

The Epistemological Foundations of Nahdlatul Ulama: Religious Authority, Scholarly Tradition, and Muslim Unity

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ABSTRACT

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, plays a significant role in establishing and preserving Sunni religious authority through the framework of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, which integrates the Qur'an, the Sunnah, *ijmā'*, and the scholarly tradition of Muslim jurists and theologians. This study analyzes Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah's epistemological framework in Nahdlatul Ulama as the foundation for constructing religious authority, transmitting Islamic knowledge, and preserving Muslim unity. Employing a qualitative approach based on library research, the study finds that NU's religious framework is founded upon several fundamental principles: (1) adherence to the collective path of the believers (*al-jamā'ah*), namely following a religious methodology grounded in the consensus of the mainstream Muslim scholarly tradition while maintaining a balance between scriptural texts, reason, and social realities; (2) the preservation of communal cohesion (*ijtimā'*) through a strong commitment to Muslim unity and a highly cautious approach to *takfīr* (excommunication) of fellow Muslims; (3) adherence to the teachings of the Prophet, the Companions, the *Tābi'īn*, and subsequent generations of scholars, recognizing their epistemic role in transmitting the Qur'an, hadith, *tafsīr*, and *fiqh* through an unbroken chain of scholarly transmission (*sanad*); and (4) the understanding of *jihād* as an ethical and methodological instrument for safeguarding the integrity of faith, promoting the public good (*maṣlaḥah*), and preserving Muslim unity, rather than as a justification for terrorism or indiscriminate violence.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Religious polarization, competing claims of authority, and the increasing tendency toward *takfīr* have become salient features of contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia. These developments have been further intensified by the circulation of religious interpretations through digital media and the growing influence of transnational Islamic movements, which often promote more scripturalist and homogenizing understandings of Islam. In this context, debates over religious authenticity, the legitimacy of local Islamic traditions, and the authority of established religious institutions have become increasingly prominent. These dynamics have renewed scholarly attention to models of Islamic

moderation that can reconcile doctrinal commitment with socio-cultural plurality in Indonesia¹.

In this broader context, Islam Nusantara has emerged as one of the most influential intellectual discourses within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), articulating a contextual and historically grounded understanding of Islam. Rather than constituting a new theological school or an independent *madhhab*, *Islam Nusantara* is widely understood as a discursive framework that emphasizes the historically embedded and culturally situated nature of Islamic practice in the Indonesian archipelago.² It highlights how Islamic teachings have interacted dynamically with local traditions without losing their connection to universal doctrinal principles. In this sense, *Islam Nusantara* does not introduce a new creed but rather affirms the plurality of legitimate Islamic expressions shaped by diverse historical and cultural contexts.

Scholarly discussions of *Islam Nusantara* have generally emphasized its socio-cultural, educational, and political dimensions. A significant strand of literature focuses on its role in promoting religious moderation, tolerance, and civic values within Indonesian Muslim society, particularly through NU's educational institutions and socio-religious networks.³ Another body of scholarship interprets *Islam Nusantara* as a form of cultural or legal adaptation, highlighting the contextualization of Islamic teachings within local Indonesian traditions.⁴ These approaches have contributed substantially to understanding the sociological and cultural dynamics of Indonesian Islam, particularly regarding identity, pluralism, and nation-building.

However, while these studies offer valuable insights, they tend to privilege descriptive and socio-cultural analyses and pay comparatively little attention to the intellectual and epistemological foundations underlying NU's conception of religious authority and moderation. In particular, the epistemological structure embedded in the tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, including concepts such as *al-jamā'ah* (communal unity), *ijmā'* (scholarly consensus),⁵ *sanad* (chains of transmission), and scholarly authority, has not been sufficiently examined as an integrated system of knowledge validation. As a result, scholars often describe moderation in the context of Islam Nusantara in normative or sociological terms, without fully addressing its theological-epistemic grounding.

This gap is significant because NU's understanding of Islam is not merely a socio-cultural construct, but is deeply rooted in a long-standing intellectual tradition that traces its genealogy to classical Sunni theology. NU's theological orientation is characterized by adherence to the Ash'arite and Māturīdite schools of theology, commitment to the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, and integration of classical ethical and spiritual traditions within Islamic thought.⁶ Within this framework, religious authority is not arbitrary but is structured through established epistemic mechanisms that regulate the transmission, interpretation, and validation of religious knowledge.

Building on this context, this study argues that socio-cultural explanations alone cannot fully account for the model of religious moderation associated with Nahdlatul Ulama. Instead, it must be analyzed through the epistemological logic of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, in

¹ Muhammad Valiyyul Haqq, "Weighing 'Islam Nusantara': A Lexical and Historical Critique of the Terminology of Islamic Moderation in Indonesia," 2025. [Google](#)

² Theguh Saumantri, "The Dialectic of Islam Nusantara and Its Contribution To The Development of Religious Moderation In Indonesia," 2020. [Google](#)

³ Mujamil Qomar, "Islam Nusantara An Indonesian Translation to Practice Islam," 2019, 131–50, <https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2019.14.1.131-150>.

⁴ Anggun Kurnia, Robbani Rosita, and Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, "ISLAM NUSANTARA MENURUT NAHDLATUL ULAMA" 2, no. 2 (2025). [Google](#)

⁵ Nurul Husna et al., "The Methodology Employed by Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al- Jama ' Ah When Confronting Contemporary Challenges to Islamic Thought" 15 (2022). [Google](#)

⁶ Agil Shodiki Manurung, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan ' S Theological Thought And Its Selective Reception In Contemporary Indonesian Pesantren," 2025. [Google](#)

which concepts such as *al-jamā'ah*, *ijmā'*, *sanad*, and scholarly authority form an interconnected system of religious validation. This epistemological system not only ensures continuity with classical Sunni tradition but also enables adaptive engagement with contemporary social realities in Indonesia.

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its attempt to reconceptualize *Islam Nusantara* not merely as a cultural discourse or a model of religious moderation,⁷ but as an epistemologically grounded framework rooted in Sunni theological tradition. By integrating doctrinal analysis with discourse on *Islam Nusantara*, this article shows that NU's model of moderation rests on a structured epistemology of knowledge transmission and religious authority. Concepts such as *al-jamā'ah*, *ijmā'*, *sanad*, and scholarly authority function not only as theological categories but also as operational mechanisms that shape how religious knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted within the NU tradition. This perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Indonesian Islam by bridging socio-cultural interpretations and theological-epistemic analysis.

B. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative library research design,⁸ as its primary focus is the textual and interpretative analysis of Qur'anic verses and Islamic scholarly works related to the theological construction of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. The study adopts a qualitative approach to emphasize interpretative meaning-making processes within Islamic textual traditions, particularly regarding *dalā'il* (religious evidence), rather than merely collecting descriptive data.

The primary sources of this study consist of the Qur'an, particularly verses relevant to theological discourse within Sunni Islam, classical and contemporary *tafsīr* literature,⁹ and selected works of Islamic theology and jurisprudence. Secondary sources include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly writings on Sunni theology,¹⁰ epistemology, and Islamic intellectual history.¹¹ These sources contextualize and critically engage with how religious authority is constructed within the tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. The corpus of analysis includes Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), and classical and contemporary scholarly works that address key doctrinal concepts such as *al-jamā'ah*, *ijmā'*, *sanad*, and scholarly authority. These concepts serve as analytical units through which the study examines the epistemological structure of Sunni thought.

This study adopts a historical-epistemological approach to trace how religious authority within Sunni Islam formed and developed. In particular, it examines how scholars construct the legitimacy of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* through scholarly transmission, consensus (*ijmā'*), and institutionalized authority across historical contexts. A comparative-critical approach examines differences between mainstream Sunni interpretations and the approaches of reformist and Salafi thinkers, particularly in their use of evidence (*dalā'il*) and interpretative methodologies.¹²

In terms of textual analysis, Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions are interpreted through authoritative (*mu'tabar*) exegetical methods, including consideration of the apparent

⁷ Nurhanisah and Afrizal Tjoetra, "The Dialectical Relationship Between Religious," *Jurnal Ar-Raniry* 5, no. 1 (2025): 31–44, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jpi.v5i1.31388>.

⁸ Lexy J. Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2014). Hal. 4. [Google](#)

⁹ Nashruddin Baidan, *Metodologi Khusus Penelitian Tafsir* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2016). Hal. 28. [Google](#)

¹⁰ Muhammad Anwar Syah Al-Kasymiri, *Ikfar Al-Mulhidin Fi Dlaruriyat Al-Din* (Karachi: Majlis Ilmi, 2004). [Google](#)

¹¹ Simon Wolfgang and Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, "Casting Aside the Clutches of Conjecture : The Striving for Religious Certainty at Aligarh" 27, no. 4 (2020): 386–410, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685195-00260A15>.

¹² Pieter Coppens, "Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Qāsimī 's Treatise on Wiping over Socks and the Rise of a Distinct Salafi Method," *VU Research Portal* 62, no. 2 (2022): 154–87, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-61040014>.

meaning (*zāhir*), the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and interpretations from both classical and contemporary exegetes (*mufasssirūn*). This ensures that scriptural interpretation is grounded within established scholarly traditions rather than isolated rational speculation.

Finally, this study is a historical-epistemological inquiry that employs a descriptive-critical approach. It seeks to reconstruct the epistemological framework of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* by analyzing how Sunni intellectual tradition produces, transmits, and validates religious knowledge. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a balanced analysis that is critically engaged with contemporary scholarly debates while remaining aware of the historical continuity of Islamic epistemic traditions.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Epistemological Foundations of Nahdlatul Ulama

K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari is central to establishing Nahdlatul Ulama, an Islamic institution that has played a strategic role in the development of Islam in Indonesia, particularly in preserving and sustaining the tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (*Aswaja*). The founding of NU cannot be separated from the historical context of Sunni Islam's dominance in the Indonesian archipelago, which, from its early development, has been shaped by Islamic legal schools (*madhhab*) and a *da'wah* approach characterized by moderation and accommodation to local culture.¹³

The Articles of Association of Nahdlatul Ulama, formulated during the third NU Congress, explicitly state that NU adheres firmly to the four authoritative Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhāhib*): Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi, and Hanbali. This commitment reflects NU's orientation toward preserving the continuity of classical Islamic scholarly tradition while affirming its position as an institutional representation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (*Aswaja*) in Indonesia.¹⁴

In creed (*'aqidah*), NU adopts a middle position (*wasathiyah*) that balances rational and textual approaches. This approach differs from the Mu'tazilah's tendency to emphasize rationalism to an extreme degree and from Wahhabism, which tends toward a literalist orientation. NU explicitly follows the theological traditions of Ash'ariyah and Maturidiyah, which integrate reason (*'aql*) with transmitted textual evidence (*naql*) in a balanced and harmonious manner.¹⁵

Meanwhile, in *tasawwuf*, Nahdlatul Ulama adopts Sunni Sufism oriented toward the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) without abandoning adherence to Islamic law (*sharī'ah*). This Sufi tradition draws on classical figures such as Al-Ghazali and Junayd al-Baghdadi, who emphasized integrating Islam's spiritual, ethical, and juridical dimensions. This approach further affirms NU Islam's moderate, contextual character and its firm roots in the classical Islamic scholarly tradition.¹⁶

The historical background of Nahdlatul Ulama's establishment rests on two main factors. First, Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) scholars worried about Muslim society's shift away from traditional *pesantren*-based education, driven by the growing influence of modern education and Islamic reform movements in the early twentieth century. This shift was seen as potentially weakening the transmission of classical Islamic knowledge, which the *pesantren* tradition had long preserved.

¹³ Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII Dan XVIII* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2004). Hal. 360. [Google](#)

¹⁴ Andrée Feillard, *NU Vis-à-Vis Negara: Pencarian Isi, Bentuk Dan Makna* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, n.d.). [Google](#)

¹⁵ Hasyim Asy'ari, *Terjemah Kitab Risalah Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah*, ed. Hasyim Asy'ari (Bekasi: Al-Muqshith Pustaka, 2021). [Google](#)

¹⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996). [Google](#)

Second, NU's establishment also responded to transnational ideological currents such as Pan-Islamism, championed by Jamaluddin al-Afghani, and reformist Islamic movements from the Middle East, which were seen as potentially shifting Indonesian Muslims' religious orientation away from their rooted local and *madhhab*-based traditions.¹⁷

In this context, NU emerged to revitalize and clarify the Muslim community's religious understanding by presenting a compassionate, moderate, and contextual form of Islam, in accordance with the scholarly tradition of the *salaf* within *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Ideologically, Nahdlatul Ulama implements Islamic moderation through principles such as *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasāmuh* (tolerance), *i'tidāl/tawāzun* (balance), and the continuous encouragement of contextual change (*tathawwur*) and an adaptive methodological approach (*manhajyyah*).

These concepts reflect the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* tradition upheld by NU, which rejects extremism and literalist interpretations that disregard Indonesian society's socio-cultural dynamics. In this context, NU's moderate values provide a strategic foundation for addressing challenges posed by extreme theological tendencies and social conflicts, while strengthening the harmonization of Islam within Indonesia's religiously diverse society.¹⁸ Based on the characteristics of creed (*'aqidah*) adopted by Nahdlatul Ulama, several aspects can be identified, including:

1. Following the Collective Path of the Believers (*Jamā'ah Al-Mu'minīn*)

In matters of creed, NU institutionally refers to the theological tradition of al-Ash'arī and al-Māturīdī.¹⁹ Contemporary academic studies widely understand these two theological schools as the main foundations of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* (*Aswaja*), which has historically developed as the mainstream current within Sunni Islam. This position places NU within the well-established global Sunni tradition, both historically and intellectually.

From a demographic perspective, Sunni Islam indeed represents the majority of the global Muslim population. A comprehensive report by Pew Research Center indicates that approximately 87–90% of the global Muslim population is affiliated with Sunni Islam,²⁰ while the remainder consists of Shia Islam and other smaller groups. Islamic discourse often cites this demographic fact to explain why Sunni theological and legal constructions have gained broad social and religious legitimacy across Muslim regions worldwide.

In the Islamic scholarly tradition, this notion of majority legitimacy is not merely quantitative, but is also linked to the normative concept of *al-jamā'ah* as understood by classical scholars. A Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) reported from the Prophet Muhammad states, "Indeed, Allah will not unite my ummah upon misguidance. Allah's help is with *al-jamā'ah*. Whoever separates himself from *al-jamā'ah* has separated himself toward Hell."²¹ This hadith conveys that the Muslim community will not collectively agree on error.

This narration is frequently used as a theological basis by Sunni scholars to emphasize the importance of consensus (*ijmā'*) in establishing religious authority. In this context, the hadith is understood not as an absolute claim that the majority is always correct, but as a methodological justification for scholars' collective role in preserving the stability and continuity of Islamic teachings.

Contemporary studies indicate that *ijmā'* in the Sunni tradition functions as an epistemological mechanism to prevent theological fragmentation and interpretive extremism,

¹⁷ Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Sejarah Indonesia Modern 1200-2008* (Jakarta: Palgrave, 2008). [Google](#)

¹⁸ M Syafiqil Umam et al., "Journal of Pesantren and Diniyah Studies" 2, no. 1 (2025): 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.63245/jpds.v2i1.45>

¹⁹ Aldi Nurmansyah et al., "Peran Teologi Al-Asy' Ariyah Dan Al-Maturidiyah Dalam Islam The Role of Al-Ash' Ariyah and Al-Maturidiyah Theology in Islam," 2025, 1670–77. [Google](#)

²⁰ Ahmad Soleh Sakni, "SUNNI DAN SYIAH DALAM HARMONI," 2016. [Google](#)

²¹ Jalal Al-Din Al-Suyuthi, *Al-Siraj Al-Munir Syarh Al-Jami' Al-Shaghir* (Egypt: Maktabah Al-Amirah, 1876). [Google](#)

while also maintaining continuity between textual sources, tradition, and social reality.²² Therefore, the dominance of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* in Islamic history is better understood as the outcome of a long process of institutionalizing scholarly authority, rather than merely as a normative, apologetic claim. Within this analytical framework, the continuity of a religious tradition that has persisted for centuries and is adhered to by the majority of Muslims may indicate strong historical and epistemological legitimacy. However, academic inquiry continues to position such legitimacy as an object of critical analysis rather than as a normative theological justification.

From this perspective, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* can be understood as *al-jamā'ah* in a socio-historical sense, namely, a majority community formed through scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*) and sustained religious practice, playing a central role in the formation of mainstream Islamic authority. The emphasis on following the collective path of the believers is also affirmed in the Qur'an, particularly in Surah al-Nisā' [4]: 115: "*Whoever opposes the Messenger after guidance has become clear to him, and follows a path other than the path of the believers, We will leave him in the path he has chosen and drive him into Hell, and what an evil destination it is.*"

In classical and contemporary exegetical literature,²³ the Qur'anic phrase *sabīl al-mu'minīn* (the path of the believers) often affirms the communal dimension of Islamic religiosity. Exegetes explain that it does not refer to specific individuals but to a religious path formed through the Muslim community's ongoing practice, understanding, and consensus. Thus, deviation from this collective path is interpreted as a departure from an epistemological framework institutionalized within the mainstream Islamic tradition.

Conversely, the prohibition against dividing the religion, remaining in small splinter groups, and abandoning the majority community is also stated in Qur'an 6:159: "*Indeed, those who have divided their religion and become sects—you have nothing to do with them. Their affair is only with Allah; then He will inform them of what they used to do.*" The verse above is understood to indicate that those who fragment the religion and form sectarian divisions are deviating. In Sunni theological and juridical perspectives, this concept is subsequently associated with the role of *ijmā'* (scholarly consensus) as one of the sources of religious authority.

Several studies suggest that *ijmā'* functions as a mechanism to preserve doctrinal stability and prevent excessive theological fragmentation, particularly in the context of interpretive pluralism within Islam.²⁴ Therefore, following the majority of the Muslim community, historically represented by the scholarly tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, can be understood as adherence to a legitimate and authoritative intellectual tradition in Islamic history. Within this interpretive framework, the category of "deviation" (*ḍalālāh*) in classical Islamic discourse is understood not solely in a theological-normative sense, but also epistemologically: as a condition in which a group or individual disengages from an established network of scholarly authority.

In contemporary academic studies, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is generally understood not as an absolute claim to truth, but as a majority tradition formed through a long historical process involving the institutionalization of scholarly authority, the transmission of knowledge, and continuous socio-religious practices.²⁵ From this perspective, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* is better understood as a historical and epistemological phenomenon within mainstream Islam, rather than as a normative justification beyond academic critique.

²² Wael B. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). [Google](#)

²³ Abu Abdullah Al-Qurthubi, *Jami' Al-Ahkam Al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Muassasah Al-Risalah, n.d.). [Google](#)

²⁴ Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law*. [Google](#)

²⁵ Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, ed. KAREN BARKEY (Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231175500.001.0001>

When differences arise in interpreting Prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*), the approach adopted by *Ahl al-Sunnah* prioritizes the more authentic reports, particularly those stronger in both transmission chain (*isnād*) and textual content (*matn*). It also emphasizes efforts to reconcile apparently contradictory evidence through synthesis (*jam' al-adillah*). In certain cases, when neither preference (*tarjih*) nor reconciliation (*jam'*) is possible, the position of suspension (*tawaqquf*) is adopted as a form of methodological caution, refraining from issuing a definitive judgment.

Allah also reminds people in Surah al-An'ām [6]: 110: “And We will turn away their hearts and their eyes just as they refused to believe in it the first time, and We leave them in their transgression, wandering blindly.” According to Ibn Abbas's interpretation, this verse refers to the Children of Israel, who persisted in disbelief despite being given various evidence of truth in the form of prophetic miracles. Meanwhile, according to a report attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, even if such disbelievers were punished in the Hereafter and then returned to worldly life, they would still deny the Prophet Muhammad's message. This verse emphasizes that deviation (*ḍalālah*) results from deliberately rejecting truth, rather than from a lack of evidence or proof (*ḥujjah*).²⁶ Thus, the continuity and consistency of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* in preserving the authenticity of Islamic teachings and maintaining harmony with prophetic principles may indicate that this tradition remains within divine guidance rather than deviation.

Although the verse explicitly addresses disbelieving communities, it is also interpreted to carry an implicit message that anyone who does not oppose the Messenger, seeks Allah's pleasure, and follows the path of *al-jamā'ah* of the المسلمين, yet occasionally slips into minor errors or sins stemming from human weakness, remains within the scope of Allah's mercy and guidance. In this sense, Allah does not leave His servants persistently in misguidance but grants them *tawfiq* (divine facilitation) to return to the truth. This is considered one of the virtues of belonging to *al-jamā'ah*, namely the majority community of Muslims who remain within the framework of the Prophet's teachings and the consensus (*ijmā'*) of scholars.

From certain perspectives, various figures and intellectual currents are considered outside the mainstream consensus of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Those frequently discussed in this context include Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, Ibn Baz, Hasan al-Banna, Abu Bakr al-Jaza'iri, Ibn Uthaymeen, Saleh al-Fawzan, and Rabi al-Madkhali. According to writings attributed to the Aswaja Center of PWNU East Java, these intellectual figures are not regarded as fully representative of *al-Jamā'ah*, insofar as certain aspects of their thought are seen as diverging from the established consensus (*ijmā'*) of classical Sunni scholarship and the methodological framework traditionally upheld within *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*.²⁷

For example, one view Ibn Taymiyyah often debated concerns the eternity of the universe. In several of his works, he argues that the universe lacks an absolute beginning in the sense of *naw' al-ḥudūth* (the perpetual origination of created kinds), stating that the species of creation (*al-naw'*) has existed eternally through continuous creation.²⁸ This view differs from the consensus of the majority of theologians (*mutakallimūn*), including the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools, who firmly maintain that the universe is a created entity (*ḥādīth*) with a definite beginning and cannot be eternal (*qadīm*), since absolute eternity without beginning and end is an attribute exclusively belonging to God alone.

This view of Ibn Taymiyyah subsequently received critical responses from a number of prominent scholars, such as Taqi al-Din al-Subki and Ibn Hajar al-Haytami,²⁹ as well as several

²⁶ Abu Muhammad Al-Husein Al-Baghawi, *Ma'alim Al-Tanzil* (Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, n.d.). [Google](#)

²⁷ Abdurrahman Navis, Muhammad Idrus Ramli, and Faris Khairul Anam, *Risalah Ahlussunnah Wal-Jama'ah* (Surabaya: Khalista, 2012). [Google](#)

²⁸ Ibn Taimiyah, *Muwafaqah Syarih Al-Ma'qul* (Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, n.d.). [Google](#)

²⁹ Ibn Hajar, *Fathul Bari* (Kairo: Salafiyah, n.d.). [Google](#)

scholars of Al-Azhar University. They argued that such ideas were not in line with the established consensus (*ijmā'*) and were considered to carry significant theological implications, particularly in the formulation of the concept of *tawhīd* and the understanding of divine attributes. This critique highlights a fundamental difference between Ibn Taymiyyah's theological framework and the mainstream tradition of classical Sunni theology.

In addition to fundamental differences in the field of creed (*'aqidah*), Ibn Taymiyyah is also known for holding several jurisprudential views that do not always align with the majority opinion of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, particularly on issues such as *tawassul* (seeking intercession), *tabarruk* (seeking blessings), and the practice of visiting graves (*ziyārah al-qubūr*).³⁰

According to most scholars in the four Sunni legal schools, the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali schools, such practices are generally permissible, provided they do not involve any form of polytheism (*shirk*) or beliefs that deviate from the principles of *tawhīd*. However, Ibn Taymiyyah considered *tawassul* through the intermediation of deceased righteous individuals, as well as undertaking a specific long-distance journey solely to visit the Prophet Muhammad's grave, to fall under the category of *bid'ah* (religious innovation) that is not religiously sanctioned. He further held that such a journey does not meet the criteria for legally valid religious travel (*safar shar'i*); therefore, the person performing it is not permitted to shorten the prayer (*qashr al-ṣalāh*).

Some scholars understand this view as reflecting a relatively sharp divergence from the majority position, which instead regards grave visitation (*ziyārah al-qubūr*) as an ethical and spiritual means of remembering death and strengthening one's spiritual connection with righteous predecessors. Furthermore, several authentic reports (*riwāyāt ṣaḥīḥah*) indicate that the Prophet Muhammad himself encouraged Muslims to visit graves as a reminder of the afterlife. This difference illustrates methodological variation in interpreting textual evidence (*dalā'il*) and understanding the objectives (*maqāsid*) of the Sharia. In a more stringent spectrum of interpretation, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab advanced a firm position stating that practices such as *istighāthah* (seeking help from other than Allah), *tabarruk* (seeking blessings), and grave visitation (*ziyārah al-qubūr*) are not merely considered innovations (*bid'ah*) or prohibited acts, but may fall under the category of *shirk akbar* (major polytheism) that can expel a person from Islam.

In addition, he is also reported to have opposed the recitation of *Dalail al-Khayrat*, a widely circulated Sufi work that collects blessings (*ṣalawāt*) upon the Prophet, on the grounds that such practices could lead to excessive veneration of the Prophet, which he deemed religiously impermissible.³¹ Another figure often highlighted in discussions of modern Islamic thought is Muhammad Abduh, a Muslim reformer from Egypt widely regarded as a key figure in the modern Salafiyyah movement. Some scholars argue that certain views of his do not fully align with the mainstream tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*, particularly in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Qur'anic hermeneutics.

One of his controversial positions concerns the permissibility of consuming meat from animals slaughtered without explicitly mentioning the name of Allah during the slaughtering process, including animals slaughtered by followers of other religions such as Christians and Jews. He based this view on the Qur'anic verse in Surah al-Mā'idah [5:5]. A literal reading of the verse explicitly states that food from the People of the Book is permissible for المسلمين. Based on this verse, Muhammad Abduh argued that meat slaughtered by the People of the

³⁰ Abdullah Al-Harari, *Al-Maqalat Al-Sunniyah Fi Kasyf Dhalalat Ahmad Ibn Taimiyah* (Beirut: Dar Al-Masyari', 2007). [Google](#)

³¹ Abdullah Al-Harrani, *Al-Maqalat Al-Sunniyah Fi Kasyf Dhalalat Ahmad Ibn Taimiyah* (Beirut: Dar Al-Masyari', 2007). [Google](#)

Book, or non-Muslims in general, is, in principle, permissible for consumption.³² However, this view is interpreted differently by the majority of scholars within the Shafi'i and Maliki schools, who emphasize the necessity of mentioning the name of Allah during slaughter and tend to reject the validity of contemporary People of the Book slaughter if it does not meet specific legal conditions (*shurūṭ shar'īyyah*).

In Indonesia, this position also conflicts with the religious practice developed within pesantren communities, which prioritize the principle of precaution (*iḥtiyāṭ*) in matters of halal consumption. Furthermore, Sunni scholars in Egypt, through Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah, responded critically, reinforcing their position by citing Qur'an Surah al-Kawthar [108:2]: "So pray to your Lord and sacrifice." In the tafsīr of Ibn Ashur, it is explained that alongside prayer, a believer is also obliged to perform sacrifice solely for the sake of Allah.³³

Other verses place similar emphasis, such as Surah al-An'ām [6:162], which states: "Say, indeed my prayer, my rituals (*nusuk*), my life, and my death are for Allah, Lord of the worlds." This verse is understood by classical exegetes, including Al-Tabari, as affirming that all forms of worship, including ritual slaughter, must be directed exclusively to Allah.³⁴ From this framework, some scholars conclude that the legal ruling governing sacrificial animals (*udḥīyah*) and animals for daily consumption falls under the same principle, namely the obligation to invoke the name of Allah during slaughter.

In this regard, Islam normatively takes a firm stance against slaughtering practices performed for other than Allah, as reflected in its condemnation of pre-Islamic *Jāhiliyyah* customs. This is evident in Qur'an 2:173: "Indeed, Allah has only forbidden you carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been dedicated to other than Allah." Al-Tabari explains that the phrase "that which has been dedicated to other than Allah" refers to animals slaughtered for idols or other deities, invoking their names during the ritual.³⁵ This verse can thus be understood as an affirmation of the principle of *tawḥīd* in practical acts of worship. Accordingly, this set of evidence is generally taken by the majority of scholars as strengthening the ruling on the prohibition of consuming animals slaughtered without mentioning the name of Allah.

Beyond jurisprudential issues, Muhammad Abduh also developed a distinctive approach to interpreting Qur'anic verses. One example can be seen in his interpretation of Surah al-Anfāl [8:9], which states: "When you sought help from your Lord, He responded to you: 'Indeed, I will reinforce you with a thousand angels, one following another.'" This verse has a strong historical background (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), as transmitted in authentic ḥadīth reports, describing the descent of Allah's assistance to the Muslims during the Battle of Badr through angelic support.³⁶

In this context, most classical exegetes understand the angels' presence in this verse as *ḥaqīqī* (literal) rather than *majāzī* (figurative), since the verse is considered *muḥkam* and is supported by authentic transmitted reports. However, Muhammad Abduh interprets the presence of angels symbolically, understanding them as a representation of the psychological and spiritual strength Allah grants the Muslim community.³⁷ This approach reflects a rationalist tendency that emphasizes psychological and moral dimensions over literal interpretation.

³² Ibn 'Asyur, *Maqasid Sharia Al-Islamiyah* (Kairo: Wizarah Al-Auqaf Lis-Syu'un Al-Islamiyah, 2004). Hal. 431. [Google](#)

³³ Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr, *Al-Taḥrīr Wa Al-Tanwīr* (Tunis: Al-Dar Al-Tunisiyah, 2007). [Google](#)

³⁴ Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir Al-Thabbari, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'Wīl Āy Al-Qur'Ān* (Kairo: Dar Al-Hijr, n.d.). [Google](#)

³⁵ Al-Thabbari. [Google](#)

³⁶ Al-Wahidi, *Tafsir Al-Wasith* (Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 1994). [Google](#)

³⁷ Muhammad Said Ramadhan Al-Buthi, *Al-Salafiyah Marhalah Zamaniyah Mubarakah La Mazhab Islami* (Damaskus: Dar Al-Fikr, 1990). [Google](#)

Some scholars view this symbolic interpretation as raising theological concerns, particularly regarding the conception of angels (*malā'ika*) in Islamic creed. If verses concerning angels are interpreted as mere natural forces, this is considered to conflict with Surah al-Baqarah [2:30], which states: "And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: 'Indeed, I will place upon the earth a successive authority.' They said, 'Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we glorify You with praise and sanctify You?' Allah said, 'Indeed, I know that which you do not know.'"

Interpreting angels as natural forces therefore risks shifting the Muslim community's understanding of angels as real, unseen beings (*makhlūq ghaybī*), as affirmed in the tradition of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Accordingly, this approach is often contrasted with *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr*, which emphasizes adherence to the text's apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) and authoritative transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*).

A similar interpretive approach is also found in the exegesis of Surah al-Fīl. This historical narrative is rooted in events before the Prophet Muhammad's birth, when Abrahah built a magnificent church in Ṣan'ā' to divert Arab tribes' attention from the Ka'bah in Mecca to this church. When the church was desecrated by a member of the Nusay'ah tribe, Abrahah felt humiliated and decided to destroy the Ka'bah. He then marched with his army, accompanied by several elephants used as mounts, intending to demolish the House of Allah. However, when the army reached the vicinity of Mecca, Allah sent flocks of birds (*ṭayran abābīl*) that hurled stones of baked clay (*sijjīl*), thereby annihilating the entire army, as described in the continuation of Surah al-Fīl.³⁸

The traditional interpretation of Surah al-Fīl is among the most well-known and widely accepted within the Muslim scholarly tradition. Classical exegetes such as Al-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathir agree that the *abābīl* birds mentioned in the verse are real, literal creatures that physically cast stones of *sijjīl*, destroying Abrahah's army. This interpretation aligns with the apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) of the Qur'anic text, supported by authentic ḥadīth reports that explain its historical context and by the scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*) of Qur'anic exegetes over many centuries.

However, Muhammad Abduh presents a different approach. Within his rational-modernist framework, he interprets the *abābīl* birds not as physical creatures carrying stones from Hell, but as a symbolic representation of an epidemic, particularly smallpox (*variola*). Under this view, Abrahah's army was destroyed not by a supernatural intervention in the form of birds, but by a deadly disease that caused the campaign against the Ka'bah to fail. This view is clearly different from conventional exegesis and has received criticism from many scholars, particularly because it interprets a *muḥkam* verse in a figurative (*majāzī*) manner without explicit supporting evidence from the Sunnah or scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*).

In addition, this approach is seen as reducing the dimension of miracles (*mu'jizāt*) and the element of divine extraordinary intervention, which form an important part of the Muslim understanding of prophetic history and Allah's protection of His sacred House. Therefore, most scholars regard Muhammad Abduh's interpretation of Surah al-Fīl as inconsistent with the established methodology of authoritative (*mu'tabar*) *tafsīr* and as diverging from the consensus of classical Qur'anic exegetes. Similarly, Muhammad Rashid Rida's *Tafsīr al-Manār* seems to allow space for the idea of human evolution as proposed in Darwin's theory, albeit with certain modifications and a more theistic interpretation.³⁹ This approach has sparked controversy because it touches on the question of human creation, which the Qur'an addresses explicitly.

In Surah Āli 'Imrān, verse 59: "Indeed, the likeness of 'Īsā in the sight of Allah is like that of Ādam. He created him from dust, then said to him, 'Be!' and he was." Classical exegetes generally understand this verse as affirming that the Prophet Ādam, the first human, was created

³⁸ Al-Qurthubi, *Jami' Al-Ahkam Al-Qur'an*. Google

³⁹ Muhammad Rashid Ridha, *Tafsīr Al-Manar* (Dar Kutub Ilmiyah, n.d.). Google

directly by Allah from dust, without any intermediary creation. This indicates that humans did not evolve from other species, as Darwin's theory proposes.

Classical exegetes generally understand this verse as affirming that the Prophet Ādam, the first human, was created directly by Allah from dust without any intermediary creation. This suggests that humans did not evolve biologically from other species, as Darwin's theory proposes. Most scholars hold that an evolutionist interpretation of human origins contradicts the apparent (*zāhir*) meaning of the Qur'anic text and runs counter to the understanding of the early generations (*salaf*). Among those who opposed such interpretations is M. Syah Al-Kasmiri, an Indian scholar, who stated: "*Ta'wīl is of two kinds: first, an interpretation that does not contradict definitive evidence in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and the consensus (ijmā') of scholars; second, an interpretation that opposes definitive evidence; this is considered heretical (zindīq/disbelief).*"⁴⁰

In this context, interpretations that place excessive emphasis on rationalistic and modern scientific approaches, without being grounded in sound transmitted evidence (*dalīl naqlī*), are regarded as problematic, and even as disbelief (*kufr*). The Prophet himself warned against interpreting the Qur'an solely based on personal reasoning. In a hadith narrated by Ibn 'Abbās, he said: "*Whoever speaks about the Qur'an based on his own opinion (without knowledge), or about that which he does not know, let him take his seat in the Fire.*" (Reported by *al-Tirmidhī*).⁴¹ Taken together, the differences between figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Muḥammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, and the mainstream of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah are not merely technical; they touch on issues of methodology, epistemology, and theological framework. Therefore, these differences are often regarded as principled distinctions that require caution in evaluation and classification.

Within the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah tradition itself, adherence to *ijmā'* (scholarly consensus) and the majority (*jamā'ah*) is an important principle, not merely because of numerical strength, but because of the continuity of scholarly transmission (*sanad*) and the stability of methodology. At the same time, however, discourse on majority and minority within Islam demands careful consideration, so as to avoid falling into oversimplification or sweeping claims of exclusive truth.

Scholars such as al-Ḥarawī reinforce this understanding by emphasizing the importance of following the majority, as they embody the continuity of knowledge, the chain of scholarly transmission (*sanad*), and the strength found in the community's collective prayers. In a socio-religious context, majority-group individuals are more likely to receive support and prayers from others, as people tend to pray for those who share their school of thought or religious affiliation.⁴² Some figures in contemporary Salafī circles also acknowledge Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah's quantitative dominance. 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Maḥmūd, a Wahhabi scholar, recognizes that the Ahl al-Sunnah school's wide influence largely stems from the dominance of major affiliated scholars, particularly in jurisprudence, such as the al-Shāfi'ī and Mālikī schools.

However, not all groups agree that truth necessarily follows the majority. According to some circles, especially those associated with the Salafī-Wahhabi movement, the claim that "truth lies with the minority" is considered more consistent with the textual evidence. They cite several verses suggesting that the truly righteous and grateful to Allah are few in number. Verses often cited include: First, Surah Ṣād, verse 24: "*He said: 'He has certainly wronged you by demanding your ewe to add to his own. Indeed, many partners oppress one another, except those who believe and do righteous deeds—and few they are.'*" Second, Surah Saba', verse 13: "*They made for him whatever he willed of sanctuaries, statues, basins like reservoirs, and firmly fixed cauldrons. [We said]: 'Work, O family of Dāwūd, in gratitude.' And few of My servants are*

⁴⁰ Al-Kasymiri, *Ikfar Al-Mulḥidin Fi Dlaruriyat Al-Din*. Hal. 44. [Google](#)

⁴¹ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (Kairo: Dar el-fagr, 2013). [Google](#)

⁴² Ali Al-Qari Al-Harawi, *Mirqat Al-Mafatih*, Jamal Aita (Dar Kutub Ilmiyah, 2001). [Google](#)

truly grateful." Third, Surah Yūsuf, verse 106: *"And most of them do not believe in Allah except while associating others with Him."* In classical exegesis, the term *qalīl* (few) in these verses is not understood to refer to divisions within the Muslim community itself, but rather to a comparison between the believers and the majority of humankind who disbelieve. Some exegetes, such as al-Qurṭubī, explain that these verses have a universal context and do not point to any particular group within Islam.⁴³

An interesting report on this comes from Sayyidunā 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who once asked a man who was praying, *"O Allah, make me among the few."* When asked about his intention, the man replied: *"Because Allah says: 'And few of My servants are truly grateful.'"*⁴⁴ Although these verses highlight the virtue of a small group, they do not automatically serve as evidence that truth must be identified with a particular minority within Islam.

Such an interpretation requires clarification. First, the term "few" in these verses does not compare groups such as Wahhabi vs. Sunni or Khawārij vs. Shī'ah; rather, it contrasts the sincere with the ostentatious (*riyā'*), true believers with hypocrites. According to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the context of "few" in these verses refers to those who perform deeds without *riyā'*. This is consistent with the explanation found in Surah al-Nisā', verse 142: *"Indeed, the hypocrites [think to] deceive Allah, but He deceives them. And when they stand for prayer, they stand lazily, showing off to the people, and they do not remember Allah except a little."*

This verse criticizes hypocrites for being lazy in worship and for performing it only to be seen by others. Therefore, equating the claim that "those who are correct are few" with the small number of followers of a particular school or group is methodologically inaccurate. This is especially so when it is used as an exclusive argument to claim that only a certain minority group is upon truth. In contrast, the Ahl al-Sunnah tradition emphasizes following *ijmā'* (consensus) and not separating from the community of المسلمين, as many hadiths and reports from the Companions mention.

Rather than treating these differences as mere disagreements among individual scholars, they should be analyzed within a broader epistemological framework that distinguishes Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah's methodological foundations from other interpretive approaches in Islamic thought. In this framework, concepts such as al-jamā'ah (the authoritative communal path), *ijmā'* (scholarly consensus), and sanad (chains of transmission) work together to validate religious knowledge and maintain continuity with the classical Sunni tradition.

From this perspective, a religious interpretation's authority depends not solely on individual reasoning or textual argumentation, but on its alignment with established scholarly transmission and acceptance within the broader community of recognized scholars. Consequently, the mainstream Sunni tradition emphasizes methodological coherence with *ijmā'* and the ummah's accumulated interpretive legacy, rather than isolated or highly individual interpretations that depart from this epistemic structure.

Therefore, the significance of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah lies not merely in its historical dominance or numerical majority, but in its role as a structured epistemological system that regulates the production, transmission, and validation of religious knowledge. Within this system, deviations are not only understood in doctrinal terms, but also as disruptions in the chain of epistemic authority that connects contemporary interpretation to the prophetic legacy through continuous scholarly transmission

2. Maintaining Unity

One theological characteristic that historically and methodologically distinguishes Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah from other schools of Islamic thought is its normative commitment to preserving the unity of the Muslim community (unity/*ijtimā'*), alongside a cautious

⁴³ Al-Qurthubi, *Jami' Al-Ahkam Al-Qur'an*. [Google](#)

⁴⁴ Al-Qurthubi. [Google](#)

approach to declaring *takfīr* (excommunication) against fellow Muslims. This approach is not merely a social preference; it reflects *ijtihād* grounded in primary sources (the Qur'an and Sunnah) and a rigorous *uṣūl al-dīn* methodology.

Contemporary academic studies examine *takfīr* as a theological and social practice with significant implications for the integrity of the Muslim community and social cohesion. For instance, Rashidi and Rizapoor argue that unjustified *takfīr* can lead to fragmentation within the Muslim ummah because it undermines the principle of brotherhood and disrupts the normative solidarity of Muslims, both historically and in the present context. They also emphasize that the authoritative basis for declaring someone a disbeliever is only valid when supported by explicit textual evidence (*naṣṣ*) or scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*).⁴⁵

The Qur'an states in Surah al-An'ām, verse 159: "Indeed, those who divided their religion and became sects ... their affair is only with Allah." Linguistically and theologically, this verse describes the social consequences of religious fragmentation. Classical and contemporary exegesis offers various interpretations of who this statement refers to. Some classical exegetes interpret "sects" as primarily referring to historical divisions among the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitāb), while others adopt a broader reading that includes serious deviations from the Prophet's and the early generations' principles (*salaf*).⁴⁶

This also aligns with normative discussions in contemporary Qur'anic studies on how interpretive pluralism affects the solidarity of the Muslim community.⁴⁷ Contemporary theological and Islamic legal studies indicate a substantive consensus that, from a methodological perspective, Sunni Islam exercises restraint in the practice of *takfīr*. El-Muhammady & Zein⁴⁸ In their study of *takfīr*, they conclude that the Sunni framework requires a very high threshold for declaring *takfīr*: only when someone explicitly denies principles understood to be *qaṭ'ī* (definitive) in Islamic belief.

Furthermore, Sunnis prioritize the presumption of Islam (the assumption that a person remains Muslim until proven otherwise) in contexts of theological disagreement. In addition, polemical interpretations and errors in *ta'wīl* (interpretation) are not considered sufficient grounds for declaring someone a disbeliever. This approach aims to preserve *ukhuwwah Islāmiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood) and avoid theological exclusivism that could undermine the Muslim community's solidarity.

The Sunnah tradition also emphasizes the importance of *amar ma'rūf nahi munkar* (enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong), namely the social obligation to advise one another in goodness and truth. Authentic hadiths indicate a hierarchy in the method of changing wrongdoing: with the hand, with the tongue, and at the very least with the heart when one is unable to do otherwise (reported by Muslim).⁴⁹ This principle does not contradict a restrictive approach to *takfīr*; rather, it shows that social correction is still carried out through *da'wah* (religious outreach), not excommunication. From an academic perspective, this approach balances social tolerance and theological integrity and reflects ethical norms in *fiqh al-akhlāq* (Islamic ethics).

Internal theological differences within the Sunni world generally stem from subsidiary issues (*furū'*), such as methods of legal derivation (*istinbāṭ*) or prioritization among legal schools, rather than denial of Islam itself. This is contrasted with groups that more readily use *takfīr* as an exclusive instrument. Contemporary research shows that in some modern

⁴⁵ Mohammad Qasim Rashidi and Habiburrahman Rizapoor, "The Phenomenon Of Al - Takfir : Impacts On Unity Within The Islamic Ummah" 1, no. 3 (2023): 56–72. <https://doi.org/10.61806/al-tatawur.v1i3.6>

⁴⁶ Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Thabbari, *Jami' Al-Bayan 'An Ta'wil Ay Al-Qur'an*, ed. Mahmud Syakir Muhammad (Makkah: Dar Al--Tarbiyah wa Al-Turath, n.d.). [Google](#)

⁴⁷ Jurnal Hikami, "Iman Dan Amal Perspektif Murji'ah Dan Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah" 1, no. 1 (2020): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.59622/jiat.v1i1.1>

⁴⁸ Ibrahim M Zein, "The Question of Takfir from the Sunni Perspective: A Theological and Jurisprudential Inquiry" 53, no. 2 (2025): 211–30. <https://doi.org/10.22452/usuluddin.vol53no2.8>

⁴⁹ Abdul Mujib Adnan, *Adab Al-Thalibin* (Surabaya: Markaz Ma'had Al-Jami'ah, 2014). [Google](#)

communities or movements labeled “Salafi,” internal dynamics exist in which various figures accuse one another of methodological or doctrinal deviation.⁵⁰

For example, internal debates within modern Wahhabi circles feature mutual accusations among scholars. Scholars such as ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-‘Abbād, for instance, strongly criticized Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī's views. Other figures such as ‘Alī al-Ḥalabī accused Ṣafar al-Ḥawālī of holding Murji‘ah beliefs,⁵¹ while Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Najmī described Abū Ishāq al-Ḥuwaynī as inclined toward Khārijite thought. Fauzī al-‘Atsarī is also reported to have considered Rabi‘ al-Madkhalī to be Murji‘ī.

Such mutual accusations indicate significant internal fragmentation within contemporary Salafi movements. Empirically, this shows that acute fragmentation is often internal and ideological, rather than exclusively characteristic of the Sunni majority. Academic discourse on such internal fragmentation should be distinguished from general claims of *takfīr* without strong methodological grounding.

In summary, the commitment to unity within the *manhaj* of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah reflects a correlation among theological principles (namely, a cautious approach to *takfīr*), the presumption of Islam, and social ethics in *fiqh* that emphasize the quality of relationships among members of the Muslim community. This approach is grounded in the methodology of *uṣūl al-dīn*, which rejects easy *takfīr* and affirms *amar ma‘rūf nahi munkar* through ethical mechanisms. Contemporary studies also show that internal fragmentation does not stem from inherent intolerance in Sunnism, but from complex dynamics of interpretation operating within methodological boundaries.

3. Following the Teachings of the Prophet and His Companions

In Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah epistemology, religious authority is structured through a hierarchical, transmissional framework in which the Prophet Muhammad is the primary source of revelation, followed by the Companions (ṣaḥābah), the Tābi‘īn, and subsequent generations of scholars. This hierarchy is not merely historical, but epistemological, insofar as it establishes the legitimacy of religious knowledge through continuous transmission (*sanad*) and recognized scholarly authority.

Within this framework, the Companions occupy a central position not only because of their proximity to the Prophet, but also because they served as the earliest transmitters and interpreters of revelation.⁵² Their role in developing Qur’anic exegesis (tafsīr), hadith transmission, and legal reasoning (fiqh) shows how early Islamic knowledge formed through direct experience, interpretive reasoning (ijtihād), and the preservation of transmitted reports. Consequently, the authority of the Companions is embedded in Sunni Islam's epistemic structure as a foundational layer of knowledge transmission.

Modern academic studies also emphasize that the early development of Qur’anic interpretation was deeply shaped by the Companions’ engagement with the revelatory context. Their interpretive authority is therefore understood not only as textual transmission, but also as contextual comprehension of revelation, which later became institutionalized in classical Islamic sciences.

From an epistemological perspective, the notion of ‘*adālah* (integrity) attributed to the Companions functions as a methodological principle that ensures the reliability of transmitted knowledge. This principle underpins the Sunni hadith tradition, where the continuity of *isnād* is regarded as a critical mechanism for validating religious reports. In this sense, epistemic

⁵⁰ Abu Al-Muzhaffar Syahfur bin Tahir Al-Asfarayini, *Al-Tabshir Fi Al-Din* (Bairūt: Dar Al Kotob Al Ilmiyah, 1988). [Google](#)

⁵¹ Navis, Ramli, and Anam, *Risalah Ahlussunnah Wal-Jama’ah*. Hal. 186. [Google](#)

⁵² Nasrullah Qureshi and Hadi Bux Chhijan, “Sahaba; Their Ijtihad and School of Thoughts in Understanding Quranic Text and Its Academic Importance,” *Al-Aijaz Research Journal of Islamic Studies & Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2020): 22–39, <https://doi.org/10.53575/A3.v4.01.22-39>.

trust in the Companions is less a biographical judgment and more a structural requirement for sustaining the authority of transmitted knowledge.⁵³

Qur'anic discourse further reinforces the importance of transmission continuity, such as Surah al-Fath [48]: 18, which describes divine approval of those who pledged allegiance under the tree. In classical exegetical tradition, scholars often cite this verse as textual support for the epistemic reliability of the Companions, particularly in their role as transmitters of the Prophet's teachings.⁵⁴ Thus, the verse is not only theological in nature but also contributes to the construction of communal epistemic legitimacy.

Within this framework, debates surrounding the authority of the Companions in early Islamic intellectual history can be understood as differing approaches to epistemic validation rather than purely doctrinal disputes. Some early theological and political movements adopted alternative criteria for evaluating transmitted reports, reflecting diverse methodological approaches to authority, reason, and textual authenticity. These differences highlight the plurality of epistemological models in early Islam.

However, the Sunni tradition holds that the Companions' reliability, as a collective body, is foundational to the integrity of religious knowledge. This assumption rests not solely on theological affirmation, but on the need to preserve an unbroken chain of transmission (*sanad*) linking later generations to the Prophet. In this sense, the Companions' authority is inseparable from the epistemological architecture of Islamic knowledge itself.

Therefore, the emphasis on following the Prophet and his Companions should be understood not merely as a normative religious claim, but as an epistemological system in which authority is constructed through transmission, communal validation, and continuity of scholarly tradition. This system provides the methodological basis for developing Qur'anic interpretation, hadith sciences, and Islamic jurisprudence within the Sunni tradition.

4. Commitment to Jihad

The term *jihād* is understood broadly as striving or exertion, not merely physical warfare. Linguistically, the word *jihād* derives from the root *jahada*, meaning "to strive earnestly" or "to exert one's full effort toward a goal." In its general semantic range, this concept encompasses multiple forms of effort, including spiritual, intellectual, and social dimensions, as well as, in specific juridical contexts, physical combat (*qitāl*) when it fulfills the conditions established in Islamic law. As a juristic concept, *jihād* therefore includes both inward ethical struggle (*jihād al-nafs*) and outward social engagement, including *da'wah* and regulated forms of collective defense.

In Qur'anic discourse, *jihād* is consistently framed as striving in the path of Allah (*fī sabīlillāh*), associated with divine guidance and moral formation. For instance, the Qur'an states: "And those who strive for Us, We will surely guide them to Our paths..." (Q.S. al-'Ankabūt: 69). In this sense, *jihād* is not reducible to physical conflict, but represents a comprehensive ethical orientation that integrates belief, action, and moral discipline within a divinely guided framework.⁵⁵

Within the epistemological tradition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, particularly as developed in the NU-Aswaja intellectual framework, *jihād* is also conceptualized through the authority of transmitted knowledge (*naqlī*) and scholarly interpretation grounded in established chains of transmission (*sanad*). In this framework, intellectual *jihād* (*jihād 'ilmī*) is central, understood as scholars' disciplined effort to preserve doctrinal integrity through the

⁵³ Qureshi and Chhijan. <https://doi.org/10.53575/A3.v4.01.22-39>.

⁵⁴ Yasin Al-Salimi, "The View of Mu'tazilah on the Doctrinal Difference Which Exists among the Islamic Sects," *Nama Journal*, no. 1 (2016): 18–41, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.59151/vi1.230>.

⁵⁵ Dri Santoso, "The Dynamics Of Muslim Interpretation Of Jihad Verses: Between Morality And Military," *Al-Tahrir* 22, no. 1 (2022): 49–70. <https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v22i1.3802>

transmission, clarification, and validation of religious knowledge.⁵⁶ This intellectual dimension is not merely argumentative; it is embedded in a structured epistemology in which authority derives from the continuity of transmission, scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*), and recognition of qualified religious authority.

From this perspective, the intellectual legacy of classical Sunni theologians such as Imām al-Ash'arī and Imām al-Māturīdī is significant, not only for its doctrinal formulations but also for its methodological contribution in integrating transmitted textual evidence (*naql*) with rational inquiry (*'aql*).⁵⁷ This integration reflects a broader epistemic principle: religious truth is not constructed individually but validated through scholarly continuity and collective interpretive authority.

Physical *jihād* (*qitāl*),⁵⁸ within this framework, is understood as a legally regulated form of collective action that is strictly bound by ethical and juridical conditions established in classical jurisprudence.⁵⁹ Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that its application is limited to specific conditions such as defense, protection of society, and the establishment of justice, and must always be governed by the broader objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) and considerations of public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*).⁶⁰

In the NU–Aswaja tradition, therefore, *jihād* is not conceptualized as an isolated act of violence, but as a multidimensional ethical effort that is structured through epistemological continuity (*sanad*), scholarly authority, and interpretive discipline. Intellectual *jihād* becomes foundational, preserving correct understanding (*ḥifẓ al-fahm al-dīnī*) by transmitting knowledge across generations from qualified scholars, while physical *jihād* remains contextual, regulated, and secondary within the broader moral framework of Islamic law.

Thus, *jihād* in the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah tradition, particularly in its NU articulation, represents a structured epistemological and ethical system in which the pursuit of divine pleasure is realized through both intellectual rigor and disciplined action, grounded in the continuity of transmitted knowledge and the authority of scholarly tradition.

D. CONCLUSION

This study argues that moderation within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) tradition is fundamentally rooted in an epistemology of religious authority constructed through the interrelated concepts of *al-jamā'ah*, *ijmā'*, *sanad*, and scholarly authority. Rather than functioning as isolated doctrinal principles, these concepts collectively establish a methodological framework that balances fidelity to the Qur'an and Sunnah with the cumulative scholarly tradition and the realities of social life. This epistemological foundation shapes NU's cautious approach to *takfīr*, reinforces its commitment to the unity of the Muslim community (*ijtimā'*), and frames *jihād* as an ethical, constructive effort to protect faith, public welfare, and social harmony rather than a justification for terrorism or indiscriminate violence. This study's scholarly contribution is showing that NU's religious moderation is not merely a pragmatic or sociopolitical stance, but is deeply grounded in a coherent Sunni epistemology of religious authority. By integrating *al-jamā'ah*, *ijmā'*, *sanad*, and scholarly authority into a unified analytical framework, this study offers a novel perspective on how the

⁵⁶ Abdul Qahir bin Thahir Al-Baghdadi, *Al-Milal Wa Al-Nihal*, Albir Nash (Bei-rūt: Dar Al-Masyariq, 1970).

Google

⁵⁷ Ahlan and M. Ragap Redho, "Konsep Jihad Dalam Al- Qur ' an (Kritik Hermeneutika Otoritatif Khaled Abu El Fadh)," *Al-Dzikra: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Al-Hadits* 16, no. 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.24042/al-dzikra.v16i1.10428>

⁵⁸ Al-Baghdadi, *Al-Milal Wa Al-Nihal*. Google

⁵⁹ Muhammad Hasanaini Haikal, "Rekonstruksi Narasi Jihad Dalam Media Digital Islamis Di Indonesia : Studi Sosiologis Terhadap Peran Media Dalam Militarisme Kontemporer" 10, no. 1 (2025): 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.14421/mjsi.v10i1.4058>

⁶⁰ Nuzul Iskandar, "Jihad Dan Terorisme Dalam Tinjauan Alquran, Hadis, Dan Fikih," *AL-QISTHU* 17, no. 1 (2019): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.32694/010650>.

intellectual foundations of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* continue to shape the development of *Islam Nusantara* and contemporary discourses on religious moderation. Future research may extend this analysis through comparative and multidisciplinary approaches, particularly by incorporating perspectives from intellectual history, sociology of religion, and discourse studies to further illuminate the dynamics of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* in both global and local contexts.

E. DECLARATIONS

1. Author Contribution

Ardelia Nihlah Ilahi: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, writing the original draft, visualization, and reviewing and editing the manuscript. **Mohamad Saofi:** Methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, interpretation of findings, validation, and manuscript review and editing. **Nur Shofiyah Ramadhani:** Investigation, data collection, data curation, validation, interpretation of findings, and manuscript review and editing. **Maulana Ikhsanul Karim:** Supervision, validation, conceptual input, interpretation of findings. **Muhamad Haikal Husaini:** Critical review and editing of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the study's intellectual development, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. All authors agree to be accountable for their respective contributions and for the integrity of the published work

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This research received no external funding from government agencies, commercial organizations, private institutions, or other funding bodies. The authors conducted the study using their own institutional and research resources.

3. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no financial, professional, personal, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the study's design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, or reporting.

4. Declaration of AI Use

The authors used ChatGPT in a limited supporting role during manuscript preparation, primarily for language refinement, improved academic expression, editorial assistance, and initial identification of potentially relevant literature. The authors independently verified all references, arguments, interpretations, and factual information included in the manuscript. Artificial intelligence was not used to generate research data, replace field observations or interviews, autonomously interpret participants' accounts, or make research decisions. The authors take full responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy, originality, academic integrity, analysis, interpretation, and final content.

5. Additional Information

Not applicable.

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