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Going to Hell or Heaven? An Analysis of Malaysian Muslims' Perspectives on Extremism in Religion

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Abstract

Religion has long been the focus of research looking into terrorism and extremism. However, previous researches tend to focus heavily on terrorist and extremist groups who have committed acts of terrorism. This study further expands the literature by analysing how the public perceive extreme elements in their daily religious routines in a multicultural society in Malaysia, employing four dimensions of religiosity, namely, physical, social, cognitive, and spiritual. This research utilised a survey method and distributed it to 497 Malay Malaysian Muslims in 2019. Using descriptive statistical analysis, it was found that there is a tendency for Malaysian Muslims to be more perceptive towards religious extremism, as the majority of the sampling population showed strong support towards the visible aspects of religiosity indicators, such as strict adherence to religious dress code and physical rituals that can be managed and administered through the establishment of a legal institution and can reinforce their status quo as the majority group in society, rather than intangible aspects of extreme religiosity, such as cognitive and spiritual aspects. However, this study also found that extreme religiosity in religious practices is not necessarily an indicator for society to support extremist religious ideologies, as the Malaysian Muslims also showed positive tendencies of living in a multi-faith society. This finding provides insights into how the prevention of religious extremism should address social elements of religiosity and should not be taken care of in isolation, as well as should consider the complex historical and social dimensions of society. As such, this paper contributes to the understanding of Malaysian Muslims' perceptions of religious extremism in their daily religious practices in a multicultural society.

Keywords

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