe prophets, religion scripture, religion itself. Believe that everything is natural, already there, no one	I think Atheism is a belief that God does not exist.	The group of people who don't believe in god.



	who creates the world and everything inside.		
2	Does not believe in any God. Does not believe in religion. Does not believe in prophet, religion scripture. Believe everything is natural, everything is already there and not created by anyone or any god.	It could be because one thinks that religion is illogical or superstitious, they think everything needs to be proven with science and evidence. It could also be because the person has gone through traumatic episodes that lead them to denounce their previous religion. It could be because of many things. Some people think they do not need religion as long as they live life as a decent human being and do kind things for other people.	They get confused in their life or misunderstood.
3	Maybe the parents have low skill and knowledge about parenting makes the child become rebellious. Friends' influence, social media and obsession with books and	I think one is entitled to follow whatever religion they wish to even though they were born in a family or to parents who practice a certain religion. You make	They lack knowledge, lack of practicing Islamic life and get confused with some beliefs.

	people (such as actors, thinkers etc) might also be the factors.	your own decisions that you think are best for yourself. (Though this does not apply to countries that prescribe the religion after you were born. Some countries have their citizens follow a religion as a law.)	
4	Yes. My indigenous people.	I have a close friend who is agnostic and also an atheist (or agnostic atheist?)	<i>No</i>
5	My friends are indigenous who live in the forest, they don't have anyone who preaches them properly about religion etc. They are used to holding on to what their older people taught them. As long as they do not threaten our religion, I think that should be okay. But it would be better if we can go and preach them, talk about our religion and Allah.	After I heard my friend's story on why he decided to leave his previous religion, I tried to be more understanding of his painful struggles he had to go through when he was practicing religion. As someone who follows a religion, I do hope that he hadn't lost that little hope he had left before he decided to leave his religion but I also respect his decision and I	They cannot think logically thinking that all things in this life have it's own creator, like a car and it's creator which is human, then a human also must have his creator, God.

		<p>hope that he would find better paths that would help him restore his faith in God.</p> <p>I feel the same way to other people who are atheists too, I hope in their pursuits of finding the missing piece in their lives, they would find something more worthwhile to depend on or God.</p>	
6	<p>I totally disagree and think that these things should never happen. It can ruin the name of our religion, and put shame on the believers. He should be punished as what he deserves if he was proven to be guilty.</p>	<p>Religious figures conducting sexual misconduct are no new news. It's been an issue for the longest time. In whatever religion. I think their problem is that they could not control themselves, they have a lot of sexual fantasies, they consume a lot of sexual content and put forth their sexual needs, they also lack respect for other people. Other than that, they obviously feel repressed by their religion not allowing them to act indecently such as conducting sexual misconduct. Also, I think a person is in a dangerous</p>	<p>They cannot control their attitude and follow their nafs.</p>

		<p>position when they are given power and status and in this context, these figures use the power and influence they have to find opportunities and prey to fulfill their sexual urges. They abuse their power, ignoring the repercussions that would strike them and the victims. They're awful humans with no heart masked behind a pure and pious front.</p>	
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(Shi Peipei 1722760)

	Respondent 1 (male)	Respondent 2 (female)	Respondent 3 (female)
1	<p>Atheism is not an affirmative belief that there is no god nor does it answer any other question about what a person believes. It is simply a rejection of the assertion that there are gods. Atheism is too often defined</p>	<p>Not believe God exists.</p>	<p>Ones who are not believe the existence of god.</p>

	<p>incorrectly as a belief system. To be clear: Atheism is not a disbelief in gods or a denial of gods; it is a lack of belief in gods.</p>		
2	<p>One common reason for atheism is contact with a variety of religions. It isn't unusual for an atheist to have been raised in a religious household and to have grown up living with the assumption that their religious tradition represented the One True Faith in the One True God. However, after learning more about other religious traditions, this same person may adopt a much more critical attitude towards their own religion and even religion generally, eventually coming to reject not only it but also belief in the existence of any gods.</p>	<p>He/she does not feel the power of God.</p>	<p>They do not find the evidence of the existence of god.</p>

3	<p>Why people become atheist when they were born in the family practice religion has few reasons. Firstly, I think that the parents are not motivating or calling their children to be religious, this phenomena happens especially to those families which recently become religious and the parents are not really asking their children to be religious. Secondly, children are not willing to be religious even though their parents are religious. they might have the ideology of not believing in God, this mental most likely came from their friends, or relatives or maybe anyone other than his/her parents. thirdly, the person think that being religious is troublesome, which means, he/she has to pray to the God, spend time in church, Mosque , temple or any other religion practicing center, then,</p>	<p>Practice religion not a ruler of Iman if the curiosity about God is still not being answered.</p>	<p>- Not enough religious knowledge</p> <p>- Influenced by someone</p>
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	he/she think that all these activities are waste of time, fake belief, no any benefits from worshiping God.		
4	I have a friend who is atheist, his father converted to Islam few years ago and his mother is atheist. the father suggested my friend to convert to Islam, but, my friend refused such a advice from his father. According to him, he said that the condition he grew up in China is completely irreligious. it is been 28 years, he remained as atheist. he has no idea about what religion is, and what does it do, what is the meaning of being religious, also no one came and explained any religion in front of him, he already used to the life as an atheist. he could not instantly accept religion right away. he has the mentality of not believing God, there is no such a thing as God, it is all	No	No

	fake belief from our primitives, he only believe science. He added.		
5	My opinion for all those friends of mine practicing atheism is that: I really respect human rights and religious freedom. I have tried many times to ask them convert into Islam. I used a lot of possible ways to motivate them. But, it did not work. According to my observation, they have a strong mentality of not believing God. They believe that the creation of the universe was the huge explosion that took place in space. if they find something weird happening during night time, such as hearing screaming, weird sounds from the next door, or seen something like a ghost. they try to understand from a scientific aspect, or they search from the net and ask their atheist friends. If there is explanation from the	I hope you are not just using logic to prove something happened in this world. Besides learn to know Allah instead just accept all the destiny of your life.	We should not avoid them but we try to show them the truth indirectly.



	religious person, they would desperately reject such a religious explanation, since they do not believe in God.		
6	<p>A man is a man before he becomes any religious attribute. Man's own biological attributes, in this case, man is more about the desire to reproduce. So religious scholars have a certain level of sexual desire and sexual behavior.</p> <p>However, after people have certain religious and social attributes, they have been guided and bound by religious rules. So there will inevitably be a conflict between the physical desire and the religious and social rules to which he belongs.</p>	Not his title be blamed on this issue because HE is the one doing wrong. People should not think all preachers are the same, that is not fair. The INDIVIDUAL is wrong not all communities.	<p>Supposedly people among them are knowledgeable about religious knowledge which they should be an example to others. But who are we to judge people based on their mistakes, maybe Allah wants to test us. May Allah guide us in the right path and bless us.</p>

(Siti Syuhaidah Binti Mohd Rahman 1715822)

	<b>Respondent 1 (Male)</b>	<b>Respondent 2 (Female)</b>	<b>Respondent 3 (Male)</b>
Q1	Atheism is a belief in which they do not believe that God or any deity exists.	Atheism is when a person does not believe in any god or deity	In my opinion, Atheism is the belief system that involves the disbelief in the existence of God.
Q2	A person becomes an atheist when he/she believes that there are no gods in this world.	Their belief might be more hedonistic or scientific and logical whereas religion needs faith.	They belief that everything has a logical/scientific proves
Q3	One of the reason someone could be an atheist is that it could be something traumatic or bad that happen in their lives that could affect them into thinking that there are no gods in the world and lose faith	Because they may be their own person with different worldviews, beliefs and values.	The conversion of the belief system occurs due to extreme external factors. Certain people lose faith due to tragic events. Some announced themselves as an atheist due to the society environment that influences their lifestyle and thinking. These may vary due to many reasons. But in the end, extreme external conditions are usually the main reason for changes in any belief systems.
Q4	Yes	Yes	Yes
Q5	They are good people. Their	They are decent human	Based on the

	<p>beliefs do not affect the way they act or their personalities. Just like how there are good and bad Muslim, there are good and bad atheist.</p>	<p>beings, still practicing moral values.</p>	<p>conversation, they believe that their success and their failures are due to their own circumstances. While having everything in life, it doesn't feel wrong to not believe in anything that does not contribute to their success.</p>
Q6	<p>Firstly, people need to stop glorifying/idolizing them too much to a point they will still try to protect them or give some excuses when it is confirmed that they did those sexual misconducts. Second, these preachers that did those misconducts should be punished and treated just the same as any other criminals. No matter what, a crime is still a crime, no matter who you are</p>	<p>In my opinion, the root of all causes is the commercialization of religion through these “Islamic” shows where one’s level of religious knowledge becomes a competition. At the end of the day, your niyah is corrupted because you will pursue religion for fame and success. Thus, just because they participate in this does not mean they are holier than the rest of us. They should know better that if they sign up for a title such as Imam, Dai etc, there is a certain level of which they have to uphold themselves. In conclusion, just because</p>	<p>People should stop idolizing them as they are all human beings who can’t avoid making sins no matter how religious they are. Their title does not make them deity.</p>

		<p>someone seems to be of religious status/title does not mean they are inherently a good person. Being good is a choice. So is being evil.</p>	
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