

## The Relevance of Pesantren-Derived Epistemological Paradigms in Religious Studies and Their Role in Overcoming Islamophobia in the Post-Truth Era

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### Abstract

This article explores the paradigms of Islamic study used in pesantren and their relevance to religious studies in the post-truth era. Findings of the authors' recent qualitative research which combined the outcomes of observations, literature reviews and descriptive-interpretive analyses have led to these conclusions: (1) Pesantren is an educational institution with unique models of religious study which offer multifarious perspectives by seamlessly blending three scientific epistemologies called the *bayani*, *burhani*, and *irfani*. (2) The adoption of these three epistemologies resulted in the concept of moderate Islamic study that enshrines the religion's spiritual, intellectual and social aspects. (3) Using these paradigms will allow us to study Islam and other world religions inclusively. This fact in turn highlights the importance of adopting the paradigms of Islamic study used by pesantren and the role of these paradigms in curbing the growth of islamophobia especially in this post-truth era.

**Keywords:** Pesantren, Religious Study, Islamophobia, Post-truth Era.

### Introduction

Quite recently our scholarly search for religious truth was perturbed by a series of incidents that desecrate the religion. Reports of appalling atrocities substantiate this claim. Memories of violence going rampant across the globe still linger on our minds. The world still witnesses acts of religious terrorism in Britain, New Zealand, France, Indonesia and many other places, not to mention cases of civil unrest now wracking parts of the Middle East (ISIS's transnational expansion). These incidents necessitate us to seek solutions and preventive measures for the years to come.

Among the factors that trigger riots and chaos is the growing exclusivism among numerous religious groups. Such is a major tumbling block to the progress of religious studies since the world's major religions are still plagued by hateful ideologies that refuse to die. Islam

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now, for instance, is a religion teeming with exclusivist groups that resort to violence in their social interactions.

Diverging doctrines prevailing in Islam has become the center of media attention. Consequently, Islam is labeled as terrorist religion because some splinter groups claim to represent the faith. This shows the importance of rethinking the dominant paradigms of Islamic study and changing the simplistic perspectives on Islam. This article presents a review of 'paradigmatic map' drawn by a religious tradition that has is growing and flourishing in Indonesia, the one developed by pesantren.

As a religious institution, pesantren strives on moderate models of instruction. This statement is supported by the outcomes of various studies on pesantren and the authors personal observation as a pesantren graduate. There's a tendency among Islamic boarding schools to implement inclusive approaches in their teaching and learning activities. Such approaches deserve a rigorous discussion that in turn will serve as an epistemological foundation by which we think and act.

Scholarly writings on pesantren are abound, but they limit their narrations to the history of the institution<sup>1</sup>, the rituals and the lives of the kiai<sup>2</sup>. Little do they describe paradigmatic maps of pesantren. Some writings lightly touch this topic and they are randomly scattered, the majority of which can be found on the internet. These facts provide the reason why the author opted to discuss paradigmatic map of Islamic thoughts prevalent in pesantren and the their relevance to religious studies.

Today we can figuratively draw the maps of traditions in the studies of Islam and other major faiths. These studies employ historical, social, and psychological approaches. Naturally, different viewpoints lead to different conclusions. In Indonesia, novel approaches of Islamic studies are evident in the stellar writings of some luminaries. For example, M Amin Abdullah proposes a multidisciplinary concept of Islamic study. He finds it imperative that studies of Islam and other religions take on diverse approaches to guarantee objective and inclusive outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Other experts share Amin's passion. Noorhaidi Hasan<sup>4</sup> and Mukhyar Fanani<sup>5</sup>, for example, are focusing on the development of multidisciplinary Islamic studies in their work.

This current trend is not an isolated case. Islamic studies by Western scholars show the same tendency to apply multidisciplinary approaches. This reality has made a positive contribution to the increasingly inclusive interfaith dialogues. Richard S. Martin's research on

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<sup>1</sup> Among a few writings that provide comprehensive discussions on the history of pesantren is Martin Van Bruinessen's article entitled *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat* (Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing, 2012), specifically, 83-85.

<sup>2</sup> A book written by Zamakhsyari Dhofir can be used as a reference in this respect. In the book entitled *Tradisi Pesantren*, Dhofir meticulously describes the life inside a pesantren, the traditions and the kiai's reflections of life. See: Zamakhsyari Dhofir. *The Pesantren Tradition: A Study of The Role of The Kiyai in The Maintenance of The Traditional Ideology of Islam in Java*. Thesis. Australian National University, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> M. Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi Pendekatan Integratif – Interkoneksi*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka pelajar, 2012, V - VIII

<sup>4</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan. *Islam Cosmopolitan*. International Seminar hosted by UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 30 August 2015

<sup>5</sup> Mukhyar Fanani, *Metode Studi Islam Aplikasi Sosiologi Pengetahuan Sebagai Cara Pandang*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2010, 217 - 221

approaches to Islamic studies, for example, calls forth multidisciplinary concepts.<sup>6</sup> Connolly book on the same topic also proposes the same perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Within the walls of pesantren, students and clerics alike zealously engage in religious and ideological discussions and have developed multidisciplinary approach in their work. Such a trend manifests itself in the traditions that they faithfully perpetuate in pesantren.<sup>8</sup> Such is the reality that motivates the author to study the paradigms of religious studies in pesantren. The current polemics on pesantren and Westerners' stigmatized views on pesantren have lent urgency to this research.

Academically, pesantren is a religious institution with a rock-solid intellectual standing, and its quality keeps getting better, in line with increasing number of people interested in religious studies.<sup>9</sup> Among the unique aspects of instructional patterns in pesantren is the richly diverse body of literature which supports religious studies, among others. The vast collection of learning resources has earned it the reputation of authoritative institution in the face of radical religious views.

Now it is evident that the paradigms of religious studies in pesantren merit attention and investigation since pesantren is still suffering from stigmatization. Nasaruddin Umar writes about his experience when confronted by American people who peppered him with questions about pesantren. In his book *Rethinking Pesantren*, he presents a common conception about pesantren in Indonesia.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the book he asserts that pesantren is a moderate religious teaching institution, in contrast to popular view of pesantren as the cradle of exclusivists (radicals). In the same light, the Tempo magazine published their report on 'ideological mapping' of pesantren, and they concluded that pesantren embraces religious tolerance.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, pesantren represents the model of moderate Islam, which is uniquely Indonesian. In other words: pesantren is the miniature of moderate Islam.<sup>12</sup> The concept of Islamic moderation is gaining general attention due to the proliferation of exclusive and intolerant schools of religious thoughts.

The current threat of islamophobia (even among Muslims communities) lends urgency to scholarly discussions on pesantren-based paradigm of Islamic / religious studies.

Observers see that Islamophobia is a burning issue and intriguing subject to explore. Islamophobia oversimplifies Islamic teachings. Previously, this phenomenon existed only among non-Moslems in the West. Lately, this phobia has taken a subtler form and haunts people who embrace the religion! Islamophobia which is spreading among Moslems deserves special attention since this has sparked exclusivist attitudes among Moslem groups – they reject others who do not share their views. Narzanin Massoumi's article in *Times* points out that

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<sup>6</sup> Richard C. Martin (ed). *Pendekatan Kajian Islam dalam Studi Agama*, Surakarta: Muhammadiyah University Press, 2002,

<sup>7</sup> Peter Connolly. *Aneka Pendekatan Studi Agama*, Yogyakarta: Ircisod, 2016

<sup>8</sup> Muhamad War'i, "Formasi Nalar Santri: Studi Epistemologis Tradisi di Pesantren", *Muktamar Pemikiran Santri*, Jakarta 28-29 October 2019, Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesian Republic

<sup>9</sup> This claim is supported by the fact that numerous pesantren now operate tertiary education institutions providing formal education (universities) and non-formal education (Ma'had Aly).

<sup>10</sup> Nasaruddin Umar, *Rethinking Pesantren*, Jakarta: PT. Elex Media Komputindo, 2014, 4-10. The same story is told by Choirul Fuad Yusuf who attended the annual meeting of National Association of Foreign Student Advisers in Los Angeles, USA: participants of the conference were questioning him about the concept of pesantren; the name was closely associated with terrorism. They pointed out to the disturbing phenomenon of Afghan madrasah that produced members of the Thaliban. See: Pusat Data dan Analisa Tempo, *Indonesia dan Seribu Wajah Pesantren*, Jakarta: Tempo, 2019, 13

<sup>11</sup> Pusat Data dan Analisa Tempo. *Pesantren dan Penjunjung Toleransi*, Jakarta: Tempo, 2019, p. 15

<sup>12</sup> Syamsun Ni'am. "Pesantren: the Miniature of Moderate Islam in Indonesia", *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Volume 5, Number 1, (June 2015), 111 - 134

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Islamophobia is the consequence of the stigma attached to the religion following terrorist acts by splinter groups like ISIS.<sup>13</sup>

This article mainly aims to portray pesantren paradigm of Islamic studies and its role in promoting the positive image of Islam as a religion that brings divine blessing to the universe.

Hopefully we can formulate a scientific concept on paradigms of Islamic studies in pesantren and how such concept will affect the studies of other religions in this disruptive era. In addition, the outcomes of this discussion can be the antidote against Islamophobia which is currently afflicting non-Moslems and Moslems alike.

Against this background, three research questions are generated: (1) How are models of religious studies developed in pesantren? (2) What religious paradigms are used in pesantren? (3) What is the relevance of pesantren models of religious understanding to religious studies in the post-truth era, and what role does it play in curbing the spread of Islamophobia?

### Conceptual Framework

#### Pesantren within the mainstream religious studies

Lately religious studies are forced to clear a lot of hurdles resulting from atrocities that were committed in the name of religions or ideologies and social conflicts sparked by delicate religious issues. Violent riots and conflicts arising from religious issues have posed real threat to religious harmony globally. Religious studies has a major role to implement relevant approaches to bring end these problems.

Various approaches proposed by contemporary scholars merely show that religious studies are complicated by nature. They are anything but simple. It takes a myriad of methodologies to help us understand the phenomenon. Peter Connoley proposed the use of *polymethodik* approach.<sup>14</sup> It blends various methods of observing religious phenomena. However, the new age and its increasing complexity demands more innovation.

Religious study in Indonesia is currently facing serious handicaps. As a multicultural nation with a constellation of faiths and belief systems, Indonesia needs pluralistic paradigms in studying and perceiving religious phenomenon.

Many people share a positive view of pesantren for its moderate perspectives on Islam. Time-honored traditions of pesantren teach the graduates to show inclusive attitudes and embrace differences. Indonesian pesantren pride themselves with graduates who became celebrated Islamic clerics like Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholis Majid, Syafi'i Ma'arif, and Amin Abdullah, just to name a few. This has helped to strengthen the role of pesantren in building inclusive paradigms within the context of religious studies. The aforementioned graduates have gained reputation for open mindedness.

Obviously, the existing models of religious teaching in pesantren have a tangible correlation with today's predominant religious studies (sadly, such correlation is sparsely elaborated). But at least one can hypothetically claim that pesantren-based religious teaching has the potentials to produce graduates with open minds thanks to their traditions. For that reason, in the analysis the authors will explain the enormous implications those traditions can have in helping us develop inclusive models of Islamic studies.

#### Religious studies in the post-truth era

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<sup>13</sup> Narzanin Massoumi. "Why is Europe so Islamophobic? The Attacks Don't Come from Nowhere" in *Times*, via: [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com), accessed 6 Maret 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Connoley. *Aneka Pendekatan Studi Agama.....*, 11

The advent of post-truth era has posed challenges to religious studies. Post-truth era is marked by the proliferation of hoaxes concocted to present untruth as ‘truths.’<sup>15</sup> Apart from the widespread debates, the authors believe that ‘post-truth’ refers to the bizarre juxtaposition of subjective and objective notions; the media has the capacity to doctor the truth, to present something subjective as objective. Post-truth era is intricately linked to the media. To sum up, truth is intentionally twisted by the media in order to construct certain discourses.

The danger of such typology is imminent: it blurs the line separating truth and untruth. Consequently, people lose the ability to tell truth from falsity because truth is negated and lies are presented as truth. This chaos adversely affects all aspects our life, especially religion, which deals with reflections of the right and the wrong.

In some cases, religious issues mixed with political issues frequently give rise to religious primordiality which favors political interests. In the long run, religious values are compromised in favor of political incentives. Examples are abound from the contemporary political pageants in Indonesia and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

Post-truth era can be defined as the ‘semiotic pandemonium’ characterized by no clear-cut relationship between signifier and the signified. In such complicated semiotic relationships some instruments are needed to help us chart the road to objectivity. Within this context, religious studies badly need sophisticated Islamic outlooks that help us navigate the murky waters of post-truth era.

The authors are positive that pesantren paradigms of religious studies can guide us through our ‘phenomenological wanderings’ in this turbulent era. With the aid of the so-called ‘sophisticated looking-glasses’ we will be able to steer clear of the haze of lies and falsity shrouding all worldly phenomena, media plays and twisted issues, thanks to the above paradigms, and this explains why the article merits attention and significance.

Post-truth era is marked by the alarming rate of disinformation which also affects people’s religious attitudes. Even among Moslem communities, *islamophobia from within* is a real phenomenon. The proliferation of intolerant groups who resist differences and repel the other groups (to the point of outlawing their fellow worshippers simply because the latter do not share their belief). The situation is aggravated by their tendency to openly assert their ‘truth’ even if they have to exterminate the opposing groups.

The existence of such groups has smeared the image of Islam: Islam is perceived as an intolerant religion, and this stigmatizing view has put a great pressure on the Muslims living in the West because they are treated as radicals devoid of humanity. This shows the desperate need for a new perspective to counter their negative opinion and show the true color of Islam, which is the chief purpose of this paper.

## Research Methods

This article is adapted from a qualitative research that combined literature reviews and observation. These methods were used to blend information from various sources with the authors’ personal (subjective) experience as pesantren graduates. Integrated interconnection in Islamic study is the theoretical framework used to elaborate this topic. To borrow Amin

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce McComiskey. *Post-truth Rethoric and Compisition*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2017, 6-7

<sup>16</sup> A concrete example of the said phenomena is the mass demonstrations that erupted in Jakarta in 2016 amid the madness of gubernatorial election in Jakarta. The massive public uproar paved the way for “Protect Islam Rally” which has deformed the face of Islam in Indonesia. See: Muzayyin Ahyar, “Aksi Bela Islam Islamic Clicktivism and The New Authority of Religious Propaganda in The Millennial Age in Indonesia”, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Religion Societies*. Vol. 9, No. 1, (June 2019), 1-29

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Abdullah's concept, Islamic studies need to mix various theories and reviews in order to get objective findings.

There were three methods that used to collect the data in this research, which were interview, observation and documentation. An interview is a direct oral question and answer section between two or more people. An interview in a research must be based on clear objectives so that they have an explicit scope of problem.

In the data collection phase, the researcher also did a direct observation. Observations were used to obtain information about family practices and behavior in the phenomena that became the object of this research and the community's response to these phenomena. Observation is important to get more obvious pictures of the problem under study.

Documentation is the search of data such as notes, books, magazines, newspapers, agendas and so forth. Documentation is a way of obtaining the data by tracking and studying the document in the form of the work, either in the form of paper, or writing in magazines/journals. This method is used to investigate and review the important records of books that examine related issues.

Data were analyzed using descriptive-interpretive model to gather, screen and interpret research data based on pre-selected themes. To maintain objectivity, data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously to enable the researchers to effectively and accurately capture phenomena that constitute the research data.

### Results and Discussion

#### Models of Islamic Studies in Pesantren

At the extreme end of continuum of contemporary Islamic study, we can draw an important conclusion: Islamic studies should incorporate various approaches to widen the spectrum of their achievement. Nevertheless, the aspect of sacredness – which is the central issue – is largely overlooked by Islamic scholars who pursue the subject from purely scientific perspectives. For example, Amin Abdullah's concept of integrated interconnection, in spite of its methodological superiority, tends to give scant attention to discourses on mysticism which is the most fundamental part of religions.

This is ironic when we consider Connoley's claim that the most basic instrument of religions is their sacredness. This aspect is frequently ignored since Islamic scholars tend to employ approaches that distort the essential phenomenon. For illustration, when someone sets out to carry out a sociological study on Islam, they are deeply immersed in sociological reviews that they undermine the quintessential part of the religion. At any rate, religious phenomenon cannot be seen and treated only as social process.

It's not our intention to extend the debates on religions and social life. There have been too many forums discussing this, and they keep ending up with blurry conclusions. Max Weber who perceived religions as the end products of social processes seems to negate what Connoley defines as something 'sacral beyond the reach of human reasoning.'

Amid this methodological vacuum pesantren offers the solution. Time-honored traditions practiced in pesantren present the phenomena that make up for the loss of religious sacredness. In other words, pesantren fills the methodological gap of Islamic studies with traditional instruction on the yellow book, bahtsul masail and sufism.

Phenomenologically, pesantren is seen as a unique institution imbued with the above traditions. Zamakhsyari Dhofir in *Tradisi Pesantren* maintains that pesantren is associated with the said traditions. Any Islamic institution devoid of these traditions do not qualify as a pesantren.

Attempts to present pesantren paradigms of Islamic studies cannot be made only by describing hard data; interpretations are needed in order to clarify the phenomenon, because pesantren is not a formal institution having a set of scientific administrative mechanism, although its teaching and learning activities have solid scientific grounding, especially the instructional methods. For example, pesantren teachers always emphasize literal and rational aspect when conducting studies on fiqh, Islamic jurisprudence.

Pesantren traditions are unique: they are characterized by flexible manners of studying the religion. They set the epistemological foundation for knowledge. According to Muhamad War'i, the formation of reason within pesantren is unique because it features a reciprocal model in implementing epistemology in religious studies<sup>17</sup>.

War'i calls Aljabiri's concept of language acquisition 'the trilogy' (*bayani, burhani and irfani*), because every single component of the epistemology is intertwined with the others. Such interconnectedness in turn shapes the character of thoughts and attitude emanating from pesantren: inclusive and not resistant to changes. This character draws from the traditions perpetuated in pesantren: *kitab kuning*, the yellow book (which represents bayani reasoning), *bahtsul masail* (representation of burhani reasoning), and *tarekat* (representation of irfani reasoning). These traditions do not stand alone, but coexist in mutual reciprocity.

In addition to having well established intellectual and spiritual traditions, pesantren maintains social cohesion with the communities beyond its walls. Although it is cocooned by walls and buildings enclosing and sheltering the students and teachers, pesantren is open to the needs of neighboring communities' for education. To fulfil its intellectual duties, pesantren allows people to come inside and enjoy religious teachings. Many pesantren open their doors for people to learn religion. For example, Pesantren Darul Muttaqin in Surabaya<sup>18</sup>, Pesantren Tebuireng in Jombang, East Java<sup>19</sup>, and Pesantren Nahdlatul Wathan in Lombok. Such is the proof that pesantren always strives to maintain its social integration.<sup>20</sup>

The above social integration is made evident by the intellectual work of pesantren scholars who always respond to the contemporary social issues. For example, the during Nahdlatul Ulama conventions always discuss current affairs and daily problems like pollution / waste problems, or ethnic, racial and interfaith conflicts. Even when discussing the fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), pesantren clerics always put social issues into consideration.<sup>21</sup> This illustrates that pesantren prides itself with stellar intelligence and social integrity.

It can be said that Islamic studies in pesantren are characterized by comprehensive models of inquiries. *First*, pesantren models of religious studies are carried out through a series of logical reasoning which based on bahtsul masail. *Secondly*, the religious studies always stress on the significance of enriching references or learning resources backed up by students' ability to read the yellow book. *Thirdly*, the religious studies are imbued with sufistic aspects that require the students to practice tarekat (rituals done to purify the soul and heighten one's

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<sup>17</sup> Muhamad War'i. *Formasi Nalar Santri: Studi Epistemologis Tradisi di Pesantren*. Paper presented at the National Convention of Santri Intellectuals in Jakarta (28-29 October 2019).

<sup>18</sup> This pesantren hosts free Qur'anic reading courses for the neighboring communities on a daily basis following the congregational morning prayer. Ismail. Interviewed on 23 January 2019

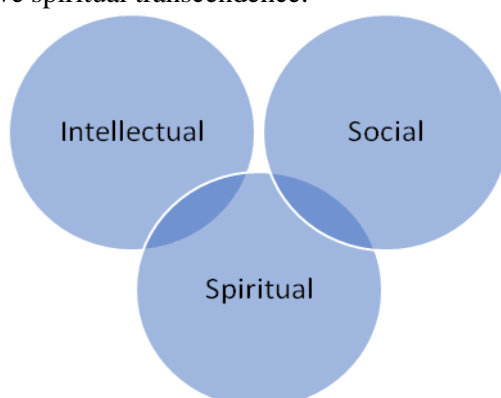
<sup>19</sup> Pesantren Tebuireng helped to settle violent conflict between local sugarcane growers and the sugar factory over disputes about sugarcane sale price. Tempo Magazine Data Centre. *Indonesia dan Seribu Wajah Pesantren*. (Jakarta: Tempo, 2019), 19

<sup>20</sup> Muhamad War'i. "Sosio-Religius Pesantren: Aktualisasi Nilai-Nilai Agama dalam Ruang Sosial Kemasyarakatan Di Lombok Timur." in *Fikri: Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial dan Budaya*. (Lampung: IAIM NU, V 4. No 1. 2019), 1-13

<sup>21</sup> Nur Hidayat Muhammad. *Fiqh Sosial dan Toleransi Beragama*. (Kediri: Nasyrul Ilmi Publishing, 2014)

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awareness) and intellectual exercises aimed at improving their personal life and intelligence. Needless to say, pesantren students are encouraged to practice tirakat, a spiritual undertaking that helps someone achieve spiritual transcendence.



### **Illustration: Interconnectivity of religious study paradigms in pesantren**

The diagram illustrates the systematic interconnectivity of intellectual establishment, social awareness and religious spirituality that make the foundation of religious studies in pesantren. In this case, spiritual values have become predominant forces that harmonize intellectual prowess and social awareness. In pesantren, it is common among kiai and santri to regularly spend time being alone, meditating and pursuing spiritual excellence in undertakings that they call 'tarekat.' It is customary within pesantren for teachers and disciples alike to put aside special time for deep contemplation to strengthen their intuition, which will bolster their intellectual prowess. In time, this will be beneficial for their social interactions.

It has become evident that pesantren paradigms for religious studies are unique, as both teachers and disciples not only rely on their intelligence and social awareness in their quest for wisdom; they too, respect their intuitions and always engage in spiritual reflections. Spiritual reflection is the building block of *irfani* way of reasoning that enables pesantren students to intellectually adopt measured and transcendental thinking.

### **Moderation as a religious paradigm in pesantren**

In recent years, Islamic moderation has become a trending topic in scholarly and political discussions, and countries with large Muslim majority like Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have opted to adopt this concept. Islamic moderation is popular because the world has witnessed the growth of exclusivist religious groups adhering to radical ideologies. The notorious hardliner group of ISIS exemplifies religious conservative-radicalism.

Efforts to mainstream moderate Islam in Indonesia gained momentum with the advent of new Islamic concepts like Islam Nusantara, Progressive Islam, Advanced Islam, Islam Aswaja, and many others.<sup>22</sup> The authors propose the concept of *wasathiyah* (moderate Islam) for this research.

Religious studies in pesantren strongly favor the *wasathiyah* concept, which manifests itself in various teaching-learning practices and paradigms. As the author has previously explained, religious studies in pesantren take on multi-paradigmatic models that culminate in inclusive concepts. Moderate Islam has become the centerpiece of this conceptual mapping.

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<sup>22</sup> Ridho, et. al., "Media Online dan Perilaku Keberagamaan Muslim: Pengalaman di Indonesia, Malaysia dan Burnai Darussalam", *Dialog Jurnal Penelitian dan Kajian Keagamaan*, Jakarta: Ministry of Religious Affairs, Vol. 42, No. 1, (Juni 2019), 49 - 51



Indonesian ministry of religious affairs hosts numerous events to publicize and disseminate the concept of moderate Islam. The ministry has also published books and held seminars on this topic, which is deeply rooted in Indonesian religious practices. Since 2018, the ministry has launched the annual Conference on Pesantren Scholars' Thoughts which is attended by prominent Islamic scholars who share their concepts on Islamic studies. The ministry has recently published a book on moderate Islam.<sup>23</sup>

Conceptually, Islamic moderation aims to carry out Islamic studies in an inclusive manner, which is to say that Islam should be perceived and represented based on the context of its existence as a religion that brings divine blessings to the universe. Being part of a huge nation has motivated Islamic scholars in pesantren to adopt the concept of Islamic moderation. Additionally, efforts to mainstream Islamic moderation has been greatly influenced by intellectual reflections of those who are concerned about the widespread Islamic fundamentalist who threaten the nation's religious, cultural and traditional diversity.

In the recent years, Islamic fundamentalism has bared its teeth and caused turmoil in a nation dominated by the Muslim majority. This fundamentalist movement reached its apex in 2016 when the former governor of Jakarta (popularly called Ahok) was found guilty of speaking blasphemy against Islam. This case had triggered public outcry around the world. International community began to question Islamic moderation in Indonesia.<sup>24</sup> People across the globe believed the era of Islamic moderation in Indonesia had come to an end.

Nevertheless, such an accusation has proved to be overgeneralized. Those people failed to see the actual majority living in Indonesia. History records that Indonesian Muslim majority is roughly divided into two large moderate groups: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Fundamentalist movements that gather in mass protests called Islam Defense Action do not represent the Muslim majority in Indonesia. The fact that most Indonesian Muslims did not do anything against or in favor of the fundamentalist groups has created the false illusion that Indonesian Muslim majority was behind the colossal rally.

Claims that Indonesian Muslims supported the mass protest must be disproved. Something must be done to prove that Indonesian Islam was, is, and will always be moderate. The existence of pesantren which is inseparable from Indonesian education serves as a scaffolding for the concept of moderate Islam. In this case, pesantren has made a significant contribution in developing and mainstreaming moderate approach to the study of this religion. How come this paradigm become a favored model in pesantren? To find the answer let us take a look at the traditions respected and perpetuated within the pesantren. The author has discussed this in the previous part and there is no need to reiterate this point. However, it is necessary for us to get to know the driving factors behind the existence of moderate Islam.

First, historical factor. Historically, pesantren scholars were aware of the fact that Islam came to Indonesia in peace. The people who spread the religion into the archipelago did not resort to violence like what their compatriots had done in the Middle East and Spain. Spanyol. Merle C. Ricklefs contends that this happened, in part, due to the adaptive or flexible characteristics of Islam that was introduced to the land of Java by the nine early Islam missionaries (Wali Songo - the nine saints). History has it that in the earliest days of its

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<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Religious Affairs, *Moderasi Islam*, Jakarta: Research, Development and Training Agency, Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019,

<sup>24</sup> Chandra, et. al., *Indonesian Moderate Islam in the Eye of the Global Society: Is It Falling Yet?*, Yogyakarta: IIS Brief, Issu 4, (May 2017), 3-6

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existence in Indonesia, Islam was better known for the esoteric aspects of Sufism, not for Fiqih with its heavy emphasis on the right and the wrong.<sup>25</sup>

Another factor that gave Islam its peaceful face is the fact that it came to the archipelago through trade diplomacy, not bloody crusades. The development of Islam in Indonesia went through peaceful interactions. The descendants of Wali Song continued this peaceful tradition and later on became the revered dignitaries of the earliest pesantren. This peaceful approach in spreading Islam has led to the growth of moderate Islam paradigm in the present-day Indonesia.

Besides historical factors, scientific genealogy has its legacy in the proliferation of Islamic moderation in pesantren. Azyumardi Azra indicates that the network of Indonesian and Middle-Eastern ulemma was dominated by syafi'i clerics.<sup>26</sup> This school of thought is popular for its moderate attitude, as manifested by highly contextual legal rulings.

### **The relevance of pesantren religious paradigms to the other religious studies**

People perceive that Islamic studies in pesantren are based on the Ulumuddin and Ilmu Kalam paradigms. Conceptual mapping by Amin Abdullah shows that Islamic studies are based on three paradigms: ulumuddin (normative study of the religion that defies logics), Ilmu Kalam (Islamic theology), a branch of Islamic science that uses logics but respects the theological exclusivity and relies heavily on the subjective justification of the religion, and dirasah islamiah (Islamic studies), religious study that stresses on the importance of dialogs. Within this last paradigm, scholars and researchers of religions engage in open and highly logical discussions, celebrate differences and welcome views from beyond their theological realms.

Labeling pesantren as an Islamic institution that exclusively implement theological paradigm proves to be simplistic and this requires a lot of rethinking. As the authors have indicated in the previous sub-chapter, empirical data have clearly demonstrated that despite the lack of formal methodology, pesantren religious studies have shown their academic nature. Although lacking formality pesantren religious studies and instructions have significantly advanced in terms of the methodology. In other words, religious studies in pesantren meet the criteria for a scientific study.

Even though at a glance the scholastic tradition in pesantren is redolent of normative and exclusively theological approach, the actual scope of Islamic study is far beyond these. We can trace a plethora of theoretical frameworks from pesantren that earn a special place in the arena of Islamic Studies. All theological approaches originating from pesantren, for example, are essential prerequisites of academic requirements of religious study.<sup>27</sup> Besides that, the scientific instruments used in pesantren are academically accountable and unique.

### **The urgency of pesantren-based epistemological paradigm in the post-truth Era**

Some approaches of the contemporary Islamic studies are dominated by positivism, but in pesantren, this aspect is given the right proportion. Tradition in pesantren has always incorporated the social aspects in the pedagogy; in fact, this has become an integral part of *bahtsul masail* process, whose end product is dedicated to the public. Teaching-learning

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<sup>25</sup> Merle C. Ricklefs, "Religious Reform and Polarization In Java", *Isim Review: Migrants, Minorities And The Mainstream*, International Institute for The Study of Islam In The Modern World, 2008, 35

<sup>26</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII dan XVIII.*, Jakarta: Prenada Media Group, 2004, 117

<sup>27</sup> Frank Whaling. "Pendekatan Teologis" in Connoley (ed). *Aneka Pendekatan Studi Agama.* (Yogyakarta: IRCISOD, 2016), 315

traditions in pesantren have always considered the archeological, cultural and other relevant aspects. Data presented in the previous segment sufficiently describe the phenomena.

So, what is the role or relevance of the pesantren paradigms of Islamic studies to the studies of the other religions? The relevance is obvious, especially when viewed from the intuitive context. Pesantren has blended three Western-oriented epistemological paradigms (empirism, rationalism, and intuitionism) with Oriental paradigms: *bayani*, *burhani* and *irfani*. The paradigmatic combination will create highly complex reasoning, which proves that pesantren, by implementing these blended paradigms, has provided us with sophisticated solution.

The authors have described the three epistemological paradigms developed and established at pesantren by practicing *bahtsul masail*, reading the yellow book and practicing *tirakat*. The authors would like to stress that the most essential aspect of pesantren-mode religious study to emulate is the intuitive aspect. In an international seminar several years ago, Syafaatun Almirzanah showed the importance of applying the sufistic paradigm for today's interfaith dialogue.<sup>28</sup>

The distinctive model of studying Islam in pesantren is relevant in the context of interfaith dialogues. The combination of logics, vast reading materials and reflections will result in sophisticated and inclusive conclusions. Aspects of Sufism that nurture intuition will positively affect paradigmatic development of religious studies. We can mention the names of great *tasawuf* philosophers whose thoughts have breathed life into the study of religions. Jalaluddin Rumi, for example. Although he never actually wrote the concepts of Islamic study, his most important book entitled *Fihi Ma Fihi*, has shown the importance of interfaith dialogues.<sup>29</sup> Rumi teaches us about the imminent demise of universal truth brought about by sectarian fanaticism.

Then it becomes apparent that Sufism-based approaches can pave the road for open-minded and dialogical paradigm of Islamic studies. The dialogical concept which takes its roots in pesantren will capitalize on intuitions in responding to irreversible changes in the future. The current post-truth era that caused global pandemonium proves how urgent this issue can be.

The post-truth era has presented challenges to the study of Islam. Problems like contradiction between the signifier and signified, monolithic textual interpretation by numerous groups, extreme interpretations by liberal thinkers, can only be addressed by aspects of religious study formulated in pesantren which showcase the importance of intuition in seeing the dynamics and dialectics of Islamic studies. This aspects is gaining paramount importance because studying a religion necessitates us to take an intimate look into its the mystical aspect.

In many respects, the epistemological paradigm of bayani cannot be isolated from the other paradigms. Without burhani and irfani, scholars who rely too much on bayani will find it difficult to interpret their subject due to the rigidity of the religious texts. On the other hand, theological studies which overemphasize the rational aspect of burhani are prone to fail due to the inability to grasp and understand the mystical aspect of the subject. The intuitive aspect of irfani relies heavily on ascetism in its search for the truth. These epistemological paradigms cannot work on their own because they present contested theories or immature methodologies.

For illustration, when we examine a set of post-truth research data using the bayani approach, we will fail to understand the phenomenon. We will also fail to use the burhani approach in isolation, since the advocates of this approach tend to find justifications for their

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<sup>28</sup> Syafaatun Almirzanah. *Sacred Text in Interfaith Dialogue*. An international seminar hosted by UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta on 30 August 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi. *Fihi Ma Fihi Ahaditsu Maulana Jalaluddin Arrumy Sya'iru Shufiyatu al-Akbar*. (Damaskus: Darul Fikri, 2002) specifically pages 51-54

## The Relevance of Pesantren-Derived Epistemological Paradigms in Religious Studies and Their Role in Overcoming Islamophobia in the Post-Truth Era

subjective arguments and draw premature conclusions too. Consequently, irfani becomes a necessary tool to complement the epistemological structure of Islamic studies.

Irfani gains its importance when we observe and study Islamic discourses since this paradigm is based on the transcendental interaction between an individual and their God. From the traditions of pesantren we know a certain spiritual pursuit that enables an individual to get divine enlightenment (*kasyaf*). This is known as *ilmu laduni*. This model of seeking truth and gaining divine enlightenment (*tarekat*) is consistently cultivated and developed within pesantren. For this reason, pesantren will be the only institution capable of integrating the above concepts.<sup>30</sup>

The right blend of the three paradigms will guide us in understanding Islamic discourses in the post-turth era. We see that public sphere and the media nowadays are rife with contents and passages that distort and reduce the values of Islam. Holy scriptures and quotes from the Hadith are deliberately misused in favor of advertisers, vested-interest groups and communities. Islamic contents on televisions and the media tend to inculcate the viewers with exclusivist views. By using pesantren-based paradigm we can thoroughly investigate the phenomenon, make efforts to counter the radical movements and help preserve the religious truths.

The epistemological paradigms under discussion will gain real significance especially when the government formalize the pesantren. Constitutionally, pesantren-based education is legalized thanks to the recent ratification of Pesantren Law. Several great pesantren have opened universities that adopt the Ma'had Aly sistem dedicated to their graduates. This underlines the fact that pesantren plays an important role in the studies of religion.

The flourishing forums that accommodate pesantren on the national level<sup>31</sup> will help pesantren establish their instructional methods.

Pesantren alumni have forged national and international alliances with various forums discussing issues pertaining to the religion and daily life.<sup>32</sup> For example, World Association of Al-Azhar Graduates with members and representatives from across the world. The majority of the members are pesantren graduates. The existence of this network strengthens the global position of pesantren in the dialectics of science.

### **Overcoming Islamophobia, promoting the true image of Islam**

Pesantren-based paradigm for religious studies is relevant because it enshrines humanity and shows flexible and inclusive attitude. The paradigm is grounded on many perspectives. Such paradigm will be instrumental in presenting the true image of Islam in the face of growing islamophobia.

The nascent movement of intolerant groups is triggered by monolithic religious teachings by exclusivist groups. We have to do what it takes to put them back on the right track where religious studies and discussions are more inclusive by nature. Inclusive religious doctrines encourage mutual respect and tolerance, and this has been internalized within pesantren.

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<sup>30</sup> Compare this with Amin Abdullah's integrated interconnection concept. While the authors realize that his concept is by far the most representable tool for mapping the phenomenon, it is difficult to find technically viable method to study the aspect of irfani in today's tertiary education. This shows the significance of pesantren as an institution capable of interconnecting the paradigms of Islamic study.

<sup>31</sup> AMALI (Asosiasi Ma'had Aly Seluruh Indonesia) is an organization set up to accommodate diverse groups or communities of Ma'had Ali in Indonesia.

<sup>32</sup> Husein Muhammad. "Moderasi Islam dan Pesantren Internasional." In *Acara Rapat Kerja dan Silaturahmi Nasional Ikatan Keluarga Alumni Nahdlatul Ulama Mesir*. Cirebon, 7-8 March 2020

When paradigms for religious studies encourage open-mindedness, we can stop the spread of islamophobia, and one day people will be able to tolerate and sympathize with people who embrace other religions. Islamophobia is rampant due to doctrines that obscure the face of Islam<sup>33</sup>. Outsiders tend to see the ugly face of the religion and their opinion remains unchanged. Therefore we have to stop the spread of islamophobia by opening the venues for people to correct their views and understanding of Islam.

Psychologically perspective, cognitive aspect of the efforts to counter islamophobia should be prioritized. Pesantren-based paradigm enables people to study the religion with open-mindedness, and this helps them perceive the religion comprehensively.<sup>34</sup> As a country dominated by Muslims, Indonesia must encourage its citizen to adopt inclusive approach in their social interaction. In so doing they help build the true image of their religion. When moderate Islam becomes a shared norm, islamophobia and bad stereotypes of Islam will dissipate.

### Conclusion

Based on the above narration we can draw some conclusions. *First*, pesantren earns the reputation as an institution with a unique model of religious study thanks to the multiple perspectives which blend the three Islamic epistemologies: *bayani*, *burhani* and *irfani*. *Secondly*, owing to the multi-epistemological approach in pesantren-based instruction, the concept of Moderate Islam came into existence, with its emphasis on spiritual, intellectual dan and social aspects. *Thirdly*, by combining the above paradigms, Islamic studies and other religious studies can be carried out inclusively. This paradigm, when applied, will help us build the good image of Islam and help counter islamophobia.

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