

**BEING ISLAM OUT OF FANATICISM
(Uncovering Arguments of Arabs in Embracing Islam)**

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Abstract

It is strongly believed that pre-Islamic Arabs were *ummi* and *jahiliyah* (ignorant). These two characters were symbolizing the ignorance and moral decadence at that time. The Prophet Muhammad was born in that era. His mission was to solve the problems occurred, and he successfully did it in less than twenty years of his prophetic mission. It was a remarkable success considering the transformation of Arabs from being ignorant and decadent to be civil and religious. This article is aimed at critically analyzing this brisk transformation, focusing on three aspects, namely, the essence of religiosity of human being with special reference of the Arabs, the reason of the triumph of Islam over polytheism and the background of labelling Arab as *ummi* and *jahiliyah*. Epistemological and historical approach was employed to address those issues. The finding showed that, firstly religiosity is *fitri* universally, however, it is optionally when dealing with particularities. Second, pre-Islamic Arabs readily embraced Islam revealed to Prophet Muhammad due to ethnic fanaticism, solidarity and personal quality of the Prophet himself. And third, pre-Islamic Arabs readily accepted Islam due to the adequate qualities, pre-understanding and, pre-belief.

Keywords: Islam, fitrah, fanaticism, pre-understanding and, and pre-belief

A. Introduction

Islam emerged in the Hijaz region in Arabia with Arabs and Jews as its first audience.¹ Prophet Muhammad's mission spanned for about twenty three years divided into two periods, pre-migration in Mecca and post-migration in Medina (Yathrib). In the last days of his life, it was revealed in the Quran that Islam was deemed complete (Al-Maidah: 3).² When he died, Prophet Muhammad was 63

¹ Aksin Wijaya, *Sejarah Kenabian Dalam Perspektif Tafsir Nuzuli Muhammad Izzat Darwazah* (Bandung: Mizan, 2016), 344–501.

² There are two forms of the perfection of Islam according to Abdul Karim Soroush, they are perfection in essential-minimum and perfection in accidental-maximum, 'Abdul Karim Soroush, *Basth Al-Tajribah Al-Nabawiyyah*, trans. Ahmad Al-Qabbanji (Lubnan-Beyrut: Dar al-Jadid, 2009), 62–63. and 164-166. A comprehensive discussion on these two perfections can be found in Aksin Wijaya, *Menalar Islam: Menyingkap Argumen Epistemologis Abdul Karim Soroush Dalam Memahami Islam* (Yogyakarta: Magnum, 2017), 58–79.

years old and was declared by the Quran as the last Prophet (Al-Ahzab: 40). Since then on, Islam is propagated by his companions and continued by Muslim generations until it is completely spreading to the world.

The two propositions pave the way for strong theological arguments for Muslims to perceive their religion great because it took very short time to accomplish its goals (23 years of Prophet's mission). Islam had transformed the Arabs in that period from being illiterate and morally decadent for being civilized, religious and moralized. Because of its greatness and perfect status (as claimed in the Quran),³ Islam intends to guide humanity to God. The success of Islam is also God's prerogative intervention so that all hurdles cannot stop its presence, advance and awakening.

Nonetheless, this theological argument leads us to question of the function of the Quran and God's will. If the reason is the greatness of the Quran, the question remains the failure of Islam to convert Jews (children of Israel) who were acknowledged in the Quran as brainy people. If God's will play significant role in guiding human being to Islam, His decision for not guiding the Jews of Medina to Islam should be questioned. Instead, only the Arabs (Awz and Khazraj) who converted to Islam, after previously practiced Judaism.⁴ The Arabs of Medina initially converted to Islam in a series of *Bay'ah Aqabah* even before the Prophet migrated to his hometown.

Here lies the problem of theological argument in understanding the success of Islam to convert the Arabs in very short time. God becomes a critical object. Thus, without negating this theological argument, these critical questions actually directed to human intellect, which is the focus of this article. First, why did the Arabs, who happened to be illiterate and decadent, embrace Islam while polytheism, Christianity and Judaism also flourished in the region? Second, why did the Arabs embrace all aspects of Islamic teaching? For an important introduction for socio-historical discussion upon those two questions,⁵ this article begins with epistemological analysis of the essence of human religiosity.⁶

³ Muhammad 'Abduh, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Hakim, Al-Mashhur Bi Tafsir Al-Manar*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2005), 56–59. Hasan 'Abbas, *Al-Mufasssirun Wa Madarisuhum Wa Manahijuhum* (Aman-Urdun: Dar al-Nafa'is, 2007), 36–37.

⁴ Awz and Kahzraj clans were Arab ethnic group of 'Aribah al-Qahtaniyah who migrated to Yathrib (Medina). They were true-blood Arab. Because Yathrib was dominated by Jews, the Arabs also practiced Judaism. They converted Islam in *Bay'ah 'Aqabah* event, Muhammad Sa'id Al-Ashmawi, *Al-Khilafah Al-Islamiyah*, 5th ed. (Beirut: al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2004), 135.

⁵ Socio-history theory of Ibn Khaldun will be employed in this article because it treats not only retelling history but also discussing causes of historical events. Ibn Khaldun states that historical events does not happen out of blue, it take place for reasons. Every event has its characteristics caused by certain reason. Because human being is essentially social being, human being gave birth to civilization. The characteristics of civilization is the object of history. The purpose is to know why such event took place and to determine what historical event is plausible and what is not. Ibnu Khaldun, *Muqaddimah Ibnu Khaldun* (Cairo: Maktabah al-'Usrah, 2006), 332–42.

⁶ So far, there is no academic exposition that discusses this topic as an interrelated topic. There are numerous discussion on one of the topic as separate from the other. For instance, writings on *fitri* are authored by Murtada Muṭṭahhari. Murtadha Muththahhari, *Al-Fitrah* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Ba'thah, 1990). Likewise, Asghar Ali Engineer, *Asal Usul Dan*

B. Religiosity as a *Fitrah* (Nature)

Does a human being has a set of knowledge since his or her birth without any effort of learning?⁷In Islam, there are three competing answers to this epistemological question.

First, some say that the human being has knowledge since birth, so that there is no need to learn to understand things. This effortless knowledge is called a priori knowledge (*fitri*). A priori knowledge is absolute, not conditional to time and space because it is considered a gift of God. Second, others believe that human being is not endowed with any knowledge since birth, so that he or she must acquire knowledge to know things. This acquired knowledge is called a posteriori (*muktasab*).⁸ This knowledge is not absolute, in a sense it is conditional to time and space because it is highly influenced by his or her life experience.⁹ Third, some also say that human being knows several universal things by birth, so that it is a priori, but he or she does not understand particular aspects of his a priori knowledge. To know these unknown a posteriori aspects, he or she must learn.¹⁰

In line with this epistemological theory, a question comes. It is related to whether being religious is a priori or a posteriori knowledge in a sense that whether the human being becomes religious without learning or through learning effort. There are at least two literally conflicting groups of verses of the Quran that deal with this issue. First, the Quran states human being as religious species because he or she is born equipped with *fitrah* (natural character) (al-Rum: 30). Some exegetes understand this verse by saying that a human being has natural character of being religious (acknowledging God). In another verse, there is a

Perkembangan Islam: Analisis Pertumbuhan Sosio-Ekonomi, trans. Imam Bachaqi (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar and Insist, 1990). Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam Dan Teologi Pembebasan*, trans. Ahmad Bachaqi, 3rd ed. (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2007).

⁷ This is the epistemological question that will be used as pivot point in investigating the characteristic of human religiosity. Actually, there are several models of basic question in epistemology discourse, some of which are: is it possible for human being to know something? What is the way to know it? Discussion on these two questions can be found in Aksin Wijaya, *Satu Islam, Ragam Epistemologi: Dari Epistemologi Islam Teosentris Ke Antroposentris* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2014). A more detailed questions are posed by Harold H. Titus as follow: what are sources of knowledge? From where does the true knowledge come from and how can we know it? This is about the origin of knowledge. Secondly, what is the characteristic of knowledge? Is there any world outside of our mind, and if there is, can we know it? This is about what is visible and essence (reality). Thirdly, is our knowledge valid? How can be differentiate between right and wrong? This is about examining truth or verification. Harold H. Titus, *Persoalan-Persoalan Filsafat*, trans. H.M. Rasjidi (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1984), 187–88.

⁸ A posteriori knowledge is a knowledge which its existence is preceded by human experience, or knowledge in practical level. A priori knowledge is a knowledge which its existence precede human experience, therefore its propositions are detached from experiential things. ‘Abdul Karim Soroush, *Al-Qabdh Wa Al-Basth Fi Al-Syari’ah*, trans. Aḥmad Al-Qabbanji (Lubnan-Beyrut: Dar Al-Jadid, 2002), 21–23.

⁹ Ma’ruf Al-Roshofi, *Kitab Al-Shakhshiyah Al-Muhammadiyah*, 5th ed. (Baghdad: Manshurat Al-Jumal, 2011), 75–76.

¹⁰ Muththahhari, *Al-Fitrah*, 37–40.

dialog between God and unborn human being that he or she know, acknowledge, bare witness Allah as supreme deity (al-A'raf: 172).¹¹

Second, the Quran calls the human being as not knowing anything when born into the world. Therefore, God gives him or her equipment to know things (al-Nahl 78). This verse informs us that human being really knows nothing at birth, including no knowledge about God. In line with this verse, Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said once that every born child is in *fitrah* condition. The parents would make him or her as a Jew, a Christian or a Zoroastrian.¹² Among the many meaning of *fitrah*, the most prevailed meaning is clean and empty/vacuum, and it would be filled with knowledge through learning. Whatever a human being will become, it is up to the teacher. If a Jew teaches him or her, then a Jew he or she will become and so forth. Thus, he or she will become a Muslim when a Muslim teaches him or her. These two textual proofs also show that a human being was born not knowing God. The religiosity of human being is heavily influenced by external reality which then considered of having a significant role in shaping human's theological consciousness.¹³

When related to the aforementioned epistemological typology, it can be stated that, in universal aspects, human being knows in a priori manner. Theological issues include in universal ones and therefore every unborn baby as a priori "*fitri*" (Al-Rum:30) acknowledges Allah as God (Al-A'raf:172). Pre-Islamic Arabs who were attributed as illiterate and decadent also acknowledged God's existence as the creator of the universe (Al-Mukminun:84-89, Al-Ankabut:61-63 and Al-Zukhruf:86). While on particular details, human being knows in a posteriori manner. Therefore, God revealed religions with the purpose of introducing details of God, universe of the essence of human being. These three are naturally particular which have to be learnt by human being. God endows human being with reason for this purpose of learning the particulars (Al-Nahl:78).

C. Arabs "Choose" Islam

Why is the religiosity on the universal aspects considered *fitri* (a priori)? The answer should be referred to two sides of the term *fitrah*. In a hand, *fitrah* is a term used by the Quran to refer to "main or specific" character of a thing along with the other two terms, which are *thabi'at* and *gharizah*. *Thabi'at* is a term used to signify "specific character" of mainly inanimate objects. *Gharizah* which literally means incomplete consciousness is usually used to refer to specific character of living being of animals and human being in lesser instances. *Fitrah* which means complete consciousness generally used to refer exclusively for specific character of human being. Thus, in some instances, *gharizah* is *fitrah*, but

¹¹ Al-Thabari, *Tafsir Al-Thabari Al-Musamma Jami' Al-Bayan Fi Takwil Al-Qur'an*, vol. 12 (Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Tawfiqiyah, 2004), 51–53. Zamakhshari, *Tafsir Al-Kashshaf*, 2nd ed. (Bayrut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2005), 830–31. Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi, *Al-Tafsir Al-Kabir Aw Mafatih Al-Ghaybi*, vol. 13 (Cairo: Maktabah al-Tawfiqiyah, n.d.), 104–5.

¹² Al-Naysaburi, *Jami' al-Sahch*, ed. 8 (Libanon:Dar al-Fikr, Tt.), 52

¹³ Muththahhari, *Al-Fitrah*, 37–39.

is not in others in term of the quality of consciousness or its objects. Likewise, *gharizah* generally is related to material aspects, whereas *fitrah* concerns immaterial aspects of the human being.¹⁴

In other side, *fitrah* is also a term to signify the phenomenon of religiosity of human being, along other two terms of *sibghah* and *al-hanif*. Concerning the term *sibghah* the Quran states *sibghah* Allah (Al-Baqarah:138) which means religion. It means that human being is created to be religious being. As to the term *al-hanif*, the Quran states “*hanifan musliman*” (Ali Imran:67). This term means that Christianity and Judaism which had deviated from their original forms were not the religion of Abraham. Instead, the Quran says that Abraham’s religion is *hanifiyah* religion. Similarly, the term *fitrah* in the verse of “*fitrah Allah*” refers to a phenomenon of religiosity (Al-Rum:30) and theism (Al-A’raf:172).¹⁵

This hypothesis is confirmed because linguistically speaking, the word *fitrah* which refers to religion in the Quran uses noun pattern of *fi’latun*,¹⁶ such as *fitratun*. The meaning of an Arabic word using the pattern of *fi’latun* is different from those use *fa’latun* pattern. For instance, a word with the pattern of *fa’latun* such as *jalsatun* (seat) means one seat. While using *fi’latun* pattern, that is *fiṭratun* means a type of seat. If we say: *jalastu jilsata zaydin*, it means “I sit the way Zayd sits.” From semantic aspect, the word *fitrah* means *al-khalq wa al-bida’*, which means creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). The Quran contains several of this, such as Allah is the creator, meaning Allah creates out of nothing.

Therefore, the expression of the Quran in Al-Rum:30 as has been mentioned means that human being since the beginning (pre-existential period when human being has not yet have intellectual consciousness) was created with a specific form (type) which was pure in term of spirit and body.¹⁷ In this stage, the human being was theistic¹⁸ and in need of religion.¹⁹ Thus, the human being is incomplete if he or she is not religious. Religious aspect of human being is identical to reason, ethics, and social aspect of human being. If philosophers define human being as *al-insan al-hayawan al-natiq* or homo sapiens (a thinking creature), experts of ethics define human being as ethical being (*al-insan al-hayawan al-akhlaqi*), sociologists defines human being as social creature (*al-insan al-hayawan al-madaniy*), religionists define as religious being (*al-insan al-*

¹⁴ Muththahhari, 20–33.

¹⁵ Muththahhari, 10–19.

¹⁶ The Quran mentions some *fitrah* terms in many word forms (Al-Rum:30; Al-An’am:79; dan Al-Muzammil:18). Among those verses, Al-Rum:30 is the verse that linguistically speaks about *fitrah* which is related to religion.

¹⁷ Human being is created from two elements: body and divine spirit. The element of body represents human as animal, whereas element of spirit represents human being as religious being. Mahmud Hamdi Zaquzuq, *Al-Din Li Al-Hayah* (Cairo: Dar al-Rashad, 2010), 16–17.

¹⁸ ‘Abd Al-Majid Al-Najjar, *Maqashid Al-Shari’ah Bi Ab’adin Jadidin*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Ghar al-Islami, 2008), 86–97.

¹⁹ Zaghul Al-Najjar, *Rislati Ila Al-Ummah* (Cairo: Nahdhatu Al-Mishra, 2009), 81–91.

hayawan al-mutadayyin).²⁰ Therefore, from the beginning he or she knows and acknowledges God's existence (Al-A'raf:172)²¹ and accepts the mandate from God (Al-Ahzab:72)²² which Fazlur Rahman calls as "primordial covenant" between human being and God.²³

In line with that, religiosity in universal sense will not change because Allah's *fitrah* which is one element of human character as being theistic does not change (Al-Rum:30).²⁴ Human being will not change or is not allowed to change from being theistic to become atheistic. However, this hypothesis leaves one crucial question that is, why does the human being embraces different religions? The children of Israel embraced Judaism and then some of whom became Christians, and Arabs were polytheistic before the coming of Islam? Isn't this simply confirming that religiosity is preferential and subject to change, not something *fitri* (a priori or compulsory), and not something fixed and permanent? To answer these questions, two aspects will be addressed; the motive of observing a certain religion and its indications.

1. The Influence of Arab Fanaticism in Embracing Islam

The aforementioned questions are related to several particularities which are part of a posteriori epistemology (*muktasab*), and absolutely not related to universalities which are the domain of a priori (*fitrah*). It is considered the particulars because it relates to established religions, regardless their category as worldly or revealed religions which penetrate into time and space of human history and subject to change. It is also considered a posteriori (*muktasab*) because religions are concrete and become experienced and attainable through learning.

The answers to the aforementioned questions is unfolded by viewing the phenomenon of numerous religions that God has revealed; and that each people have their own prophet sent to them by God. God revealed religions to his chosen prophets. Among the prophets are told in the Quran and some are not. The Quran told about 25 prophets. Still, it is believed that God only revealed one single religion to all his prophets (Al-Nisa':163) which is Islam.²⁵

²⁰ Zaquq, *Al-Din Li Al-Hayah*, 132. Faras Al-Suwah, *Din Al-Insan: Bahthun Fi Mahiyati Al-Din Wa Mansya'u Al-Dafi' Al-Dini*, 4th ed. (Damascus: Dar 'Alauddin, 2002), 19.

²¹ Ahmad Al-Qabbanji, *Al-Tawhid Wa Al-Shuhud Al-Wijdani* (Beirut: Al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2012), 222–27.

²² Al-Najjar, *Risalah Ila Al-Ummah*, 93.

²³ Fazlur Rahman, *Tema-Tema Pokok Al-Qur'an*, trans. Ervan Nurtawab and Ahmad Baiquni (Bandung: Mizan, 2017), 36–37.

²⁴ Al-Najjar, *Risalah Ila Al-Ummah*, 93. Muththahhari, *Al-Fitrah*, 197. Al-Najjar, *Maqashid Al-Shari'ah Bi Ab'adin Jadidin*, 88–91.

²⁵ The single essence of Islam consists of three fundamental elements: the first is declaring the first part of declaration of iman that there is no God but Allah; the second is the belief in the hereafter; and the third is the command to do good deed (Al-Baqarah:62). Therefore, it can be understood that Islam is the acceptance of the existence of Allah and the hereafter. If this acceptance is combined with good deed, the doer is called a Muslim (Al-Baqarah: 112 dan 128; Al-Ambiya:108; Yunus:90; Al-Nisa':125 and Al-Maidah: 44). Because all heavenly religions believed in these three elements, they are called as Islam regardless their prophets, be they followers of Muhammad (*alladzina amanu*), followers of Moses (*alladzina hadu*), followers of

The singleness of Islam is supported by normative data that the prophets who predated Prophet Muhammad are called Muslim in the Quran.²⁶ They observed the religion of Prophet Muhammad that is Islam.²⁷ However, they granted different *sharia* (particular teaching of religion) (Al-Jatsiyah:18, Al-Shura:13, Al-Shura: 21 dan Al-Maidah: 48). The plurality as well as difference proves that *sharia* is relative to each prophet and his people, because each people is sent with the appointed prophet of God (Yunus:47).²⁸

The aforementioned proposition means that certain people were taught by their prophet with a *sharia* and other people were taught with different *sharia* by another prophet designated for them. The children of Israel would only receive message from Moses and refused Christianity because of it was brought by Jesus which originated from other ethnic group. Jesus's people would only receive the message from the Son of Mary and would not accept the *sharia* of Moses because of this ethnicity issue. Likewise, the people of Muhammad would only accept his *sharia* because he came from their circle and would not accept *sharia* for Jews and Christians.

This fact shows that religiosity is inherently related to ethnic fanaticism. Arab people clearly show this feature,²⁹ especially fanaticism based on ethnic, tribe, and personality.³⁰ Among indications that Arab fanaticism influence people's acceptance of pre-Islamic Arab to Islam is a dynamic phenomenon of faith religiosity that flourished in Arabia.

2. Indications of Fanaticism-Based Religiosity

According to Islamic belief, pre-Islamic Arab in Mecca initially were monotheistic with the *hanifiyyah* religion of Abraham. They acknowledged Allah as the only deity that is worthy of worship (*uluhiyyah*) as well as the only Omnipotent deity that is worthy of Lordship (*rububiyyah*) (Al-Mukminun: 84-89, Al-Ankabut:61 and 63, and Al-Zukhruf:86). However, because of long vacuum historical process without prophet after Abraham and

Jesus (*al-naṣārah*), or the sabeans (*al-ṣabi'in*). Muhammad Shahrur, *Al-Islam Wa Al-Iman: Manzhumatul Qiyam* (Damascus: al-Ahali li al-Thiba'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1996), 38. Al-Ṭabari mentions some views on these religious groups in his tafsir, Al-Ṭabari, *Tafsir Al-Ṭabari Al-Musamma Jami' Al-Bayan Fi Takwil Al-Qur'an*, 12:393–99.

²⁶ For instance, these following verses explain that many prophets .are Muslims; Abraham in Al-Imran:67; Jacob in Al-Baqarah:132; Joseph in Yusuf:101; sorcerers of Pharaoh in Al-A'raf:126; Pharaoh Yunus: 90; al-Hawariyyun (the apostles) in Ali Imran: 52; Noah in Yunus:72; dan Lot in Al-Zariyat:35-36. Shahrur, *Al-Islam Wa Al-Iman: Manzhumatul Qiyam*, 31–33. Muhammad Sa'id Al-Ashmawi, *Jawhar Al-Islam* (Cairo: Sina li al-Nashr, 1993), 118-119.

²⁷ Muhammad Sa'id Al-Ashmawi, *Al-Ushul Al-Mishriyah Li Al-Yahudiyah* (Beirut: al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2004), 121–22.

²⁸ Muhammad Shahrur, *Al-Sunnah Al-Rasuliyah Wa Al-Sunah Al-Nabawiyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2012), 84.

²⁹ This view is exposed by Ibn Khaldun as mentioned by Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, trans. Ahsin Muhammad (Bandung: Pustaka, 1984), 16.

³⁰ Actually, there are some forms of fanaticism or solidarity among Arab people, those based on ethnic, family, clan, faction, guardianship, protectorate, and tradition. Muhammad Izzat Darwazah, *"Ashrun Al-Nabi Wa Ba'atihi Qabla Al-Ba'tha: Suwarun Muqtabisatun Min Al-Qur'an Al-Karim: Dirasat Wa Tahlilat Al-Qur'aniyah* (Beirut, 1964), 272–304.

Ishmael, Arabs gradually deviated into polytheism.³¹ They believed that Allah blesses idols and that these idols were capable of giving intercession (*shafa'ah*) other than Allah and performed as intermediary between them and Allah.

According to Islamic sources, the first person who was known to divert monotheism of the Arabs to become polytheism is Amr ibn Luhay³² and eventually pre-Islamic Arabs followed him. It is interesting to know the motivation of the Arabs in this episode of their history provided that Judaism and Christianity existed in the area. One of the motivations is ethnic fanaticism. Amr ibn Luhay was a distinguished Arab from *qabilah* (sub-tribe/clan) Khaza'ah (Arab 'Aribah Qahthaniyah) who was well-respected to a level that he was considered demigod by many of his fellow Arabs. His words and tradition became religion.³³ Very influential he was that Judaism and Christianity could not penetrate Arab. The fact that both religions were not originated in Arabia as they were brought by Moses and Jesus who were Jews and were intended for Children of Israel and also contribute to this failure.³⁴

The social history of the Arabs went uncontrollable that the influence of Amr ibn Luhay diminished. Later, several people such as Salman al-Farisi, Zayd ibn Amr ibn Nawfal, Waraqah ibn Nawfal, Ubaydillah ibn Jahshi and Uthman ibn Huwayrith, and Muhammad ibn Abdillah, sought different type of religions other than Judaism, Christianity and Polytheism. They were apprehensive with the Arabs' polytheism, but at the same time inconvenient with "imported" religions of Judaism and Christianity. This desired new religion should be based on "homegrown" religion brought by the ancestor of

³¹ Abu Al-A'la Al-Mawdudi, *Al-Mushthalahat Al-Ar'ba'ah Fi Al-Qur'an*, 6th ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Qalam, 2010), 74–80. Indeed, historically speaking, polytheism emerged in Arab far earlier, even Adam period, Noah, Abraham and so forth so that God sent many messengers to fix this. Al-Najjar, *Risalat Ila Al-Ummah*, 93–98.

³² Al-Najjar, 98–102. Amr ibn Luhay urged Arabs to believe in the idols of Allah in form of statue and worshipped statues surrounding Ka'ba. There is an indication that this belief was performed as sacred expression of hajj rituals. The observers of Abrahamic tawhid religion (*hanifiyah*) used to chant monotheistic chanting "*labbayka Allahumma labbayk, labbayka la sharika laka*" ("Here I am at Thy service O Lord, here I am. Here I am at Thy service and Thou hast no partners. Thine alone is All Praise and All Bounty, and Thine alone is The Sovereignty. Thou hast no partners."). However, Amr ibn Luhay added this with "*illa sharika huwa laka, tamlikuhu wa ma laka*" (except the partner Thou have, Thou own I and what Thou have). This original chant as well as its addition was voiced by hajj pilgrims until the coming of Prophet Muhammad who later revised it to original monotheistic version. Ibnu Hisham, *Sirah Nabawiyyah*, ed. Muhammad 'Ali Al-Qaththab and Muhammad al-Dali Balthah, vol 1 (Al-Maktabah al-'Ashriyyah, 2003), 60–68. Al-Ashmawi, *Al-Khilafah Al-Islamiyah*, 73–74. Hanafi, *Ulum al-Sirah*, p. 178.

³³ Al-Ashmawi, 73–74.

³⁴ In addition, it was also because Judaism and Christianity underwent internal social and theological conflict. Both launched exclusive truth claim, even their religion were distorted and deviant. Judaism claimed that Uzayr was son of Allah and Christianity claimed that Jesus was son of God (Al-Tawbah: 30-31) which later the Quran clarified that Jesus was son of Mary and Mary is messenger of God. Thus, the Quran characterizes Jews and Christians as infidels since this belief had deviated from true monotheism of Christianity (Al-Maidah: 73 dan 75).

the Arabs, Abraham, which was called as *hanifiyah*. The observers of this religion were attributed as *hunafa*.³⁵ The bearer of this desired new religion was claimed to have been mentioned in previous holy books of Torah and Gospel. He would be called as Ahmad (Al-A'raf: 157)³⁶ who was commanded by Allah to follow the religion of Abraham, the ancestor of the Arabs, *ittabi' millata Ibrahima hanifa* (Ali Imran:95).

The reason of the Arabs in seeking for another religion a side of polytheism of Amr ibn Luhay was influenced by the fact that Amr ibn Luhay was from Arab 'Aribah al-Qaht'aniyah (true-blood Arab), which was a minority in Mecca. Interestingly, this tribe comprised the majority of Awz and Khazraj tribes in Yathrib (Medina), while the majority of Arabs in Mecca belonged to Arab Musta'ribah al-Adnaniyah ethnic group who claimed Abraham and Ismael as their ancestors. Their affinity to Amr ibn Luhay is certainly less dominant than to fellow tribesman such as Muhammad, who was a Arab Musta'ribah al-Adnaniyah, descendent of Ismael, son of Abraham.

Therefore, it could not be considered unjust as well as natural and reasonable when God chooses Muhammad as his messenger. God applies the law of causality, including to human being. There are certain social processes which naturally become the law of human life, and this process is the reason for God in choosing a human being as His messenger. According to Fazlur Rahman, this is a specific example of natural political process which represents the will of God on the reasoning His decision to choose Muhammad as messenger.³⁷

At the same time, the Quran emphasizes the origin of Muhammad as a person who was born and raised in Mecca (Muhammad:13) using several expressions, such as *minkum*, *min anfusihim* and *minhum*. These expressions are to stressed that Muhammad is from their own kinship, the Arabs, the audience of the message of the Quran (Al-Baqarah: 129, Al-Tawbah: 128, and Al-Nahl: 112-113). The intended people (*qawm*) are the Arabs. They are *ummi* (illiterate), a sharp opposition of Children of Israel who are mentioned in the Quran as the people of the Book (ahl al-kitab) represented by the Jews and Christians.³⁸ As a person who was born from *ummi* community,

³⁵ Khalil Abdul Karim, *Al-Judhur Al-Tarikhiiyah Li Al-Shari'ah Al-Islamiyah* (Cairo: Dar Mishri al-Mahsuniyah, 1997), 30–33.

³⁶Because this verse was revealed in Mecca (Makkiyah) which therefore prior to theological conflict of Medina period. Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri calls it missionary Islam (da'wa), not political Islam (dawla). Muhammad 'Abid Al-Jabiri, *Madkhal Ila Al-Qur'an Al-Karim (Al-Juz Al-Awwal)*, *Fi Al-Ta'rif Bi Al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat Al-Wahdah Al-'Arabiyah, 2006), 50–52.

³⁷Indeed, the Quran reposes question when asked why God chose Muhammad as messenger as it states: “do they distribute God’s bounty?” (al-Zukhruf:32); or the Quran gives answer; “...Allah knows more where to trust His message” (al-An'Am:124). Even though these two expressions as if gives absolute power to God, it should be noted that He also creates natural law. His absolute power does not necessarily enable Him to do unjustly. Rahman, *Tema-Tema Pokok Al-Qur'an*, 34.

³⁸ Al-Roshofi, *Kitab Al-Shakhshiyah Al-Muhammadiyah*, 166–72. Abu al-Hasan 'Ali al-Hasani al-Nadwi, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, cet. ke-6, Damaskus: Dar al-Qalam, 2014), pp. 69-70.

Muhammad was also attributed as *ummi* (Ali-Imran: 20, Al-A'raf: 157 and Al-Jum'ah: 2).³⁹

In addition to being originated from the majority ethnic group, Prophet Muhammad deserved securing trust of his fellow tribesmen because of his personal qualities which were far exceeded the rest of the flock. He was exceptionally bright, because his *fitri* mind (a priori) exceeded his *muktasab* mind (a posteriori),⁴⁰ well equipped with noble characters which the Quran praised as *khulukun 'azim* (Al-Qalam:4), compassionate (Al-Tawbah:128), gentle, and patient (Al-Ahzab:53). However, the most important qualities were his in spiritual and social experience which surpassed poets and oracles of his day. Frequent supra natural events occurred to him before and after prophet hood.⁴¹

His fellow tribesmen even called this great man as *al-amin* (the trusted one) because of his honesty, trustworthiness and personal integrity. What he said was always brought benefit for his people. The Quran highlighted this prevailing character as “being divinely guided” (Al-Najm:3).⁴² The attribute *al-amin* is a precious asset to attract and sway people toward him. When declaring as being messenger of God (Al-A'raf: 158) he was potentially trusted and the Arabs potentially trusted him.

This description indicates that the Arabs with their various beliefs would be inclined to embrace Islam because it was preached by Prophet Muhammad who were an Arab himself from the dominant clan of Quraysh ‘Musta’ribah al-Adnaniyah, the direct descendent of Abraham and Ismael. It natural that Prophet Muhammad defeated polytheism of Amr ibn Luhay, imported Judaism and Christianity of Moses and Jesus who were from different ethnic group, children of Israel.

D. Arab People “Readily Understand” Islam

Why the Arabs “conveniently” understand Islam and its elements, especially the process of its revelation as well as its messages?⁴³ The convenience

³⁹The Jews denied Muhammad prophethood because he originates from *ummi* people (Arab), not from Children of Israel who are dubbed as Ahl al-Kitab (al-Jum'ah: 3-6).

⁴⁰ Al-Roshofi, 76–83.

⁴¹ Ḥanafī, *‘Ulum al-Sirah*, pp. 198-202. For instance, when following Abu Ṭalib for trade to Syria at the age of 9 years old, they met with Bahira, a Christian priest. He discovered signs of prophet hood in Muhammad. Bahira requested Abu Ṭalib to bring Muhammad home and to keep silent about Muhammad’s identity especially from Jews.

They followed this advice and returned to Mecca. Hisham, *Sirah Nabawiyyah*, 134–37. and Al-Nadwi, *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah*, p. 104; Little Muhammad once underwent open surgery in his chest by someone who was thought as an angel of God to clean Muhammad and to prepare him to become His prophet. Al-Roshofi, *Kitab Al-Shakhshiyah Al-Muhhamadiyah*, 103–22. Ḥanafī, *Ulum al-Sirah*, pp. 198-199. However, some doubt this event and consider this as a myth. Abdullah Jannuf, *Hayatu Muhammad Qabla Al-Ba'thah: Al-Tarikh Wa Al-Bisjarah W Al-Usthurah* (Bayrut: Dar Al-Thali'ah, 2012), 31–35.

⁴² Al-Roshofi, 43–52.

⁴³ The emphasis of this question is on “conveniently/easily” understand Islam (revelation),” not on “why chose Islam”. If “why chose Islam” refers to ethnic, tribe and figure solidarity, while

in understanding Islam could be based on a theological factor in which God (the Quran) gives guide and willingness to them. Nonetheless, if a theological factor was the cause, several questions should be posed to God: why didn't God make it easy for other people, especially to Children of Israel who were known for their brightness, to accept Islam? Why didn't the Quran sway their minds to embrace Islam?

Without negating a theological factor, this article focuses on human side of the issue, not God's. therefore, the two negative attributes of pre-Islamic arabs (*ummi* and *jahiliyah*) should be perfectly clarified because these two labels are used as theological argument to show that Islam is a great religion that successfully transform the Arabs from being decadent, illiterate and polytheistic to become civilized and monotheistic.

1. Civilized People without Holy Book

What are actually *ummi* and *jahiliyah* which were attributes of Pre-Islamic Arabs? to be fair toward them as well as promotes Prophet Muhammad and Islam, reinterpretation of these two words is necessary. First, when speaking about *ummi*, two aspects should be discussed, the grammatical and terminological meaning of that word, as well as the view of the Quran upon pre-Islamic Arabs.

a. From grammatical and terminological perspective

From grammatical and terminological perspective, *ummi* had negative connotation, which is inability to read and write, and in some instances it means negligent (*al-ghaflah*) or ignorance (*al-jahalah*). It also means a symbol of newly born baby who does not know a thing. However, the Quran does not use this word in its negative connotation.⁴⁴ As the Quran absorbs foreign terms, it also happens in the concept of this word since the word *ummi* originated from ancient Hebrew language that uses this word to connote non children of Israel as *ummi* (gentile). Likewise, Christians once used this word to call unbelievers. And according to the Quran, Both Jews and Christians are people of the Book. In line with this line of argument, the Quran differentiates between people of the Book and *ummi* people, who do not have any holy book (Ali Imran:20).⁴⁵

Similarly, the usage of *ummi* as attribute for Prophet Muhammad is actually redefinition.⁴⁶ Scholars of the Quran usually employ the story of

“conveniently/easily understand Islam (revelation),” points to other factors which make them easily understand Islam. The convenience in understanding Islam might not be a point of interest if they are educated people and theistic like children of Israel and Greeks. This is an intriguing question because the subject is pre-Islamic Arabs who were characterized as “*ummi*” and “*jahiliyah*.” They easily accepted and understood Islam within a span of 23 years. The shouldn't these characters prevent them to easily accept and understand Islam?

⁴⁴The Quran mentions term *ummi* six times in two forms: twice in singular form, which is *ummi*, and four times in plural form, that is *ummiyyin*. This term is not only attributed to pre-Islamic Arabs (Ali Imran:20 dan 75; Al-Jum'ah:2; and Al-Baqarah:78), but also to Prophet Muhammad himself (Al-A'raf:157-158).

⁴⁵*Ummi* people also means those who do not know holy book (Al-Baqarah:78).

⁴⁶Some muslim scholars think that Muhammad is not “illiterate”, instead a person who was born in *ummi* society (people with no holy book). Maqdisi, *Benarkah Nabi Muhammad Buta*

first revelation as a proof that Prophet Muhammad was an illiterate. It was told that Muhammad visited cave Hira', then he contemplated for nights. He went home to Khadijah only when he ran out of supplies. He kept doing that until archangel appeared before him and said to him: *iqra!*' (read) to which Muhammad replied by: '*ma ana bi qari'in*' (I am not a literate person). These exchanges repeated several times until the archangel dragged Muhammad and hug him. After Muhammad was exhausted from the event, the archangel released him and said to him: *iqra' bi ismi rabbika al-ladzi khalaq* (Al-Alaq:1) until '*allama al-Insana ma lam ya'lam* (Al-'Alaq:5). After this spiritual event, Muhammad went home to Khadijah with the revelation tremulously.⁴⁷

The interesting part of the dialog is the reply of Muhammad *ma ana biqari'in* which is generally translated as "I do not read". Thus, Muhammad was attributed as illiterate. But, actually if the report is further scrutinized, it is discovered a more positive meaning. It because when Prophet Muhammad was commanded to read in the first revelation, the Prophet replied by saying *ma aqra'?* (What do I read?)⁴⁸ This is different from the well-circulated version of *ma ana biqari'in*. The reply from Muhammad was in question form of *ma aqra'?* Simply means "what should I read?" These replies occurred when the archangel Gabriel did not present Muhammad with text to read, so that Muhammad asked him; "what should I read?" it would be different case when Gabriel presented him with text and ordered him to read, and Prophet Muhammad was unable to read, then it could be concluded that he did not know how to read. Alternatively, Muhammad would say: "*ma ana biqari'in*".⁴⁹

b. The View of the Quran on Pre-Islamic Arabs

The view of the Quran on pre-Islamic Arabs is actually very appreciative especially when historical context is concerned. If using literary tradition of a society, which are written materials, writing tools; people who read and write; and traditions of writing and publication of ideas, such a tradition is known in pre-Islamic Arabia and continued until the Prophet Muhammad's period. There are two historical facts that prove this. In Southern Arabia, there was an Arabic script which was formed of *musnad* (pillar-like) because of its rigid form resembling a pillar. The manuscript found using that script was estimated to date back in 1 Century BC. They contained words on offering to god, name of buildings, law, and

Huruf? Mengungkap Misteri Keumman Rasulullah, trans. Abu Nayla, 2nd ed. (Jakarta: Nun Publisher, 2008), 17–28.

⁴⁷ Hisham, *Sirah Nabawiyah*, 253. Khalil Abdul Karim, *Negara Madinah: Politik Penaklukan Masyarakat Suku Arab*, trans. Kamran Asy'ad Irsjady (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2005), 13.

⁴⁸ Hisham, *Sirah Nabawiyah*, 253.

⁴⁹ George Tarabichi, *Min Islam Al-Qur'an Ila Islam Al-Hadith: Al-Nash'ah Al-Musta'nafah*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2011), 89–90. Al-Roshofi, *Kitab Al-Shakhshiyah Al-Muhammadiyah*, 166–72. Aksin Wijaya, *Arah Baru Studi Ulum Al-Qur'an: Memburu Pesan Tuhan Di Balik Fenomena Budaya* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2009), 42–48. Wijaya, *Sejarah Kenabian Dalam Perspektif Tafsir Nuzuli Muhammad Izzat Darwazah*, 293.

religious matters. The one dated 1 century CE contains a story about the crumble of a dam.⁵⁰

The Quran also mentions some terms which are related to reading and writing, namely in the first revelation (Al-Alaq:3-4) of *iqra'!*: read! And *al-qalam*: pen". Similarly, in chapter Al-Tur:1-3) there is expression of *kitabun mastur*: the written book, and *fi raqqin manshur*: the open sheet" (Al-Qalam:1 and Luqman:27).⁵¹ The Quran also tells the writing skills of religious personalities before Islam (al-Furqan:5). When refusing to acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad, instead the infidels asked Allah to reveal book from heaven which they could read, but they would not believe (Al-Isra':90-93). The Quran also refuse that proposal, because they would remain disbelieving (Al-An'am:7), while posing the question back to them; "who has sent holy scripture to their prophet, Moses?" (Al-An'am:91).⁵²

This expression in the Quran proves that pre-Islamic Arabs were literate people, although this skill was only privilege of select people.⁵³ Among the proofs is the poet competition which was regularly held,⁵⁴ and the winning poet then was hung on the wall of Ka'ba which was known as *al-mu'allaqat al-sab'ah*,⁵⁵ regardless their authenticity, existence and usability for interpreting the Quran.⁵⁶

Certainly, these literacy skills developed up until the eve of the birth of Prophet Muhammad as it is recorded in the history that the Prophet himself ordered his companions to write every verse of the Quran revealed to him. It was said that there were about 26 to 43 companions who wrote and read. Moreover, some wrote the Quran for their own interest Uthman ibn Affan, Ali ibn Abi Talib, Zaid ibn Thabit, Ubay ibn Ka'ab, Muadz ibn Jabal, Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, and Abdullah ibn Amr bin 'Aṣ. Therefore, there was no substantial obstacle when Uthman ibn Affan during his reign as the third caliph formed a task force to compile the Quran while ordered the burning of private collection of the Quran.⁵⁷

With this normative and historical proof, it can be inferred that the term *ummias* attributed to pre-Islamic Arabs and later to Prophet

⁵⁰ J. Pedersen, *Fajar Intelektualisme Islam: Buku Dan Sejarah Penyebaran Informasi Di Dunia Arab*, trans. Alwiyah Abdurrahman (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), 15–25.

⁵¹ Abd Al-Yastar Al-Huluji, *Al-Makthuth Al-Arabi* (Cairo: Dar Al-Miṣriyah al-Bananiyah, 2002), 21–45.

⁵² Al-Huluji, 49–53.

⁵³ Al-Huluji, 49–53.

⁵⁴ Al-Huluji, 54–67.

⁵⁵ Abi Abdullah al-Huscini bin Ahmad bin al-Husaini Al-Qairzuni, *Sharkhu Al-Mua'allaqatu Al-Sab'ah* (Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-Tawfiqiyah, n.d.).

⁵⁶ See Thaha Husein, *Fi Al-Shi'ri Al-Jahili* (Cairo: Ru'yah, 2007). I have write an article commenting this Husein's work. See, Aksin Wijaya, *Nalar Kritis Epistemologi Islam Membincang Dialog Kritis Para Kritikus Muslim: Al-Ghazali, Ibnu Rusyd, Thaha Husain, M. Abid Al-Jabiri* (Yogyakarta: Kalimedia, 2017), 159–200.

⁵⁷ Muslim historians vary in calculating the numbers of these "revelation takers". Some say they were 23, 25, 26, 40, 43, and so forth. Al-Huluji, *Al-Makthuth Al-Arabi*, 69–80.

Muhammad should not be understood as “do not read and write.” Instead, this term should be the opposite to the attribute of Children of Israel as *ahl al-kitab*, as some holy books were revealed to them. Thus, pre-Islamic Arabs who do not have any holy book are attributed as *ummi*. (Ali Imran:20 and 75, Al-Baqarah:78, Al-Jum’ah:2 and Al-A’raf:157-158).⁵⁸

The second is term *jahiliyyah*. This term is negatively attributed to pre-Islamic Arabs⁵⁹ because of moral decadence and polytheism-paganism. This term is generalized to include all dimension of their life as if they are pure evil with no good quality and credential.⁶⁰

This view is under serious criticism from contemporary Muslim thinkers. The term *jahiliyyah* indeed has several meanings. Among its meaning is “not knowing something, temperamental and wrongdoing. There is a debate when this term is attributed to pre-Islamic Arabs. Some say that pre-Islamic Arabs were ignorant in all aspects of their life, and some say that they are theologically ignorant, yet knowledgeable in other aspects of life. They are considered theologically ignorant because they did not know Allah, denied His existence, and created idols to Him.⁶¹ Did they not know everything, including not knowing Allah? Certainly not. According to Thaha Husein, the Arabs are smart people, knowledgeable, experienced, civilized and theistic. In fact, Umar ibn Khattab once said that: “the Arab world is the substance of Islamic teaching.” This expression shows that many aspect of Arab tradition in law, politics, economy and religious thought, inspired Islam.⁶²

If we perceive pre-Islamic Arabs from Quranic perspective, we will discover the depiction as civilized (literate people), with strong conviction and intelligent.⁶³ These qualities were not recorded in their poets.⁶⁴ The Quran also relates the Arab with other major ethnic group at the time such as Persians and Romans in all aspect of life, especially in politics and economy.⁶⁵ In addition, there are several pre-Islamic tradition that are adopted with certain Islamic modification.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Tarabichi, *Min Islam Al-Qur’an Ila Islam Al-Hadith: Al-Nash’ah Al-Musta’nafah*, 89-90. ‘Aisyah ‘Ajiyah, *Al-Wahyu Bayna Shuruthi Wujudih Wa Tahawwulatihi* (Beirut: Mansurat Al-Jumal, 2010), 138–50.

⁵⁹ The Quran attributes term “*ummi* to Prophet Muhammad, but not term *jahiliyyah* because it is only attributed to pre-Islamic Arabs.

⁶⁰ Such an opinion is in fact generalized by some scholars such as Abdul Wahhab, al-Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutub to call contemporary people who are considered more *jahiliyyah* than pre-Islamic Arabs. See, Aksin Wijaya, *Dari Membela Tuhan Kc Membela Manusia: Kritik Atas Nalar Agamaisasi Kekerasan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2018).

⁶¹ Al-Ashmawi, *Al-Khilafah Al-Islamiyah*, 63–68.

⁶² Karim, *Al-Judhur Al-Tarikhyyah Li Al-Shari’ah Al-Islamiyah*, 19. Muhammad Sa’id Al-Ashmawi, *Ushul Al-Shari’ah*, 6th ed. (Cairo: Dar Al-Thinani li al-Nashr, 2013), 115.

⁶³ Thaha Husein, *Fi Al-Shi’ri Al-Jahili* (Cairo: Ru’yah, 2007), 83.

⁶⁴ Thaha Husein, *Mir’ah Al-Islam*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1998), 10–20.

⁶⁵ Husein, *Fi Al-Shi’ri Al-Jahili*, 84–85.

⁶⁶ Tosihiko Izutsu, *Etika Beragama Dalam Al-Qur’an*, ed. 2nd, trans. Mansuruddin Djoely (Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus, 1995), 113–57..

Khalil Abdul Karim mentions some aspect of pre-Islamic Arab life which is considered positive and inspired Islamic teaching such as in religious propagation, warfare or political expansion.⁶⁷ After selectively and censoriously adopted, each aspect of Islamic teaching contains a certain degree of Arab tradition for instance, in ritual manner, Arab people were accustomed to pay tribute to Ka'ba, perform hajj pilgrimage, revere month of Ramadan, honor Prophet Abraham, and congregate in Fridays. In social and politics, they have tradition of deliberation and political leadership. Aren't all of these in Islam?⁶⁸

The reinterpretation of these two terms which are negatively labeled to pre-Islamic Arabs is not meant to erase all negative aspects of their life. We do not deny that there were bad and decadent Arabs, because good people and bad people always exist in any society.⁶⁹ Not having holy book is as negative as being morally decadent. The purpose to present the two terms from different perspective is to view Islam more rational and argumentative. By interpreting these two terms (*ummi* dan *jahiliyah*), it can be concluded that prophet Muhammad is a great man and Islam is a great religion because of his success to transform pre-Islamic Arabs who were a great people, literate and polytheistic, and not having holy book, to become civilized, monotheistic and having holy book.

2. Pre-knowledge and Pre-Conviction

Along with reinterpretation of these two negatively connoted terms, it should not be a surprise if pre-Islamic Arabs easily accept and understand Islam. Because with their quality, they could wrestle with knowledge and beliefs that had flourished in the period, which certainly shaped their pre-knowledge and pre-belief.⁷⁰ This pre-knowledge and pre-belief assisted them to easily understand Islam. Among this pre-knowledge and pre-belief are:

⁶⁷ Muslim historians who wrote pre-Islamic period differ in depicting Arab lives, depending on the purpose of writing. Khalil Abdul Karim depicts some pre-Islamic Arab traditions that shape Islamic teaching, namely climate, social life, economy, intellectual tradition, beliefs and politics. This is understandable. Some perceive negatively and other vice versa. For someone who perceives positively, aspects of Arab people are considered to have contributed to Islam. See Khalil Abdul Karim, *Negara Madinah: Politik Penaklukan Masyarakat Suku Arab*, trans. Kamran Asy'ad Irsjady (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2005). Muhammad Sa'id Al-Ashmawi, *Al-Khilafah Al-Islamiyah*, 5th ed. (Beirut: al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2004), 63–114.

⁶⁸ This side later inspires Ashmawi to view correlation between Islamic caliphate and pre-Islamic Arabs Al-Ashmawi, *Al-Khilafah Al-Islamiyah*.

⁶⁹ According to Taha Hussein, there are two categories in every people: first is enlightened people which have excellent human resources, intellectual tradition and science. Second is ordinary or primitive people who lack those qualities. The Quran indicates this second people as having inherent ability to follow leadership. They have limited independent intellectual capacity that satisfy with their intellectual quest of truth. Hussein, *Fi Al-Shi'ri Al-Jahili*, 83–84.

⁷⁰ What is argument for pre-knowledge and pre-belief? As mentioned beforehand, human knowledge has two dimensions; a priori knowledge which is related to universals and a posteriori which is related to particularities. This a posteriori knowledge is gained through experience and learning, because human being lives in historical space and is shaped by history hermeneutically speaking. Historical reality fills human empty space so that human being is considered a cracked-mirror of history. This historical human being, hermeneutically speaking, as pre-knowledge and

First, literary and premonition tradition. Pre-Islamic Arabs were accustomed to poets and fortune tellers. These two figures were believed to be able to communicate with genie, a supra natural being that God had created.⁷¹ When searching for inspiration, poets and fortune tellers depended on genie because it was believed to be able to capture future natural phenomenon, virtual reality from heaven so that those two figures were able to received information which could not be sensed by human senses, and gave this supra natural information to people. The belief of pre-Islamic Arabs in poets and psychics indicated three important elements in Arabs beliefs; belief in charismatic figures (poets and psychics),⁷² intermediary role between physical and non-physical natures, and invisible Deity.

Conviction to this phenomenon brings theological implication on the a form of potency for the acceptance of Arab people toward revelation as received by Prophet Muhammad. The Quran as revealed to Muhammad existentially meets three elements of pre-Islamic Arab tradition. Muhammad himself was a reflection of charismatic figure who even exceeded charisma of poets and physics, archangel Gabriel was the intermediary⁷³ between the invisible Deity and the Quran was the supra natural message brought by Gabriel from the invisible Deity (Allah).⁷⁴

Second, the religious belief and conviction. Pre-Islamic Arabs had known religions such as Hanifiyah, Judaism and Christianity which taught religions that those prophets received revelation from God through angels. The polytheistic Arabs essentially had similar conviction with observers of those heavenly religions. They believed and knew elements of heavenly

pre-belief based on his or her life history. This is hermeneutic theory of Gadamer, which asserts that human being is shaped by history so that human being is equipped with pre-knowledge and pre-belief. Muhammad Mujtahid Al-Shabistari, *Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an Wa Al-Sunnah* (Beirut: Al-Intishar al-'Arabi, 2013), 13–47. Sahiron Syamsuddin, “Integrasi Hermeneutika Hans George Gadamer Ke Dalam Ilmu Tafsir? Sebuah Proyek Pengembangan Metode Pembacaan Al-Qur'an Pada Masa Kontemporer,” in *Annual Conference Kajian Islamby Directorate of Islamic Higher Education* (Bandung: Ministry of Zreligious Affairs, 2006), 67–73. Aksin Wijaya, *Arah Baru Studi Ulum Al-Qur'an: Memburu Pesan Tuhan Di Balik Fenomena Budaya* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2009), 178–90.

⁷¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhum Al-Nash: Dirasah Fi Ulum Al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Al-Markaz Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2000), 34.

⁷² Zayd, 34. Abdullah Seed, “Rethinking ‘Revelation’ As Precondition For Reinterpreting The Qur'an: A Qur'anic Perspective,” *Qur'anic Studies* 1 (1999): 95–97. Muhammad Karim Al-Kawwaz, *Kalamullah: Al-Janib Al-Shafahi Min Al-Zhahirah Al-Qur'aniyah* (London: Dar Al-Saqi, 2002), 23–25. see also Tosihiko Izutsu, *Relasi Tuhan Dan Manusia*, trans. Agus Fahri Husein, Supriyanto Abdullah, and Amiruddin (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 1997), 185–87.

⁷³ In this context, it is not certain that archangel Gabriel played mediating role between God and Muhammad. It was possible that Muhammad used archangel Gabriel as a strategy to ease him when dealing with the Arabs since they believed that there was always mediating agent between God and human being in supra natural events. Aksin Wijaya, *Menggugat Otentisitas Wahyu Tuhan: Kritik Atas Nalar Tafsir Gender*, 2nd ed. (Yogyakarta: Magnum Pustaka, 2012), . 44-47.

⁷⁴ Detailed discussion on phenomenon of pre-understanding and pre-belief of pre Islamic Arabs can be read in a work by 'Aisyah 'Ajiyah, *Al-Wahyu Bayna Shuruthi Wujudhi Wa Tahawwulatih* (Beirut: Manshurat Al-Jumal, 2010), 51–115.

religions, such as Allah the supreme deity, angels as intermediary, prophets of Allah, heavenly books, genie, a supra natural being created by God, Satan and devil. They also knew how these beings interacted each other.⁷⁵ The difference is the way these pre-Islamic Arabs communicated with God, since they did that through intermediary, be it angel, human being or statue.

Revealed in such a context, the revelation to Prophet Muhammad which was later reached to Arab people gained positive response, easily understood and received as the divine truth. The resistance that took place was not related to elements in revelation or religious motive. Instead, it was due to arrogance of Arab elite group (wealthy people, political leaders as well as poets).⁷⁶

3. The Rhetoric of the Quran

The easy nature in understanding Islam with all of its elements is also influenced by the rhetoric of the Quran which speaks based on its context. The Quran speaks appreciatively and critically about familiar themes in pre-Islamic Arab people, such as about belief, conviction, social and cultural issues, economy, science, those which they experienced or those which did not, but they heard stories about. The rhetoric of the Quran is extremely sophisticated from the aspect of its method of discourse or its themes.

For instance, when dealing with Arab people who were not *ahl al-kitab*, the Quran addresses belief and knowledge about angels as daughters of Allah (Al-Nahl: 57-58, Al-Isra': 40, Al-Anbiya': 26-29, Saba': 40-41, Al-Shafat: 149-157, Al-Zukhruf: 15-22, Al-Najm: 19-27, Al-An'am: 8, Hud: 12, Al-Hijr: 6-7, and Al-Shafat: 149-152). When dealing with *ahl al-kitab* (Jews and Christians), the Quran addresses critically about the claim of Jews as the rightful observers of religion of Abraham. For Jews, the religion of Abraham is Judaism. They claimed that Uzayr is son of Allah (Al-Tawbah: 30). Likewise, the Quran speaks critically when addressing Christians⁷⁷ who consider Mary (Al-Maidah: 75 dan 116) and Jesus (Al-Nisa': 171 and Al-Maidah: 17, 73) as Gods in holy trinity.

When dealing with those two groups (non *ahl al-kitab* and *ahl al-kitab*), the Quran speaks critically about the topic of discussion, like whether or not Allah has a child, and who the child of God is. For pre-Islamic Arabs, angels are the children of God. For them, this is more sensible than what the Jews and the Christians believed. Their reasoning is simple. The angels are in non-physical form (*ruḥānī*), whereas Uzair and Jesus are physical. They also considered their God as better than the God of Jews and Christians (Al-Zukhruf: 47-50).

Therefore, because Arab people are civilized people (literate people) and theistic so that they had pre-knowledge and pre-belief, together with the themes addressed in the Quran suitable with their knowledge and belief, it is

⁷⁵ Ajiyah, *Al-Wahyu Bayna Shuruthi Wujudhi Wa Tahawwulatihi*.

⁷⁶ Aksin Wijaya, *Sejarah Kenabian Dalam Perspektif Tafsir Nuzuli Muhammad Izzat Darwazah* (Bandung: Mizan, 2016), 346–49.

⁷⁷ Muhammad Izzat Darwazah, "*Ashrun Al-Nabi Wa Ba'atihi Qabla Al-Ba'tha: Suwarun Muqtabisatun Min Al-Qur'an Al-Karim: Dirasat Wa Tahlilat Al-Qur'aniyah* (Beirut, 1964), 750.

reasonable to view their easy acceptance and belief to Islam along with all of its teaching, including the revelation to Prophet Muhammad. If there was an opposition, it was not about religious elements and the idea of revelation, but it was strictly about the arrogance of the elite.⁷⁸

E. Concluding Remarks

The discussion offers three conclusions: first: religiosity is *fitri* (a priori) when related to universal matters, but it becomes a matter of option when dealing with particularities. Second, pre-Islamic Arabs readily embraced Islam revealed to Prophet Muhammad due to ethnic fanaticism, solidarity and personal quality of the Prophet himself. And third, pre-Islamic Arabs readily accepted and understood Islam because they were equipped with adequate qualities, pre-understanding and, pre-belief. This also was contributed by a spot-on strategy of the Quran in articulating its message.

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