

THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES TOWARD COVID-19: A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF TABLIGH JEMAAH IN MAKASSAR, INDONESIA

Muhaemin Latif

*Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar
Jl. H.M. Yasin Limpo No. 36 Romangpolong Kec. Somba Opu
Kab. Gowa Sulawesi Selatan
Email: muhaemin.latif@uin-alauddin.ac.id*

Hamdan Juhannis

*Alauddin State Islamic University, Makassar
Jl. H.M. Yasin Limpo No. 36 Romangpolong Kec. Somba Opu
Kab. Gowa Sulawesi Selatan
Email: hamdanjuhannis@gmail.com*

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Abstract

The study discusses the theological perspectives of Tablighi Jemaah in Makassar in contending against COVID-19. It employs qualitative research methodology through conducting observation, focusing on group discussion, and document collection. Two different groups of Tablighi Jemaah become the object of the interview, Tablighi Jemaah Seluruh Alam and Tablighi Jemaah Maulana Saad (MS). The researchers picked up some crucial figures from Tablighi Jemaah members. The research found the theological perspectives of Tablighi Jemaah regarding COVID-19 from two different schools of theology, Jabariah (fatalism) and Asy'ariyah. The researcher concluded that Jabariah influenced the attitudes of Tablighi Jemaah Maulana Saad, and Asy'ariyah affected the way of thinking of Tablighi Jemaah seluruh alam. Both different schools of theology existed in the life of Tablighi Jemaah, not only in the context of COVID-19 but also in public life. Besides, the internal dispute of Tablighi Jemaah in India influenced the thinking among Tablighi Jemaah adherents in Makassar.

Keywords: *Jemaah Tabligh, theological, Jabariah, Asy'ariyah*

INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that the emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan has dramatically changed the way people live. As contended by scholars (Festus Jaja et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2021; Hartt, 2020), people around the world seek strategies by themselves to deal with this virus. Although World Health Organization (WHO) issued certain protocols about this virus, every country has its ways to cope with it, especially regarding its own religion. This issue become the hardest aspect of life that needs to seriously be considered in line with religion. The character of religions that oriented gathering that engages many people

in one place might be a serious problem in line with COVID-19. This orientation had made a certain group of religious beliefs accused of distrusting COVID-19. Some of them committed to hold the religious gathering. It did happen in many countries around the world. For instance, a certain sect of a religious group in South Korea kept worshipping in the Church amid the banning of gathering. They did not conduct health protocols as WHO suggested, such as wearing mask, washing hands, and social distancing.

In the same manner, several religious leaders in Trinidad still provide services to their *Jemaah* (followers) amid the banning of religious gatherings issued by the national government. Interestingly, based on their

perspectives, the banning was like a conspiracy to make people away from their own beliefs.

The emotional accusation of COVID-19 by the religious community also happened in America. In this superpower country, several religious heads asked their followers to pray as in normal life. When the national government issued a prohibition to perform any kind of gathering, including religious gatherings, they encourage to have a religious meeting between *Jemaah* and their spiritual heads (Wildman et al. 2020). The same experiences were contested in Indonesia when a certain religious group held an international conference that involved a thousand people. Initially, they do not care about local or national governments' suggestion to cancel the conference. Due to a massive protest from the people and government, the conference was further terminated. However, some of them got infected with this virus and further become shared it with others within the country (Muhtada, 2020).

Apart from the cancellation, the researchers found an interesting point in line with the conference, one of the participants contended that COVID-19 is one of God's creatures, so people should not be away from the virus. People must be afraid of the only one, namely God. This is an example of how theological reason becomes the element behind the resistance to COVID-19.

Based on the research observation, the resistance toward COVID-19 is not only dominated by one religion but also most religions have their problems with this issue. Another example of this is the religious gathering held by Christian's belief in Ruteng, East Nusa Tenggara. They continue to perform a religious gathering by engaging their *Jemaah* to come to the church (Muhtada, 2020). Malaysia, a neighboring country, experienced similar barriers to those who reject COVID-19. A certain group of Islamic organizations held a meeting with others that further become a serious problem encountered by the local government (Kompas, 2020).

The explanations mentioned above demonstrated how religious doctrines and practices distract the perspectives of COVID-19 not only in Indonesia but also around the world. These doctrines emerged in every single religion. As acknowledged by scholars,

extremism and exclusivism can exist in any religion (Alatas, 2021; Kloos, 2018), including Islam. So, it is a fallacy to think that people generally stated that only one religion can generate extremism, especially in line with COVID-19.

In this sense, the research will mainly concern with the theological perspectives toward COVID-19 among Tablighi Jamaat in Makassar, South Sulawesi. The researchers assume that scholars had not seriously discussed it, particularly the views of this specific sect of Muslims. This research is based on a case study in Makassar, South Sulawesi. The main question of this research is how JT argues COVID-19 from a theological perspective.

Literature Review

Scholars have extensively discussed many studies on COVID-19. Several references emerged with different issues, ranging from health dimensions, economic sectors, education, and religious perspectives. This religious dimension also become an interesting topic of research and not many academicians paid attention to it.

Notwithstanding, the researchers will look at in detail some references on the relationship between COVID-19 and religious reasons, such as Islam. Citing Ahmad and Ahad (2021), both produced an article with the title *COVID-19: A study of Islamic and scientific perspectives*. This article was published in an international journal, *Theology, and Science*. The writers explored this issue from Muslim scripture backed up with scientific heritages. Another important account of the article is how the writers presented evidence along the history of the prophet Muhammad and his companions in relation to COVID-19.

Another interesting article that might be considered is *Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic*. This article simplified evidence of the tight relationship between religion and the COVID-19 pandemic. It demonstrated two sides' perspectives of COVID-19, either positively or negatively. In other words, the religious dimension can be a soft power to fight against COVID-19, at the same time, the religious foundation may become a strong barrier to stop the spread of COVID-19. So, the writers criticize the use of religious foundation to regard COVID-19. He believed

that spirit of religious entities can be traced globally to fight the virus, particularly, taking the positive side of the religious dimension. Based on his perspectives, the religious leaders could potentially become the leading actors to stop the dissemination of the virus.

In addition, the researcher found an interesting article, *are viruses evil?* It was written by Joshua M. Moritz (2020). Although this article does not directly mention COVID-19 as a dangerous virus, it is strongly imperative to discuss it in this theoretical framework. Some people believe that COVID-19 is like a sanction from God, which is why the virus may contribute to strengthening the awareness of people to see their life. In other words, viruses can generate a positive impact among people, particularly to upgrade their knowledge and do some research to find a solution.

The previous article that may be interesting is *social distancing: how religion, culture, and burial ceremonies undermine the effort to curb COVID-19 in South Africa*. Ishmael Festus Jaja wrote this article. Al and published by *Emerging Microbes and Infections journal*, a part of Taylor and Francis network. The article's authors explained how religious perspectives do exist among the believer in dealing with COVID-19. This article focuses on funeral ceremonies among the Nigerians who ignore the lockdown regulations. Through this ceremony, as contended by the writers, the funeral may contribute to spreading the transmission of COVID-19 very quickly. The article also presented how the church services enormously contribute to spreading COVID-19, such as congregation singing, worshipping loudly, and sitting close to each other. Due to ignoring the lockdown protocols, three church leaders tested positive for COVID-19 after leading the church services. This article

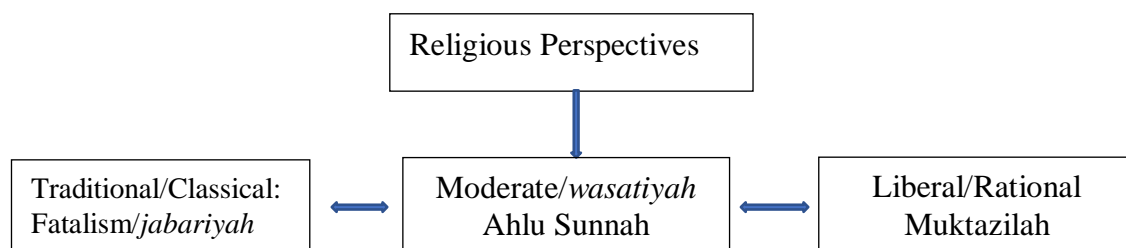
showed how religious practices might transmit the virus among people.

Given the literatures above, the researchers regard that scholars have not seriously explored the discussion of theological perspectives toward COVID-19, especially the perspectives of JT in Makassar. Most references on religion and COVID-19 are still concerned with looking at the positive and negative sides of the virus. According to the researcher, the issue of religious perspectives is crucial in curving the virus, especially in Indonesia.

Conceptual Framework

This research employs the theory of social action and power legitimacy derived from Max Weber. This theory is relevant to the center of the study. In accordance with Weber, social action is seen as a specific action-oriented subjective meaning that may further affect others. An example of social action, as contended by Weber, is an economic transaction that links an individual and others, while a separate action may occur in doing worship. In terms of social action, there are at least four types: instrumentally rational, value rational, productive and traditional. Concerning COVID-19, the researchers will follow this theory as a foundation for doing research.

Beside presenting theories, the researchers will follow the conceptual framework traced by Harun Nasution (1986). Referring to Harun Nasution, there are three denominations of theology; *Firstly*, tradition is usually generated from classical Islamic thought. It also might be called conservatism. In this sense, *Jabariah* represented this sort of school. *Secondly*, moderate theology created a moderate of thinking in looking at Islam. *Sunni* represented this kind of theology. *The third is* the liberal group that Muktazili represents. This mapping is described in the table below:



RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research depends on Focus Group discussions, interviews, and observations. The researchers will focus on the theological perspective of JT in looking at COVID-19 in Makassar. The JT will be divided into JT all universes and JT Maulana Saad. The researchers will start doing FGD with the key persons within the group of JT with their perspectives regarding COVID-19. Each group will be five participants. Afterward, the researchers will do in-depth interviews with those three different sects of school theologies. At least we will pick up three of them for each group to gain more information. In addition, the researchers will observe some activities done by the JT concerning COVID-19 in Makassar, particularly looking at their theological perspectives. Besides, the researchers will collect documents such as journals, archives, or papers related to the main issue. These combined strategies, as contended by Maxwell (1996), can generate extensive data which is more reliable.

DISCUSSION

Tablighi Jemaah is one of the trans-national Muslim associations initially born in India. Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandahlawy (1886-1944) was believed as the main person behind the emergence of this Muslim association. In other words, he established this missionary movement in 1926 in Mewat Village, a region of India. *Jemaah Tabligh* means the society of preachers or preaching party (Pieri, 2021: 49-72). Historically, Muhammad Ilyas, the founder of JT, personally came from religious family background. His father was Syaikh Ismail, a knowledgeable person in Islamic discipline (Rofiah, 2010, p 43). He started to learn Islam, including finishing memorizing al-Qur'an under his father's guidance. Afterward, in 1905, he pursued his studies in Darul Uloom Deoband while studying Islam privately from different teachers, such as Rashid Ahmad Gangohi and Mahmud Hasan Deobandi. This place eventually changed Muhammad Ilyas' mind regarding Islam. He believed that the foundation of Islam was strongly dependent on the networking of the Muslim Brotherhood, where the mosques are the place to strengthen this brotherhood

(Reetz, 2014, p.33). He argued that one of the weaknesses among Muslims is lacking *dakwah* (missionary) strategy. That is why, in the early 1920s, he created solid networking by sending out young madrasah graduates from Deoband or Saharanpur to establish mosque networking and the Islamic school movement (Jaleel: 2015).

This missionary movement was first called a *tahreek el-Imam* (Imam movement). This name was inspired by the contribution of the Imam, who moved from one mosque to another mosques to deliver *dakwah* to Muslim society. Later, since this movement became popular among the commoners, people started to call *Jemaah Tabligh* instead of *Tahreek Imam*. *Jemaah Tabligh* gradually became a famous term, especially among the people in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. *Jemaah* generally meant *congregation, and association*, while *tabligh* was regarded as delivering Qur'an and hadith messages among the society, especially the implementation of the directives like conducting five prayer times in the mosques, moving out from one mosque to mosque, calling people to implement Islamic teachings. These attributes identify JT as a unique Islamic movement compared to another Islamic groups.

Another exciting feature of JT is Its vision and mission ignore the political agenda. They do not involve in any political organization around the world. They merely focus on calling people to follow Prophet Muhammad saw. Attitudes include physical performance, fashion, eating habits, and ritual praying. Consequently, JT has no political affiliation in the local context or international political organization. In running an organization, they do not have *ameer* (political leaders) in every branch. Nowadays, this sort of organization is becoming one of the most widespread *dakwah* movements in the world, which exist in different countries, such as Southeast Asian Countries, Europe, South Africa, and the UK (Timol, 2019: 2-21).

In the context of Makassar, the researcher observes that JT is widely recognized as the missionary (*dakwah*) movement rather than Muslim Mass organizations such as Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. As mentioned earlier,

JT is merely concerned with the *dakwah* movement on calling people to join their group. According to them, the success of Muslims in performing *dakwah* is when you successfully make people one of JT members. They believe that more people join JT and more opportunities to create successful *dakwah*. Based on their perspectives, *dakwah* could not be done individually but should be performed collectively as Prophet Muhammad saw has done. JT, in the Makassar context, is divided into two groups, JT *seluruh alam* and JT Maulana Saad (hereafter MS). JT *Seluruh Alam* makes *Kerung-Kerung* (a downtown in Makassar) its headquarters, while the second one is in Jalan Hertasing. Both places are located in Makassar. They used to be in one group where the headquarter is in Masjid An-Nur Jln Veteran Selatan, Makassar—due to different theological perspectives, particularly looking at Maulana Saad as the vital person among JT followers. Maulana Saad al-Khandhlawi (b. 1965) is a great-grandchild of Maulana Saad al-Kandhlawi. In 2015, he pointed himself out as the *ameer* (leader) of JT in India and ignored the agreement of 13 members of appointed shurah members of JT. This internal dispute created a conflict among the JT members in the grassroots around the world, including Indonesia, particularly in Makassar. Suppose JT MS assumed Maulana Saad as the actual figure of JT in India and made him a noble charismatic leader. At the same time, JT *Seluruh alam* sees him as an ordinary *Jemaah tabligh* member. Interestingly some JT *Seluruh Alam* members reject Maulana Saad's leadership of JT.

Generally speaking, each of these groups frequently works together to call people to have good deeds in daily life. Their attributes are similar in terms of physical performance and *dakwah* style. They usually wear a long dress with a *headscarf* covering their head. However, concerning dealing with COVID-19, each group has a different theological perspective toward this virus. As far as the researcher is concerned, JT MS strongly rejects COVID-19 as the pandemic virus. They tend to assume this virus-like as a political conspiracy to ignore Islam from a global context. That is why during the COVID-19 pandemic, they consistently committed *khuruj* from one place to another and kept praying in the mosques amid the

prohibition from the local government. They do not generally follow health protocol as generally instructed, such as wearing a mask, social distancing, and washing hands.

In contrast, JT Seluruh Alam is relatively moderate regarding COVID-19. They, under certain circumstances, follow health protocols to avoid transmission from this kind of virus. In other words, this group does not fully believe this virus can transmit from person to person. Both groups of JT regard COVID-19 from different theological perspectives. The researcher will explain the issue later in the following section.

Theological perspectives

In dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic, JT Makassar hit the media and became a trending topic, either online or offline, when Jemaah tabligh committed to organizing a second international conference on 18 March 2020 in Gowa Regency. This neighboring city is very close to Makassar, South Sulawesi's capital. Although the local government eventually canceled the meeting, and all the participants were asked to go home (Ihsanuddin 2020), many issues related to theological perspectives emerged at this conference. One of the widespread issues is when one of the JT participants from Mataram stated during the gathering as follows:

"COVID-19 is the creature of God; like us, we are one of the creatures too. We should not fear similar creations. The only one that we should fear is God. If we fear the virus, we will be a sinner to God. So, let's enter the mosques and don't be fearful of anything, including viruses. he then said *laa haula wa laa quwwata illa billahi* (no efforts and power except from Allah swt))

Many mass media published the statements above, which further attracted comments and critics from Muslim scholars and health practitioners. One of the Muslim scholars stated as follows:

It is not appropriate to compare the fear of God and the virus. Fear of God is a must and mandatory for every single Muslim. It is a big mistake if they do not fear God while God created him. In other words, it is against the foundation of Islamic teaching. But, when we fear God, it implies that we should get closer to Him. It differs considerably from fear of other creatures, such as animals and viruses. We should be away from them. COVID-19 is a dangerous virus that can

make people die, so we must stay away from possibly infected places.

The two opinions mentioned above generated different consequences. The first group, which represents *Jemaah Tabligh*, concluded not to fear COVID-19, while the second implied that COVID-19 is one of the things we should be fearful of. The researchers pointed out that JT returned their destiny to God, whatever the matter was. It is based on their beliefs that every single member of JT is compulsory to deliver *dakwah* as enjoining good and forbidding evil. It refers to QS Fussilat/41: 33

And whose words are better than someone who calls –othersl to Allah, does good, and says, – I am truly one of the *Muslimin*."

Another verse that JT considered in terms of *dakwah* movement is QS Ali Imran/3: 104, which stated:

It must be one of you to call other people to do good deeds, encourage them to behave well, and forbid them to do evil.

According to JT, those verses implied that *dakwah* is the main objective of Muslims to call other people to have a good deed in any condition, even during the Pandemic COVID-19. *Dakwah* itself is one of the six characteristics of JT. The other five are *kalimah* (a statement that declares that there is no god but Allah, *Shalaat* (performing five prayer times in the mosque), *ilm* with *zikr* (Islamic knowledge and remembrance of God, *Ikrar Muslimin* (appreciating other Muslims), and *ikhlash an-niyyah* (not showing off) (Nicholas, 2006). In this regard, the researchers assumed that the attitudes of JT toward COVID-19 are strongly influenced by their belief in *dakwah/khuru**j* and *kalimah*. The researchers found that when interviewing one of JT MS as follows:

When COVID-19 came in the early 2020, we never followed health protocols. We believe that God always protects us wherever and whenever we are. We hand over our souls and our future to God. That is why we still prayed in the mosque and did *jumatan* (weekly prayer) amid the closed mosques. Our mosques were still opened and never completed. We also still perform *khuru**j* (proselytizing tours) to certain mosques.

JT's belief, as mentioned above, is strongly related to the core teaching of

fatalism (*jabariyah*) theology. It was a classical theology established by Jad bin Dirham (d. 724). It emerged during the Umayyad era of Islamic civilization. This theology refers to their life affairs to Allah without freedom of human power. In other words, human beings are identified as machines controlled by an operator. People have no choice but to hold themselves in terms of their future. All people's conduct belongs to God. People only follow the instruction of God. (Nasution, 2009: 38). One of the verses that always become the primary reference among *jabariah* is QS as-Shaffat/37: 96, which stated:

–God created everything about you, including whatever you do."

In responding to COVID-19, the attitudes of JT, especially the MS group, believe that the Creator already determines people's fate. It is interesting to note the interview of JT MS during Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as follows:

For me, we were not sure what is COVID-19. Whether real or not, I still don't believe it 100 percent. Governments or World Health Organization (WHO) asked us to avoid mosques. I am honestly worried about this. It seems to me that just like a conspiracy to make Muslims ignore their mosques. From my point of view, people should not depend on their life totally on COVID-19 through following health protocols, and we have to believe Allah always protects us.

Conversely, JT *Seluruh Alam* partly believes COVID-19 is a pandemic that should be seriously considered in daily life. The researcher found this based on an interview with one of JT *seluruh alam*. He stated that:

I believe that COVID-19 is a frightening virus in this era. We must care about this by staying away from infected people because it can transmit quickly to other people. But, I still believe this virus cannot transfer to mosques. That is why we keep praying in the mosque without a space along the prayer line. Interestingly, based on my experience, I, with my JT friends, never got infected with COVID-19. As far as I know, those infected had not prayed in the mosques.

Another similar statement that might be considered concerning the response of JT *Seluruh Alam* is stated below:

During COVID-19, we have to believe governments or WHO, we wear a mask if there is instruction, but if there is no

instruction, we don't have to wear them. I know some of us have a different kind of business. They obeyed the government's instruction to close their own business. We don't perform *khuruj* as well during early COVID-19 to avoid transmission. But we hardly ever close our mosques. If I am not mistaken, perhaps we closed our mosque only once in the early COVID-19. Since that, we have kept opening till now.

The researcher argues that JT *Seluruh alam* tends to be similar to half of *Asy'ariyah* theological perspectives. It is not 100 percent identical. Generally speaking, *Asyariyah* is a leading school of Islamic theology led by Abu Hasan al-Asyari (873-935). The majority of the Muslim population in the world are currently followers of *Asyariyah*. This sect of theology is also called *ahlu as-sunnah wa al-Jemaah* (adherents to the Sunnah and the Community) (Thiele, 2016: p 225-241). One of the main foundations of *Asyariyah* theology is the existence of human efforts in creating their future. It might be called "al-kasb" which means an attempt. Besides believing God is the Omnipotent, people can partly determine their deeds either to have good behavior or to do evil (Brown, 2014: p. 53). People have a choice to implement it. In this regard, the researcher found that JT *Seluruh Alam* partly believes COVID-19 on the one hand by ignoring *khuruj*. Still, on the other hand, they keep praying in the mosques without providing a space between one person to others. Missing *khuruj* might become an effort among the JT followers to stop the transmission of COVID-19, but praying in the mosque can be another medium of transferring the virus. So, this is like a dilemma for JT *Seluruh alam* in implementing their theology, especially in coping with COVID-19. This statement is clearly stated based on the interview with one of JT's followers:

As one of JT *Seluruh alam* members, we are the guard of *sunnah* (ahlu as-sunnah) as the Prophet Muhammad did during his life. We followed Qur'an and prophetic tradition as the primary references. History taught us that we were not allowed to enter a place where the virus infected, and the residents were not allowed to leave their homes if they were already infected. We consistently followed this instruction in coping with COVID-19 by ignoring *khuruj*, especially in the early time of the Pandemic. However, we cannot leave

our mosques. That is why we still pray in the mosque.

In this sense, JT, under particular circumstances, claimed themselves as a part of *ahlu as-sunnah* with specific reference to JT interpretation. They do not depend on their teaching to the majority of Muslim Jemaah. JT has its interpretation derived from its leaders, especially from India. For example, JT made a unique book entitled "fadhail amal" mainly about encouraging people to enjoy good deeds. This book is like the guidance of JT, which is specially written by Muhammad Zakariyah al-Kandhlawi (1898-1982), one of the most influential figures within *Jemaah Tabligh*. This book underpins the teachings of JT in looking at COVID-19. Simply put, their theological perspectives toward COVID-19 are strongly influenced by their *ameer*. Interestingly, JT's resistance toward COVID-19 not only happened in Indonesia, but also in Pakistan, India, Malaysia, and anywhere where JT exists.

CLOSING

Based on the explanation above, the researcher contends that the theological perspectives of JT strongly influence their attitudes to COVID-19. *Dakwah* and *kalimah* are the religious factors to form their behavior regarding COVID-19. JT *seluruh Alam* and MS agreed that *dakwah* must be performed under any conditions, including in the era of COVID-19. They believe that God already determined the future as well as the fate of people. People should not be anxious about their life coping with COVID-19 when they return their affairs to God. They also believe that God will protect them, and their family as long as they perform *dakwah*. The researcher concluded that two different schools of theology inspired JT in dealing with COVID-19, *jabariyah* and *asyariyah*. The first strongly influenced JT MS, and the second partly affected JT *seluruh alam*. If the first denied COVID-19 as a dangerous virus, the second tried negotiating with it.

Both JT are a unique sects of Islamic organizations that claimed a single truth based on their interpretation. They hardly accept other understandings except from their leaders, not only relating to Islamic rituals but also in daily life. That is why they exclusively place their members in one group apart from general people. For example, they own a

certain mosque and tend to campaign their ideology through mosque networking. Due to the specific programs designed by JT such as regular preaching after prayers, they need to perform their program in their mosques to avoid clashes with other Muslim sects of the organization. These attitudes contested by JT lead to influence the way of thinking among the JT toward COVID-19 to have a separate understanding from most of the Islamic organization. The researchers come to conclude that most JT members do not believe COVID-19 as a dangerous virus like HIV.

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