

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDONESIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INDONESIAN MUSLIM INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world and is home to a rich diversity of cultures and religions. The country, as stated in its constitution, recognises five religions and one belief system. Consequently, themes of tolerance, moderation, and religious pluralism are of great interest not only to Indonesian scholars but also to those from abroad. Indonesian Muslim scholars hold diverse perspectives on the concept of religious pluralism. Some interpret it as an expression of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. In contrast, others adopt a more controversial view, asserting that all religions are equally valid and that no single truth is absolute. Proponents of this latter interpretation often cite Quranic verses that they claim recognise the legitimacy of all religions, not solely Islam, as conveyed through the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This article critically examines the arguments presented by proponents of religious pluralism in Indonesia, with a focus on the Quranic verses they frequently cite. Employing a method of descriptive criticism, the analysis reveals that these interpretations are often based on misunderstandings and misreadings of the verses in question. It further suggests that their readings are frequently shaped by external influences such as political agendas, personal

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interests, the pursuit of public recognition, and alignment with large-scale ideological projects. A key issue lies in their predominantly textual and Western-influenced approach, which lacks methodological innovation and fails to engage deeply with the exegetical tradition. Additionally, significant errors are found in their use of supporting concepts, such as their invocation of *sunnatullāh* to explain human diversity, and their interpretation of the term *al-Islām* in the Qur'an.

Keywords: Religious pluralism; pluralism in Quran; pluralism in *tafsir*; Indonesia; Muslim.

Khulasah

Indonesia merupakan negara yang memiliki populasi Muslim terbesar di dunia dan menempatkan kepelbagaian budaya serta agama yang sangat kaya. Seperti yang termaktub dalam perlembagaan negara, Indonesia mengiktiraf lima agama dan satu sistem kepercayaan. Sehubungan itu, tema toleransi, kesederhanaan dan pluralisme agama menjadi bidang yang mendapat perhatian luas, bukan sahaja dalam kalangan sarjana tempatan, tetapi turut menarik minat pengkaji antarabangsa. Dalam kalangan sarjana Muslim Indonesia, terdapat pelbagai pandangan berkenaan takrif pluralisme agama. Sebahagian melihatnya sebagai bentuk toleransi, manakala sebahagian yang lain menganggap bahawa semua agama adalah sah dan tiada kebenaran mutlak dan ini satu pandangan yang mencetuskan kontroversi. Golongan ini mendakwa bahawa pandangan mereka bersandarkan kepada beberapa ayat al-Quran yang menurut mereka mengiktiraf semua agama, dan bukan sekadar Islam seperti yang diajarkan oleh Nabi Muhammad SAW. Makalah ini mengulas hujah-hujah mereka berdasarkan ayat-ayat yang dirujuk dan menilai tafsiran yang dikemukakan melalui pendekatan kritikan deskriptif. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahawa para pendukung pluralisme agama di Indonesia telah melakukan kesilapan dalam

memahami dan mentafsirkan ayat-ayat tersebut. Tafsiran yang dikemukakan cenderung dipengaruhi oleh agenda politik, kepentingan peribadi, reputasi akademik, serta projek berskala besar. Kekeliruan ini timbul kerana pendekatan yang digunakan bersifat tekstual semata-mata, selain terikut-ikut dengan tafsiran Barat tanpa membawa sebarang pendekatan atau sumbangan metodologi baharu terhadap ayat-ayat yang ditafsirkan. Kesilapan lain turut dikesan dalam penggunaan konsep sokongan seperti *sunnatullāh* mengenai kepelbagaian manusia dan dalam mentafsirkan makna istilah *al-Islām* dalam al-Quran.

Kata kunci: Pluralisme agama; pluralisme dalam al-Quran; tafsir pluralism; Indonesia.

Introduction

Indonesia is not only rich in natural beauty, diverse ethnicities, and rich cultures, but it also boasts remarkable religious diversity. This religious diversity is particularly noteworthy amidst the various diversities in Indonesia. The Indonesian government maintains this religious diversity well, with six religions being officially recognised.¹ This demonstrates that Indonesia is a tolerant, democratic, and pluralistic country. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the majority of Indonesians are Muslim, with 86% of the 275 million population adhering to Islam.²

While such data may be indisputable in discussions concerning the state, significant challenges often emerge when the focus shifts to matters of religious belief.

¹ Lene Pedersen, "Religious Pluralism in Indonesia," *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 17(5) (2016), 387–398, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2016.1218534>.

² Greg Barton et al., "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," *Religions* 12(8) (2021): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080641>. See also, Muhammad Muhammad et al., "Freedom That is Not Absolute: Ecological Ethics and Human-Nature Relationship in the Quran," *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 22(4) (2024), 17–27, <https://doi.org/10.21697/seb.5821>.

Prominent observers of world religions, including Hector Avalos³ and Charles Kimball⁴ contend that religious traditions are, in many cases, more prone to violence than their secular counterparts. This tendency is often attributed to the exclusive truth claims made by religions and their assertion of being the sole path to salvation.⁵

Furthermore, several studies suggest that theological perspectives which claim exclusive truth and view other beliefs as erroneous, or even as threats associated with apocalyptic narratives, often contribute to intergroup conflict.⁶ A notable example is the empirical research conducted by Matthias Basedau and his team in various African contexts. Using a socio-psychological approach, their study found that differences in religious beliefs significantly increase the risk of conflict, particularly when combined with social and political tensions.⁷

Given that several studies suggest religion is often perceived as a source of conflict, the exploration of religious pluralism and interfaith tolerance has gained significant attention, especially in the context of Indonesia. Frithjof Schuon defines religious pluralism as the view that all religions offer valid paths to God or the ultimate reality.⁸

³ Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst: NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

⁴ Kimball Charles, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs* (New York: NY: Harper Collins, 2008).

⁵ Buster G. Smith, "Attitudes towards Religious Pluralism: Measurements and Consequences," *Social Compass* 54(2) (2007): 333–353, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768607077055>.

⁶ Richard Cimino, "No God in Common: "American Evangelical Discourse on Islam after 9/11," *Review Literature and Arts of the Americas* 47(2) (2005), 162–174.

⁷ Matthias Basedau et al., "Do Religious Factors Impact Armed Conflict? Empirical Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23(5) (2011), 752–779, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.619240>.

⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (London: Perennial Books, 1981), 37.

In religious pluralism, no religion is superior; all religions are considered equal, with no absolute truth, and truth is seen as relative.⁹ Thus, religious pluralism can be interpreted as the view that no religion is absolute.¹⁰ The goal of religious pluralism is to build on the assumption that no single religion possesses absolute truth, and that none can be regarded as entirely false or inherently superior to others.¹¹

In this context, some Indonesian Muslims have sought to understand and interpret Quranic verses in ways that appear to support the notion of religious pluralism. Various verses are employed to reinforce the claim that the Quran endorses this concept. While interpretation (*ta'wīl*) serves as a legitimate tool for uncovering the deeper meanings of Quranic verses, it can at times lead to erroneous understandings, referred to by scholars as *ta'wīl mamdūh*. From the perspective of Quranic exegesis, *ta'wīl mamdūh* is regarded as impermissible, as it deviates from the intended meaning of the text.¹²

As the discourse on religious pluralism continues to evolve in Indonesia, it has attracted the attention of numerous international scholars. For instance, Robert W. Hefner has explored the pluralist perspectives of prominent Indonesian Muslim intellectuals such as Abdurrahman

⁹ Enggar Objantoro, "Religious Pluralism and Christian Responses," *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat* 2(1) (2018), 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.46445/ejti.v2i1.94>.

¹⁰ Avi Sagi, *Jewish Religion After Theology* (Brookline: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 1–42. See also, Muhammad Muhammad et al., "Jewish Antagonism as Portrayed by Hamka in the Book of *Tafsir Al-Azhar*," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 24(2) (2024), 513, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v24i2.19900>.

¹¹ Neelam Bano, et al., "The Christian Response to Religious Plurality: An Appraisal of the Twentieth Century Christian Pluralist Approaches," *Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)* 11(2) (2021), 231–244, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.112.12>.

¹² Fahd bin 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Rūmī, *Buḥūth fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Manāhijih* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Tawbah, n.d.), 81.

Wahid, Nurcholish Madjid, and Syafii Maarif.¹³ Similarly, Gustav Brown has examined the approaches to pluralism adopted by major Islamic organisations in Indonesia, including Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama.¹⁴

This paper aims to critically examine the interpretation of specific Quranic verses cited by some Indonesian Muslims to support the notion of religious pluralism. The study observes that such interpretations are often closely intertwined with political interests and power dynamics. This connection has been highlighted in the work of Marcus Mietzner, who demonstrates how religious narratives, including those promoting pluralism, are frequently utilised within broader political agendas in Indonesia.¹⁵ This discussion is crucial, as misinterpretations of Quranic verses cited in support of religious pluralism are common. This paper aims to critically examine such interpretations put forward by proponents of religious pluralism in Indonesia. It argues that the Quran, like other religious scriptures, does not promote religious pluralism in the ideological sense, but rather advocates values such as moderation, tolerance, and mutual respect, without endorsing the notion of religious pluralism as previously defined.

¹³ Robert W. Hefner, "Islam and Covenantal Pluralism in Indonesia: A Critical Juncture Analysis," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 18(2) (2020), 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2020.1753946>.

¹⁴ Gustav Brown, "Civic Islam: Muhammadiyah, NU and the Organisational Logic of Consensus-Making in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43(3) (2019), 397–414, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1626802>.

¹⁵ Marcus Mietzner & Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42(1) (2020), 58–84, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs42-1c>.

The Interpretation of Religious Pluralism in Indonesian Muslims' Perspective

Among Indonesian Muslims, two distinct definitions of religious pluralism are commonly employed, and this divergence has led to an ongoing debate with no clear consensus.¹⁶ As a result, differing opinions have emerged regarding the status of religious pluralism in the Quran. One group interprets religious pluralism as synonymous with tolerance, leading to the view that it is a positive and beneficial concept, as documented by Wanda Firti¹⁷ and Moh. Hasim.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Aftonur Rosyad and Eko Zulfikar argue that religious pluralism is rooted in Islamic teachings, asserting that the Quran commands Muslims to show kindness to non-Muslims, promote mutual understanding, and cultivate harmonious relations.¹⁹ From these interpretations, it becomes evident that religious pluralism is often equated with the broader principle of religious moderation.

Others define religious pluralism as the belief that all religions are equally true and that no single faith holds a superior claim to truth. If religious pluralism is understood in the first sense, as tolerance, there is no fundamental issue, as the Quran clearly promotes tolerance and peaceful coexistence. However, problems arise when pluralism is

¹⁶ M. Hilaly Basya, "The Concept of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: A Study of the MUT's Fatwa and the Debate among Muslim Scholars," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 1(1) (2011), 69–93, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v1i1.69-93>.

¹⁷ Wanda Fitri, "Pluralisme di Tengah Masyarakat Santri Minang Sebuah Pengenalan Pluralitas Lokal di Sumatera Barat," *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 1(1) (2015), 55, https://doi.org/10.30983/islam_realitas.v1i1.12.

¹⁸ Moh Hasim, "Islam, Minoritas dan Pluralisme di Indonesia," *Analisa* 15(1) (2016), 139, <https://doi.org/10.18784/analisa.v15i01.329>.

¹⁹ Aftonur Rosyad & Eko Zulfikar, "The Concept of Religious Pluralism in The Quran: An Analysis of *Maqashidi* Exegesis in the Indonesian Context," *Dialogia* 20(1) (2022), 150–175, <https://doi.org/10.21154/dialogia.v20i1.3747>.

defined according to the second meaning, which has become more prevalent among some Indonesian Muslim thinkers in their interpretation of Quranic verses. This approach is exemplified in the works of figures such as Nurcholish Madjid, Jalaluddin Rakhmat, and Abdul Moqsih Ghazali, whose arguments will be examined in the subsequent sections. Unsurprisingly, the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI), which holds the authority to issue religious fatwas in the country, has firmly rejected the notion of religious pluralism in this ideological sense, on the basis that it contradicts core Islamic theological principles.²⁰

The MUI's fatwa rejecting religious pluralism has drawn criticism from Indonesian Muslims who advocate for a pluralist understanding of Islam. These critics support their arguments by appealing to various Quranic verses. Mohammad Hashas has identified and summarised six major thematic categories from the Quran that are commonly cited to support the idea of religious pluralism in Islam. Within these six themes, twelve specific verses are frequently referenced, namely: al-Baqarah 2:62, 115, 128, 256, Ali Imran 3:19, 67, 85, al-Mai'dah 5:69, Yunus 10:99, al-Nahl 16:97, al-Kahfi 18:29, and al-Hujurat 49:13.²¹

Furthermore, Indonesian Muslim proponents of religious pluralism interpret these verses as conveying a message of universal salvation for all humankind, provided they believe in the oneness of God, acknowledge the Day

²⁰ Saskia Schäfer, "Democratic Decline in Indonesia: The Role of Religious Authorities," *Pacific Affairs* 92(2) (2019), 235–255, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2019922235>. See also, Hilaly Basya, "The Concept of Religious Pluralism," 69.

²¹ Mohammed Hashas, "Introduction: Islam, Muslims and Religious Pluralism: Concepts, Scope and Limits," in *Pluralism in Islamic Contexts - Ethics, Politics and Modern Challenges* (Cham: Springer Verlag, 2021), 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66089-5_1.

of Judgment, and consistently perform righteous deeds.²² Moreover, supporters of religious pluralism in Indonesia regard these verses as evidence that Islam affirms the validity of other religious traditions. They argue that Islam's recognition of other faiths is not merely a result of socio-political, cultural, or civilizational considerations, but is grounded in clear Quranic evidence.

According to this perspective, the Quran indicates that paradise is not exclusively reserved for Muslims, but is also attainable by followers of other religions, provided they uphold three essential principles: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgment, and consistent righteous conduct.²³ This perspective is rooted in the understanding that Islam did not emerge in isolation, but rather as a continuation of earlier Abrahamic traditions. As such, it inevitably shares certain points of convergence with preceding religions. These shared elements are then seen as providing a theological foundation for the acceptance of religious pluralism, based on the view that the Quran does not categorically deny the possibility of salvation through other religious paths (paradise).²⁴

Abdul Moqsith Ghazali argues that "Jews, Christians, Sabians, or followers of other faiths who believe in God, the Day of Judgment, and perform righteous deeds will not be disregarded by Allah. They will receive fair rewards for

²² Amalina Setiani & Muhammad Labib Syauqi, "The Perfection of Religion in the Quran: QS Al-Mā'idah Verse 3 in the View of Ibnu 'Abbas and Hamka's Interpretation," *International Journal of Social Science and Religion (IJSSR)* (2020), 213–232.

²³ Mun'im Sirry, "Compete with One Another in Good Works: Exegesis of Quran Verse 5.48 and Contemporary Muslim Discourses on Religious Pluralism," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20(4) (2009), 423–438, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410903194886>.

²⁴ Budhy Munawar-rachman, "Perspektif Global Islam dan Pluralisme," *Ilmu Ushuluddin* 1(3) (2012), 215–230, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/292117643.pdf>.

their faith and endeavours.”²⁵ Jalaluddin Rakhmat explains that “al-Baqarah 2:62 is quite clear that salvation on the Day of Judgment can be attained by all religions concerning their beliefs and lives with the criteria of faith in Allah, faith in the Day of Judgment, and righteous deeds.”²⁶

Indonesian proponents of religious pluralism interpret the aforementioned verses as evidence that Islam acknowledges the validity of other religions and affirms their adherents’ potential to attain paradise. Based on this view, it is considered incorrect for Muslims to regard Islam as the sole and absolute path to salvation. Consequently, religious pluralism is presented as an authentic Islamic teaching, grounded directly in the Quranic text. While the interpretations offered by Indonesian advocates of religious pluralism are not entirely unfounded, they are typically confined to a selective reading of verses that emphasise interreligious respect. These interpretations frequently overlook the broader exegetical context, such as the *asbāb al-nuzūl* and other hermeneutical frameworks, and tend to ignore other parts of the Quran that explicitly affirm the claim of Islamic absolutism.

Supporters of religious pluralism in Indonesia further reinforce their arguments by examining the meaning of the term *al-Islām* as found in the Quran. According to their interpretation, *al-Islām* is not confined solely to the specific teachings brought by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), but rather encompasses a broader meaning, namely, submission and surrender to Allah. In this view, anyone who submits sincerely to God, regardless of religious affiliation, may be considered among those who follow ‘Islam’ in its universal

²⁵ Abdul Moqsiith Ghazali, *Argumen Pluralisme Agama: Membangun Toleransi Berbasis al-Quran* (Jakarta: Kata Kita, 2019), 240-241.

²⁶ Jalaluddin Rakhmat, *Islam dan Pluralisme: Akhlak Quran Menyikapi Perbedaan* (Jakarta: Penerbit Serambi, 2006), 23.

sense.²⁷ Ihda Hani'atun Nisa', in one of her articles, stated that, "according to textualists, they tend to compare, underestimate, and even consider other religions besides their own as wrong." She concludes that it is unjust for followers of other faiths to be excluded from salvation in the hereafter. In her view, all existing religions are entitled to the possibility of salvation based on the righteousness individuals demonstrate throughout their lives.²⁸

These ideas are rooted in the concept of Islamic universalism, which Nurcholish Madjid employs to elaborate on the meaning of the term *al-Islām*. He argues that Islam is not limited to the religion conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) but rather represents the core message delivered by all messengers of God throughout history. According to Madjid, *al-Islām* fundamentally signifies submission, obedience, and surrender to God, values that transcend specific religious identities and are shared across prophetic traditions.²⁹ *Al-Islām* is understood not merely as a specific religion, but as a universal message, one that is fundamentally reflected in all of creation. This interpretation holds that all religious traditions, at their core, promote devotion and submission to God, thereby embodying the essence of *al-Islām*.³⁰

In addition, some arguments distinguish between two approaches to understanding *al-Islām*: the textual and the

²⁷ Rofiq Nurhadi, et al., "Dialektika Inklusivisme dan Eksklusivisme Islam Kajian Semantik terhadap Tafsir al-Quran tentang Hubungan Antaragama," *Jurnal Kawistara* 3(1) (2013), 58–67, <https://doi.org/10.22146/kawistara.3961>.

²⁸ Ihda Hani'atun Nisa', "Pembacaan Tafsir *Maqashidi* terhadap Keselamatan Agama Selain Islam dalam al-Quran," *Ilmu Ushuluddin* 7(2) (2020), 203-204, doi: <https://doi.org/10.15408/iu.v7i2.16774>

²⁹ M. Amin Abdullah, "Nurcholish Madjid and Religious Pluralism in Indonesian Islam," *Philosophy and Politics - Critical Explorations* 16 (2021), 189–199, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66089-5_11.

³⁰ Fahrul Rozi, "Hakikat Pluralisme di Indonesia Perspektif Nurcholis Madjid," *Jurnal Yaqzhan: Analisis Filsafat, Agama dan Kemanusiaan* 6(1) (2020), 111, <https://doi.org/10.24235/jy.v6i1.6157>.

contextual. The textual perspective interprets *al-Islām* through a formal-normative lens, identifying it specifically with the religion brought by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In contrast, the contextual perspective adopts a substantive understanding, viewing *al-Islām* as a universal principle characterised by sincere submission and obedience to God, regardless of formal religious identity.³¹

Another key foundation emphasised by supporters of religious pluralism in Indonesia is the Quranic assertion that human diversity is part of Allah's divine will. From the perspective of Indonesian religious pluralists, particularly regarding religious differences, such diversity is viewed as an expression of *sunnatullāh* (God's law of creation). Denying or rejecting this diversity is seen as resisting the authority and wisdom of Allah. Within this framework, religious pluralists argue that the intended response to diversity is not conflict or exclusion, but mutual competition in performing good deeds, with the ultimate judgment belonging to Allah on the Day of Judgment.

The recognition of Allah's decree (*sunnatullāh*) and will (*irādah*) in the reality of religious diversity leads proponents of religious pluralism to conclude that Islam, as conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), does not possess exclusive or absolute truth. This view is based on the belief that the forms of Islam preached by previous prophets remain valid and acknowledged. According to this perspective, the rise of Islamic absolutism, particularly the emphasis on Muhammadanism as the sole valid path, is attributed to a narrow interpretation of religious texts and an overemphasis on doctrinal exclusivity.³² In this context, Indonesian proponents of religious pluralism tend to

³¹ Mulyadi, "Konsep Islam dalam al-Quran Perspektif Tekstual Dan Kontekstual," *Islamuna Jurnal Studi Islam* 5(1) (2018), 1–23.

³² M. Syaiful Rahman, "Islam dan Pluralisme," *Fikrah: Jurnal Ilmu Aqidah dan Studi Keagamaan* 2(1) (2014), 401–418. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21043/fikrah.v2i2.666>

overlook key Quranic verses that affirm the finality of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), such as Surah al-Ahzab (33:40), which declares him as the Seal of the Prophets, and Surah al-Ma'idah (5:48), which emphasises that the divine law revealed to him is to be followed by all of humankind.

The ideas put forward by proponents of religious pluralism in Indonesia can be regarded as meaningful contributions to academic discourse and as part of broader efforts to promote interreligious harmony within Indonesian society. The promotion of religious pluralism by Indonesian Muslims, who constitute the majority of the population, can be better understood through the lens of Abdulaziz Sachedina's theory, which suggests that the interpretation of Quranic verses often shifts depending on the sociopolitical context. According to Sachedina, when Muslims are in the majority, the emphasis tends to be on verses promoting tolerance and the protection of minorities under Islamic governance. Conversely, when Muslims are in the minority, Quranic verses are more likely to be interpreted as resisting non-Muslim influences, sometimes resulting in exclusivist or intolerant attitudes.³³

If the Indonesian context reflects the pattern described by Abdulaziz Sachedina, where Muslims' support for religious pluralism corresponds with their status as the majority, it may be concluded that religion is being utilised not solely as a spiritual or theological framework, but also as a political resource. This suggests that, for some Indonesian Muslims, religious discourse serves broader sociopolitical interests beyond purely doctrinal concerns.³⁴

³³ Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Advancing Religious Pluralism in Islam," *Religion Compass* 4(4) (2010), 221–233, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2010.00207.x>.

³⁴ Anis Malik Thoah, "Discourse of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia," in *Seminar "Al-Quran dan Cabaran Pluralisme Agama: Pengajaran Masa Lalu, Keperihalan Semasa dan Hala Tuju Masa Depan*, 2011, 19–20. See also, Robert W. Hefner, "Profiles in Pluralism: Religion

This is further evidenced by the interpretations put forth by supporters of religious pluralism in Indonesia, which often deviate from the intended meanings of the relevant Quranic verses. The concepts of salvation and ultimate truth, as upheld by each major religion, cannot be regarded as equivalent, making the pursuit of theological common ground inherently difficult.

It is therefore not surprising that Gavin D'Costa has argued that religious pluralism is an unachievable ideal.³⁵ Similarly, Ahmad Yousfi, a scholar who has conducted extensive research on world religions, contends that religious pluralism is merely an illusion.³⁶ Echoing these views, Anis Malik Thoha asserts that religious pluralism is not genuinely aimed at fostering peace among existing religions but rather represents a new religious construct being promoted by various groups through different forms of media and discourse.³⁷ Ultimately, when individuals or groups advocate for religious pluralism in the sense that all religions are equally true and valid, it becomes essential to critically examine the underlying foundations of their

and Politics in Indonesia," *Religion on the International News Agenda* (2000), 81–101.

³⁵ Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32(2) (1996), 223–232, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412500024240>.

³⁶ Ahmad Yousif, "Islam, Minorities and Religious Freedom: A Challenge to Modern Theory of Pluralism," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20(1) (2000), 29–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000050008889>.

³⁷ Anis Malik Thoha, "Mencermati Doktrin dan Ciri-Ciri Fahaman Pluralisme Agama," in *Simposium Membanteras Gerakan Pluralisme Agama dan Pemurtadan Ummah*, organized jointly by Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Terengganu (JHEAT), Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), Yayasan Taqwa (YT), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UnisZA), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) & Pertubuhan Muafakat Sejahtera Masyarakat Malaysia (MUFAKAT), January 15, 2011, at Dewan Sultan Mizan, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Terengganu.

arguments, particularly when references to sacred scriptures support such claims.³⁸

The author does not reject the concept of religious pluralism in the context of promoting diversity in harmony, but rather rejects the misinterpretation and instrumentalisation of Quranic verses to justify specific ideological positions. While religious pluralism may offer a constructive framework for fostering peaceful coexistence, it is essential to acknowledge that the Quran does not explicitly endorse religious pluralism in a theological sense. Its response to religious diversity is rooted primarily in the principle of tolerance, not in the affirmation of equal theological truth among all religions. Therefore, it is understandable that Abdulaziz Sachedina notes the general resistance to religious pluralism within Islamic discourse in the Middle East, as traditional Islamic teachings do not advocate for religious pluralism as a doctrinal tenet.³⁹

The emphasis on tolerance is not unique to Islam but is also a fundamental value promoted in other major world religions. Even Mirza Imran Baig has observed that an exclusivist approach to interpreting the Bible remains dominant in much of the modern West.⁴⁰ This raises an important question: Why is it that some Muslims interpret the Quran in a way that supports the idea of religious pluralism? At the same time, adherents of other major religions generally do not apply similar interpretations to their scriptures. The author's critique is therefore not directed at the principle of tolerance, but rather at the interpretive approach that uses specific Quranic verses to

³⁸ In this case, an example can be seen with the JIL group, who believe that religious pluralism originates from the Quran.

³⁹ Sachedina, "Advancing Religious Pluralism in Islam," 221.

⁴⁰ Mirza Imran Baig, "Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)* 4(1) (2014), 83–94, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.41.06>.

support theological pluralism. A detailed examination of these interpretations will be presented in the following discussion.

Indonesian Muslims' Rejection of Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism in Indonesia, primarily promoted by modern Muslim intellectuals, has encountered substantial rejection and criticism. In fact, when assessed broadly, dissenting voices appear to outnumber supporters. Imtiyaz Yusuf, a scholar of religious pluralism, identifies several Indonesian Muslim thinkers and groups, such as the Liberal Islamic Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, or JIL), as advocates of religious pluralism.⁴¹ However, Yusuf's analysis overlooks a critical point: the views propagated by JIL do not reflect the mainstream sentiments of Indonesian Muslims. On the contrary, the majority of Indonesian Muslims reject the group's interpretations and often regard it as deviating from Islamic orthodoxy.⁴²

Furthermore, the rejection of religious pluralism by Indonesian Muslims is also reflected in national academic discourse. Several Indonesian Muslim scholars argue that religious pluralism functions as a new religious construct, one that seeks to unify all religions under a single framework, thereby undermining the distinctiveness of

⁴¹ Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islamic Theology of Religious Pluralisme: Quran's Attitude Towrds Other Religions," *Prajñā Vihāra: Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 11(1) (2010), 1–20.

⁴² Samasudin Samasudin, "Kontroversi Pemikiran Islam Liberal tentang Pluralisme Agama-Agama di Indonesia," *Al-Tsaqafa: Jurnal Ilmiah Peradaban Islam* 14(1) (2017), 178–200, <https://doi.org/10.15575/al-tsaqafa.v14i1.1800>; Wan Ismail W. Dagang et al., "Ancaman Pemikiran Aliran Islam Liberal kepada Umat Islam di Nusantara: Satu Sorotan Kajian," *Sains Humanika* 3 (2015), 77–85; Ahmad Luthfi, Muhibbudin, "Liberalisasi Pemikiran Islam dan Kritik Terhadap Islam Liberal," *Tahdzib al-Akhlaq: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 4(2) (2021), 81–92, <https://doi.org/10.34005/tahdzib.v4i2.1586>.

each tradition.⁴³ The Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilization (INSISTS) in Indonesia, for example, views religious pluralism as a source of ideological confusion and a potential threat to harmony in Indonesia's multi-religious society.⁴⁴ Similarly, prominent Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah and influential figures within Nahdlatul Ulama have expressed opposition to the concept of religious pluralism as it is commonly articulated in the Indonesian context.⁴⁵

The rejection of religious pluralism is not limited to Indonesia but is also echoed by Muslim intellectuals in Malaysia. Ahmad Yousfi, for instance, asserts that Islam categorically rejects the idea that all religions are equally true or that truth is relative. He further argues that religious pluralism is nothing more than an illusion.⁴⁶ In Malaysia, this position has been reinforced institutionally, following the issuance of a *fatwā* declaring that religious pluralism and liberalism are contrary to Islamic teachings. Many Muslim scholars have firmly aligned themselves with this stance, actively working to prevent the spread and influence of these ideologies within Malaysian society.⁴⁷

In response to the growing discourse on religious pluralism in Indonesia, the Indonesian Ulama Council

⁴³ Harda Armayanto, "Problem Pluralisme Agama," *Tsaqafah* 10(2) (2014), 325-340, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v10i2.191>.

⁴⁴ Ahmad Khoirul Fata & Fauzan Fauzan, "Kritik 'INSISTS' Terhadap Gagasan Pluralisme Agama," *Kalam* 11(1) (2017), 31-56, <https://doi.org/10.24042/klm.v11i1.905>.

⁴⁵ Ahmad Khoirul Fata, "Diskursus dan Kritik Terhadap Teologi Pluralisme Agama di Indonesia," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 42(1) (2018), 105-128, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v42i1.393>.

⁴⁶ Yousif, "Islam, Minorities and Religious Freedom," 29.

⁴⁷ Marina Munira Abdul Mutalib & Mashitah Sulaiman, "Understanding Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: A Christian and Muslim Debate," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7(13) (2017), 175-188, <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbs/v7-i13/3193>.

(Majelis Ulama Indonesia or MUI) issued *Fatwā* Number: 7/MUNAS VII/11/2005 concerning Pluralism, Secularism, and Religious Liberalism. The *fatwā* outlines four legal provisions, clearly delineating the Council's position on these ideologies and asserting their incompatibility with Islamic teachings:

1. Pluralism, secularism, and religious liberalism, as referred to in the first part, are ideologies contrary to Islamic teachings;
2. Muslims are forbidden from adhering to the ideologies of pluralism, secularism, and religious liberalism;
3. In matters of faith (*'aqīdah*) and worship (*'ibādah*), Muslims must adopt an exclusive stance, meaning it is forbidden to mix the beliefs and worship of Muslims with those of other religions;
4. For Muslim communities living alongside followers of other religions, in social matters unrelated to faith and worship, Muslims should adopt an inclusive approach, meaning they should continue to engage in social interaction with followers of other religions as long as it does not cause harm to each other.

The author contends that the promotion of religious pluralism by certain Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, particularly those who claim that all religions are equally true and ultimately lead to the same goal, reflects a political rather than a theological orientation. This view is supported by Anis Malik Thoha, who argues that 'the discourse of religious pluralism is not rooted in theology or religious doctrine, but in political ideology.' According to Thoha, this phenomenon is clearly observable in Indonesia, where the concept of religious pluralism has emerged not from deep theological reflection, but from socio-political realities. It has evolved into an ideological construct aligned with the national philosophy of Pancasila, which has facilitated the rise of pluralist discourse. In this regard, Indonesia appears to have developed its own form of religion, what may be

described as a civil religion, akin to the concept of civil religion in the United States.⁴⁸

Therefore, it is not surprising that Indonesian intellectuals who advocate for religious pluralism often attempt to interpret Quranic verses in a manner that supports the concept, aligning it with the political ideals of a state founded on Pancasila and democratic principles. This trend suggests that the interpretations offered by many modern Indonesian Muslim intellectuals are heavily influenced by Western philosophical thought and lack originality, both in terms of the Quranic verses selected and the interpretive frameworks employed, as well as the core ideas they promote.

Misinterpretation Points

There are three primary errors commonly found in the interpretation of religious pluralism in the Quran: (1) textualist interpretation without consideration of historical and exegetical context, (2) the misapplication of the concept of *sunnatullāh*, God's divine law in creating human diversity, as a justification for religious pluralism, and (3) the reinterpretation of the term *al-Islām* in the Quran as a universal label for all religious paths. These interpretative missteps lead to the conclusion that all religions are equally accepted and legitimised by Allah through the Quranic message. The following sections provide a more detailed analysis of each of these interpretive errors.

1) Textual Interpretation

A predominantly textual approach characterizes the interpretive method employed by many proponents of religious pluralism, particularly in their reading of Quranic verses such as surah al-Baqarah 2:62, surah al-Ma'idah 5:69, and surah al-Hajj 22:17. These verses are frequently interpreted as affirming the salvific potential of all religious traditions, provided they adhere to three core principles:

⁴⁸ Thoha, "Discourse of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia," 19.

belief in God, the performance of righteous deeds, and faith in the Day of Judgment. From this perspective, any religious community that upholds these values and sincerely follows its moral and spiritual teachings is deemed worthy of salvation and divine reward in the hereafter. This reading, however, often overlooks the broader exegetical and theological context within which these verses were revealed.⁴⁹ This interpretation is carried out in a literal (*ḥarfīyyah*) manner, without consideration for the broader methodological tools essential to understanding the Quranic text.⁵⁰ One of the most critical oversights in such an approach is the neglect of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (circumstances of revelation), which illuminate the historical and situational context in which specific verses were revealed.

When viewed through the lens of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the contextual meaning of verses such as al-Baqarah 2:62, al-Ma'idah 5:69, and al-Hajj 22:17 becomes more precise and more nuanced. A serious methodological error occurs when interpreters bypass *asbāb al-nuzūl* and isolate verses from their revelatory contexts. The importance of this discipline is well established in classical Islamic scholarship.⁵¹ Scholars such as al-Wāḥidī, al-Suyūṭī, and Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd unanimously emphasise the centrality of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Quranic interpretation. In fact, al-Wāḥidī famously asserted that it is impermissible to interpret verses of the Quran that have known circumstances of revelation without first referring to those specific contexts.⁵²

⁴⁹ Abdul Moqsiṭh *Argumen Pluralisme Agama*, 240.

⁵⁰ Asep Setiawan, "Kritik atas Penafsiran Abdul Moqsiṭh Ghazali tentang Keselamatan Non-Muslim," *Tsaqafah* 12(2) (2016), 353–368, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v12i2.760>.

⁵¹ Niswatur Rohmah, "Studi Analisis Kaidah Asbab al-Nuzul: Kelebihan dan Kekurangannya," *Al Tadabbur: Jurnal Ilmu Alquran dan Tafsir* 4(2) (2019), 156–173, <https://doi.org/10.30868/at.v4i02.467>.

⁵² ʿAlī bin Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Saudi Arabia: Dār al-Aṣṣalāh, 1992), 8.

There is a consensus among classical scholars and Quranic exegetes that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (circumstances of revelation) of the three often-cited verses, Surah al-Baqarah 2:62, Surah al-Ma'idah 5:69, and Surah al-Hajj 22:17, relate specifically to the fate of individuals who lived before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and, therefore, did not have the historical opportunity to encounter or follow his message. For instance, the context of the revelation of Surah al-Baqarah 2:62 involves the companion Salmān al-Fārisī, who approached the Prophet and described the piety, worship practices, and messianic expectations of earlier religious communities who had anticipated the arrival of the final prophet. Upon hearing this, the Prophet initially stated that those previous peoples were destined for Hellfire. In response to this assertion, Allah revealed the verse to correct the understanding, clarifying that those among them who had sincere belief in God and the Last Day, and performed righteous deeds before the coming of Islam, would not be condemned.⁵³

Amer Adnan al-Hafī, after conducting an in-depth analysis of classical and modern commentaries and examining the thematic correlation of relevant Quranic verses, concludes that the adherents of the religious groups mentioned in Surah al-Baqarah 2:62 fall into the category of those eligible for salvation. However, this salvation is not unconditional; it applies only to individuals who lived before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or who never had the opportunity to receive and understand his message.⁵⁴ In this regard, the Islamic theological concept of *taklīf* (moral-religious responsibility) becomes

⁵³ Al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, 8; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 2002), 78.

⁵⁴ Amer Adnan Al Hafī, "The Salvation of Followers of Religions in the Quran in the Light of the 'Salvation Verse': (Al-Baqarah: 62)," *Jordan Journal of Islamic Studies* 14(1) (2018), 127, <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/jois/vol14/iss1/7>.

central, particularly the doctrine of *bulūgh al-da‘wah* (the reception of the divine message).

According to al-Hafi, there are three groups of people who may be saved based on Surah al-Baqarah 2:62: i) Those who believed sincerely in their respective religions and died before the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad. ii) Those who followed their religious teachings and later accepted the message brought by the Prophet Muhammad. iii) Those who believed in their religions but did not accept Islam due to genuine ignorance of the Prophet’s teachings. This interpretation offers a contextual and nuanced reading that takes into account external theological and historical elements, in contrast to the literalist approach of the pluralist camp, which interprets the verse in isolation from its revelatory context and without considering the broader framework of Islamic theology. Hence, it becomes clear which interpretation is grounded in a contextual methodology and which relies solely on a textualist reading.

On the other hand, proponents of religious pluralism often overlook the critical role of *Makkī* and *Madanī* classifications in Quranic interpretation, particularly in understanding the coherence and progression of legislation in Islamic law. Their interpretive approach frequently involves combining *Makkī* and *Madanī* verses without acknowledging their distinct historical and legislative contexts. For instance, they juxtapose verses such as Surah al-Baqarah 2:62 and Ali ‘Imran 3:85 with Surah al-Kafirun (109:6), interpreting the latter—“To you your religion, and to me mine”—as evidence that Islam recognises and accepts the validity of all religions and does not claim exclusive truth.

Such a reading, however, is methodologically flawed. It disregards the chronological development of revelation and the function of *Makkī* verses, which primarily emphasise spiritual and theological foundations, in contrast

to *Madanī* verses, which introduce legal and communal directives. Failing to recognise this distinction leads to a superficial interpretation that neglects the historical process through which Islamic law and theology were revealed and formed.⁵⁵ Therefore, the process of deriving legal and theological conclusions from the verses cited by proponents of religious pluralism does not align with the interpretive principles upheld by authoritative Quranic commentators.

Thus, this paper asserts that the group supporting religious pluralism interprets Quranic verses in a manner that aligns with their own ideological inclinations, selectively reinforcing their arguments. In the discipline of Quranic studies, such an approach is identified as *ta'wīl mamdūh*, an interpretive method that deviates from the established principles of exegesis and is therefore considered impermissible or misleading by mainstream scholars.⁵⁶ This form of interpretation is rooted in the principle of distortion (*tahrīf*) of the Quranic message. It falls under what is classified in Quranic sciences as a blameworthy or invalid interpretation. An interpretation is deemed *ta'wīl mamdūh* when it contradicts the rules of the Arabic language or fails to adhere to the established sources of Islamic law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).

Furthermore, such interpretation is considered invalid when it neglects foundational principles of Quranic hermeneutics, including *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *nāsikh wa al-mansūkh* (abrogating and abrogated verses), and other essential exegetical sciences. Without a grounding in these supporting disciplines, the resulting interpretation risks

⁵⁵ Hasna 'Afifah & Halimatul Sakdiah, "Makna dan Karakteristik Ayat Al-Makky dan Almadany Serta Urgensi Mempelajarinya," *Mushaf Journal: Jurnal Ilmu Al Quran dan Hadis* 2(2) (2022), 134, <https://doi.org/10.54443/mushaf.v2i2.27>.

⁵⁶ Israa Abdullah Karim, "Interpretation of Verbal Similarities at Imam Razi - Surat Al-Kahf As a Model: (An Objective Study)," *Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences* 63 (2021), 26, <https://doi.org/10.33193/jalhss.63.2021.375>.

misrepresenting the intended meanings of the Qur'an.⁵⁷ The neglect of *asbāb al-nuzūl* by proponents of religious pluralism in Indonesia results in interpretations that are overly textual and susceptible to *ta'wīl mamdūh*—interpretations deemed unsound within the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis. Ironically, this rigid textual approach contradicts the very interpretive theories that these proponents often claim to uphold, such as contextual and dynamic readings of the text. This inconsistency reveals a methodological flaw in their interpretive framework, suggesting that the theories employed by supporters of religious pluralism in Indonesia lack coherence and internal consistency.

2) *Sunatullāh* and Human Diversity

The argument that human diversity is part of *Sunnatullāh*, the divine law or natural order established by Allah, is not entirely misplaced. However, the interpretive error arises when this notion is extended to claim that religious diversity signifies Allah's acceptance of all religions as equally true, even those that emerged or persisted after the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). While the Quran indeed acknowledges diversity, this recognition does not equate to the validation of all religious paths. Rather, it reflects the Quranic principle that there is no compulsion in religion (*lā ikrāha fī al-dīn*) once the message has been clearly conveyed.

This approach highlights the significance of human free will and intellectual responsibility in embracing the truth of Islam. Allah created human beings with reason and discernment, enabling them to understand the message of Islam delivered by the Prophet. This perspective aligns with the meaning of Surah Yunus 10:99, particularly when interpreted in conjunction with verse 101, which

⁵⁷ Nadir Boulmali, "Maṣāliḥ al-Ummah bayn al-Ta'wīl al-Maḥmūd wa al-Madhmūm," *Majallah Kuliyah al-Qurān al-Karīm* 6 (2015), 357.

emphasises reflection and understanding as prerequisites for faith. Therefore, the Quranic recognition of religious diversity serves as a test of moral agency rather than an endorsement of theological relativism.⁵⁸

Surah al-Hujurat (49:13), frequently cited by proponents of religious pluralism, is also subject to misinterpretation. This verse, in fact, does not address the concept of religious pluralism. Instead, its primary message pertains to the prohibition against pride in one's lineage or tribal affiliation, a common social ill during the *Jāhiliyyah* (pre-Islamic) period.⁵⁹ In Islam, lineage is not the primary criterion of worth; rather, piety (*taqwā*) is the true standard of excellence. This principle is affirmed in numerous hadiths, including those narrated by Abū Hurayrah, Abū Dharr, Ḥabīb ibn Khārash, and others, which emphasise that nobility in the sight of Allah is not based on ancestry but on righteousness and moral conduct. Furthermore, Surah al-Hujurat 49:13 does not mention other religions, nor does it discuss the theological validity of religious pluralism. The verse is specifically addressed to the followers of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and serves to address social issues within the Muslim community, particularly those concerning arrogance, tribalism, and the behaviour of hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*).

Thus, citing this verse as evidence for religious pluralism stretches its meaning far beyond its intended scope and context.⁶⁰ The diversity created by Allah in terms of nations and tribes is not meant to establish superiority but to serve as a means for mutual recognition, with ultimate judgment based on the sincerity and quality of

⁵⁸ Muḥammad Ṭāhir bin 'Āshūr, *al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Tunisia: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyyah li al-Nashr, 1984), 11:295.

⁵⁹ Muḥammad al-Amīn bin 'Abd Allah al-Hurārī, *Tafsīr Hadā'iq al-Rūḥ wa al-Rayḥān fī Rawābī 'Ulūm al-Qurān* (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāh, 2001), 27:379.

⁶⁰ Sa'īd Ḥawwā, *al-Asās fī al-Tafsīr* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1424H), 9:5420.

one's faith and piety. While it is true that the Quran prohibits contempt or hatred towards the differences Allah has created, this recognition of diversity does not imply validation of religious pluralism in the theological sense, that is, the belief that all religions are equally true and valid paths to salvation. The verse centres on *taqwā* and faith in Allah as the decisive factors for human distinction, not on affirming multiple religious truths.⁶¹

Therefore, it is misguided for proponents of religious pluralism to use this verse as a basis for justifying religious pluralism from the Quranic perspective. This claim becomes even more questionable when one reads the following verse, verse 15, which explicitly states that true faith is belief in Allah and His Messenger (Muhammad). Furthermore, those who doubt the truth of Islam as brought by Muhammad are classified as non-believers.⁶² Hence, it is unclear how the interpretation that religious pluralism is justified by the Quran based on *sunnatullāh* can be sustained.

Furthermore, using Surah al-Ma'idah (5:48) as a basis to argue that religious diversity is a *sunnatullāh* that must be theologically justified is a misreading and a superficial interpretation of the Quranic text. Focusing on the phrase "وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً," Ibn Kathīr explains:

"If Allah had willed, He would have made all of humanity one nation with one religion and one law, so that there would be no abrogation of the previous laws. However, this was not the will of Allah. Allah willed that each messenger carries different laws, then He abrogated all or part of the previous laws with the advent of subsequent messages. Finally, Allah abrogated all previous messages with the advent of Muhammad,

⁶¹ Ḥawwā, *al-Asās fī al-Tafsīr*, 9:5433.

⁶² Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah, *al-Tafsīr al-Ḥadīth* (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-'Arabiyah, 1383H), 1:457.

making him the messenger for all humanity and the seal of the prophets.”⁶³

This interpretation by Ibn Kathīr is also endorsed by Muḥammad Abū Zahrah in his tafsīr work.⁶⁴

The misinterpretation by proponents of religious pluralism stems from their partial and selective reading of Quranic verses, which leads to the erroneous conclusion that religious diversity is a *sunnatullāh* that must be accepted and theologically validated, as previously discussed.⁶⁵ This fragmented reading of the Quranic text has become a characteristic approach among proponents of religious pluralism, who often rely on the notion of interpretive freedom.⁶⁶ However, interpreting Quranic verses in isolation and without regard for their broader context inevitably leads to misinterpretation and distortion of the intended meaning.

When interpreted in its entirety, it becomes clear that Allah does not will for all of humanity to follow a single *sharī‘ah* across all eras. However, this does not imply that Allah affirms the truth of all religions. Rather, the intended meaning of the verse is that Allah decreed the succession of different *sharā‘i* (religious laws) through various prophets, culminating in the final message brought by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Allah endowed human beings with intellect so they may discern between truth and falsehood. The ultimate truth lies in following the Quran, which abrogates previous scriptures, though without denying that

⁶³ Ismā‘īl bin ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurān al-‘Azīm* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyibah, 1420), 3:115.

⁶⁴ Muḥammad Abū Zahrah, *Zuhrah al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 4:2222.

⁶⁵ Moh Isom Mudin, "Pluralisme Agama: Akar dan Justifikasi al-Qur'an," *Al-Rasikh: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 6(2) (2017), 100, <https://doi.org/10.38073/rasikh.v6i02.59>.

⁶⁶ Mohd Nasir & Wan Ismail, "Cabaran Liberal Kepada Umat Islam," 1.

earlier divine books were once legitimate sources of guidance for humanity.

3) The Meaning of *al-Islām* in the Quran

Both classical and modern Quranic commentators agree that *al-Islām* is not limited to the religion brought by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), but rather encompasses the essential message delivered by all previous prophets—submission and obedience to Allah. This understanding is affirmed by al-Ālūsī in his interpretation of Surah Ali ‘Imran (3:67), where he states that neither Judaism nor Christianity, in their later forms, are recognised by Allah. According to the Quran, only *al-Islām* is divinely acknowledged, though this *al-Islām* includes the core monotheistic message common to all prophets.⁶⁷ Therefore, no religion other than *al-Islām* is validated in the sight of Allah.

The status of Islam as the only religion accepted by Allah is affirmed through the stories of the previous prophets in the Quran. Prophet Nuh, for example, is commanded by Allah to be a Muslim in Surah Yunus 10:72. Similarly, Prophet Ibrahim in Surah al-Baqarah 2:131, Prophet Musa in Surah Yunus 10:84, Prophet Sulayman in Surah al-Naml (27:44), and Prophet ‘Isa in Surah al-Ma’idah (5:111) are all described as submitting to Allah, affirming their identity as Muslims in the broader Qur’anic sense. The essence of Islam in these narratives is the affirmation of Allah’s oneness and the rejection of *shirk* (associating partners with Him), even though each prophet brought a different *sharī‘ah* (set of laws) suited to their communities. This distinction is explicitly mentioned in Surah al-Ma’idah (5:48), which underscores that while

⁶⁷ Maḥmūd bin ‘Abd Allah al-Ālūsī, *Rūh al-Ma‘ānī fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm wa al-Sab‘ al-Mathānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1415H), 3:197.

legal prescriptions may differ, the fundamental message of monotheism remains constant.⁶⁸

It is important to note that with the arrival of each new prophet, the *sharī'ah* of previous communities was often abrogated and replaced with new divine legislation. This process of abrogation (*naskh*) continued until the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The message of Islam brought by the Prophet Muhammad represents the final and complete revelation, which is not subject to further abrogation. This is affirmed in Surah al-Ma'idah (5:3), which declares the perfection and completion of the religion, and in Surah al-An'am (6:115), which emphasises that Allah's words are perfect and unchangeable.⁶⁹

With the abrogation of the messages brought by previous prophets, it becomes clear that the form of Islam delivered by earlier prophets is no longer valid in its original legal and ritual dimensions. What remains binding and recognised is the Islam brought by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Therefore, it is not an exaggeration for Muslim scholars such as Yūsuf al-Qarāḍāwī to assert that while *al-Islām* was the religion of all prophets sent by Allah, it has now become a specific designation for the final message revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.⁷⁰

It becomes problematic when proponents of religious pluralism in Indonesia interpret the term *al-Islām* while neglecting, or perhaps even being unaware of the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) affirming that his teachings abrogate all previous religious messages. As narrated by Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal:

⁶⁸ Hosnia Abdullah Hweij, "Tolerance and Societal Peace in the Quran," *Annals of the Faculty of Arts Ain Shams University* 44(1) (2016), 412, <https://doi.org/10.21608/aafu.2016.9640>.

⁶⁹ Aḥmad bin Yūsuf al-Ḥalabī, *'Umdah al-Huffāz fī Tafṣīr Ashraf al-Alfāz* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 3:419.

⁷⁰ Yūsuf al-Qarḍāwī, *al-Madkhal li Ma'rifah al-Islam* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah, 1990), <https://www.al-qaradawi.net/node/5134>.

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ ثَابِتٍ قَالَ جَاءَ عُمَرُ بْنُ الْخَطَّابِ إِلَى النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى
 اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَقَالَ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، إِنِّي مَرَرْتُ بِأَخٍ لِي مِنْ بَنِي
 قُرَيْظَةَ فَكَتَبَ لِي جَوَامِعَ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ أَلَا أُعْرِضُهَا عَلَيْكَ. قَالَ:
 فَتَغَيَّرَ وَجْهُ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ. قَالَ عَبْدُ اللَّهِ: فَعُلْتُ
 لَهُ: أَلَا تَرَى مَا يَوَجِّهِ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ. فَقَالَ عُمَرُ:
 رَضِينَا بِاللَّهِ رَبًّا وَبِالْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا وَبِمُحَمَّدٍ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ
 رَسُولًا. قَالَ: فَسُرِّيَ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ ثُمَّ قَالَ: وَالَّذِي
 نَفْسِي بِيَدِهِ لَوْ أَصْبَحَ فِيكُمْ مُوسَى ثُمَّ اتَّبَعْتُمُوهُ وَتَرَكْتُمُونِي لَضَلَلْتُمْ
 إِنَّكُمْ حَظِي مِنَ الْأَمَمِ وَأَنَا حَظُّكُمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ.⁷¹

Translation: ‘Abd Allāh bin Thābit said: ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb came to the Prophet (PBUH) and said, “O Rasulullāh, I passed by a brother of mine from Banū Qurayzah, and he wrote for me some comprehensive statements from the Torah. Should I not present them to you? (‘Abd Allāh bin Thābit said), the facial expression of Rasulullāh (PBUH) changed. I asked (‘Umar), didn’t you notice what happened to the face of Rasulullāh? ‘Umar hurriedly said, “We are pleased with Allāh as our Lord, with Islam as our religion, and with Muhammad (PBUH) as our Messenger”. He (the narrator) said: *Then the Prophet (PBUH) was relieved (of his distress) and said: “By the One in Whose hand is my soul, if Moses were alive among you and you followed him and abandoned me, you would surely go astray. You are my share among the nations, and I am your share among the prophets.”*

⁷¹ Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal* (Beirut: Mu’assasah al-Risālah, 1999), 25:198.

The hadith clearly indicates that the Islamic law brought by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) abrogates the laws of all previous prophets. The Prophet explicitly stated that if the Prophet Moses, who was sent long before him, were to be alive during the time of his mission, he would be obligated to follow the law revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, those who abandon the law of the Prophet Muhammad in favour of the earlier Mosaic law are in error. This is because the law of the Prophet Muhammad is the final divine legislation for all of humanity, and his message supersedes and nullifies the previous prophetic messages.⁷²

In addition to the hadith mentioned earlier, numerous other narrations affirm that the meaning of Surah Ali 'Imran 3:19 and 85, as well as Surah al-Ma'idah (5:3) refers specifically to the religion of Islam as brought by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), not to the general submission (*islām*) taught by previous prophets. Even if proponents of religious pluralism reject the authority of hadith, the Quran itself provides clear textual evidence that *al-Islām* in its final form refers to the message conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad. This is made explicit in Surah al-A'raf 7:158, which states that Muhammad is the Messenger sent to all of humanity, without exception. So, on what basis do proponents of religious pluralism justify the validity of all religions using Quranic verses? Their arguments emerge from a forced and selective interpretation of the Quran, shaped more by ideological agendas than by sound exegetical principles.

Abdo Muhammad Ateen offers a comprehensive analysis of the term *al-Islām* from both terminological and substantive perspectives. He draws on definitions provided

⁷² Majmū'ah min al-Baḥithīn bi Ishrāf 'Alwī bin 'Abd al-Qādir, "Al-Mawsū'ah al-'Aqadiyyah," lib.efatwa.ir, 1433, <https://lib.efatwa.ir/46348/1/139/>.

by prominent Arabic linguists, including Ibn Fāris, al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥāhānī, and al-Jawharī. These definitions converge on a core set of meanings: to be safe from harm, to return (to truth), to submit, to humble oneself, to obey, and to be in a state of well-being.⁷³ While the term *al-Islām* may carry terminological meanings such as submission and surrender, these definitions alone are insufficient when interpreting the Quranic and Prophetic usage of the term.

In Quranic discourse, terminological meanings must be complemented by substantive meanings that reflect the context and application within Islamic teachings. For instance, the term *al-Ṣalāh* in the Quran cannot be fully understood by its literal meaning alone, which is "prayer." A comprehensive understanding of *al-Ṣalāh*, including its prescribed number of units (*rak'āt*), recitations, and specific rituals, is derived from the Prophetic tradition. Without the substantive explanation provided by the Sunnah, the command to perform *Ṣalāh* would remain vague. The hadith, "Pray as you have seen me pray" (*Ṣallū kamā ra'aytumūnī uṣallī*)⁷⁴, provides the necessary interpretive framework. This clearly demonstrates that Quranic terminology must be understood not only in its linguistic or terminological sense, but also in its substantive, contextually developed form through the teachings of the Prophet.

The substantive meaning of the term *al-Islām* can be clearly understood from the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, narrated by al-Bukhārī, in which Islam is defined through its core pillars and practices:

⁷³ Abdo Muhammad Ateen, "Islam: The Message of Peace and Tolerance: Some Examples from the Biography of the Holy Prophet," *al-Baseera* 3(2) (2014), 371, <https://www.numl.edu.pk/journals/subjects/156109107918-AL-BASEERA> 6 (Vol. 3 - Issue. 2) DEC-2014.pdf.

⁷⁴ Aḥmad bin al-Ḥusanīn al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), 2:486.

عَنِ ابْنِ عُمَرَ، رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: " بُنِيَ الْإِسْلَامُ عَلَى خَمْسٍ: شَهَادَةِ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَأَنَّ مُحَمَّدًا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ، وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ، وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ، وَالْحَجِّ، وَصَوْمِ رَمَضَانَ " ⁷⁵.

Narrated by Ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with them both): The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said: “Islam is built upon five pillars: testifying that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, establishing prayer, giving *zakāt*, performing pilgrimage (*hājj*), and fasting during the month of Ramaḍān.”

Muḥammad Ateen explains that *al-Islām* refers to the testimony that Allah is the one true Lord and that Muhammad is His Messenger. However, it is not confined to this declaration alone; it also encompasses the observance of prayer, the giving of *zakāt*, the pilgrimage (*hājj*), and fasting during the month of Ramaḍān. Furthermore, Ateen asserts that *al-Islām*, in its comprehensive sense, includes everything conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad. Similarly, Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Rāziq, in his interpretation of Surah al-Nahl (16:44), states that *al-Islām*, from the Quranic perspective, represents the essential beliefs that all human beings are required to embrace, namely, the principles revealed in the Quran. In essence, *al-Islām* refers to the entirety of divine revelation communicated to Muhammad and preserved in the Quran.⁷⁶

Considering the principles of the Arabic language, when a term encompasses both terminological and

⁷⁵ Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ al-Mukhtaṣar min Umūr Rasūlillah* (Damascus: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāh, 1422), 1:10.

⁷⁶ Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Rāziq, *al-Dīn wa al-Wahy wa al-Islām* (Cairo: Mu’assasah al-Handawī li al-Ta‘līm wa al-Thaqāfah, 2012), 77.

substantive dimensions, priority must be given to the substantive meaning.⁷⁷ Accordingly, it becomes evident that the interpretation of the term *al-Islām* by supporters of religious pluralism in Indonesia is superficial and reductionist. Their approach appears to be driven more by ideological inclination or subjective desires than by a sincere pursuit of the truth grounded in the Quranic and linguistic tradition.

Conclusion

There is no Qur'anic verse that affirms religious pluralism in the ideological sense, that is, the belief that all religions are equally true. However, the Quran firmly upholds values such as tolerance among religious communities, prohibits compulsion in matters of faith, forbids insulting the beliefs of others, and advocates moderation in religious practice. It explicitly declares that Islam, as brought by the Prophet Muhammad, is the final and absolute religion. Hence, the possibility of religious pluralism, as defined above, is categorically denied within the Quranic framework.

In response to certain Indonesian Muslim intellectuals who promote religious pluralism by relying on forced or selective interpretations of Quranic verses, such actions can be classified as blameworthy, in light of warnings in Surah al-Baqarah 2:41, 79, and 174. The ideology of religious pluralism espoused by these individuals is not only theologically unfounded but also lacks acceptance among the majority of Indonesian Muslims, who view such interpretations as erroneous and misleading. Rather than fostering genuine religious tolerance and moderation, the discourse on religious pluralism has instead provoked internal discord within the Muslim community. The widespread rejection of this concept by prominent religious

⁷⁷ Aḥmad Fahmī Abū Sināh, *al-'Urf wa al-'Ādāh fī Ra'y al-Fuqahā' 'arḍ Naẓariyyah fī al-Tashrī' al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Maṭba'ah al-Azhar, 1947), 16.

scholars globally further demonstrates its lack of universal credibility or acceptance.

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