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A Critical study of Classical lslamic Thought on Practical Exclusivity and Relevance for Moderate Reform in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Exclusive religious practices remain a challenge in Indonesian society, which is characterized by religious, cultural, and traditional diversity. Religious attitudes that tend to regard truth as belonging exclusively to one's own group may lead to intolerance, discrimination, and social conflict. This article aims to analyze classical Islamic thought's critiques of exclusive religious practices and examine their relevance to strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia. This study employs a qualitative method using a library research approach. Data were collected through a review of classical Islamic texts, academic books, scholarly journal articles, and other relevant sources. The data were analyzed descriptively and analytically by examining classical Muslim scholars' ideas on tolerance, justice, freedom of thought, respect for differences, and social ethics. The findings indicate that classical Islamic intellectual traditions contain principles that provide a critical foundation for addressing religious exclusivism. These principles emphasize the importance of openness, respect for diversity, dialogue, and justice in social life. In the Indonesian context, these values are relevant to strengthening religious moderation based on tolerance, balance, nonviolence, and acceptance of a pluralistic society. This article concludes that classical Islamic thought has not only historical and theological significance but also offers an ethical foundation for developing religious moderation in response to contemporary challenges of religious exclusivism.

Keywords: *Classical Islamic Thought, Religious Exclusivity, Religious Moderation.*

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INTRODUCTION

Islam promotes morality, tolerance, compassion, and social harmony. These principles constitute not only the fundamental teachings of Islam but also the essential characteristics that shape harmonious relationships within diverse societies. However, in practical social life, these values sometimes encounter exclusivist attitudes characterized by claims to absolute truth, the rejection of differing interpretations, and the marginalization of groups perceived as different. Such phenomena reveal a significant gap between the universal values of Islam and the challenges arising from their implementation in social life.

Exclusivism also involves attitudes and dispositions that influence relationships between individuals and social groups. The relationship between exclusivism and intolerance plays a significant role in the emergence of social divisions (Sukmayadi et

al., 2023). This phenomenon is particularly evident in the growing tendency toward exclusivist attitudes and intolerance among Generation Z. Such attitudes are not merely expressions of individual preferences but may also reflect rigid patterns of religious understanding that limit opportunities for dialogue and potentially contribute to intolerance and social conflict. In this context, religious exclusivism is not only associated with persistent interpretations within particular social groups but also requires critical examination through a broader, more comprehensive, and contextual perspective. Therefore, examining classical Islamic thought is essential to understanding how intellectual traditions have shaped contemporary Muslim society and how their contributions can be reconsidered in response to changing social dynamics.

Classical Islamic intellectual traditions have developed extensively across several disciplines, including jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), philosophy (*falsafah*), and Sufism (*tasawwuf*). The differences among these intellectual traditions are not necessarily manifestations of religious division but may also represent an integral part of the development of scholarly inquiry, intellectual debate, and the management of interpretive differences. Ahmad (2023) identifies Imam al-Ghazali as one of the most influential figures in the Islamic intellectual tradition, whose contributions demonstrate the importance of critical engagement with traditional knowledge through intellectual discussion and scholarly debate. His thought also illustrates that intellectual differences should not necessarily generate conflict but can instead be managed through ethical principles, intellectual responsibility, and constructive scholarly engagement.

Each of these traditions occupies an important position within the broader framework of Islamic knowledge and is developed through distinct methodological approaches to religious interpretation. Laabdi (2024) highlights the significance of *ʿilm al-ikhtilaf* (the science of scholarly disagreement) in understanding the intellectual diversity of Islamic civilization. Historically, this tradition demonstrates that differences of opinion have been accommodated through intellectual dialogue, methodological debate, and contextual interpretation. Such a tradition constitutes an important intellectual foundation for strengthening the unity of the Muslim community (*ummah*) amid contemporary challenges. Nevertheless, the development of intellectual diversity has sometimes been accompanied by the rejection of arguments presented by scholars from different intellectual orientations, thereby limiting the potential for constructive engagement within the Islamic scholarly tradition.

In Indonesia, religious exclusivism is particularly relevant when examined within a multicultural society characterized by diversity in religion, ethnicity, culture, language, and indigenous traditions. Research by Subchi et al. (2022) highlights the importance of religious moderation in responding to the challenges of intolerance and radicalism within Indonesian Muslim communities. Their discussion emphasizes the significance of tolerance, balance, justice, and maintaining social harmony across differences. Similarly, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019) emphasizes religious moderation as an expression of wisdom, moral responsibility, and practical religious conduct. Moderation requires individuals to maintain a balanced position without neglecting the fundamental principles of religious teachings. This perspective seeks to cultivate harmonious social relationships while preserving religious identity and cultural diversity.

Nevertheless, moderation should not be reduced to a public slogan or merely a normative political discourse. Rather, it should be reflected in educational practices,

moral commitments, and social behaviors that contribute to peaceful coexistence. Junaedi (2019) emphasizes the importance of religious moderation from the perspective of Islamic studies, particularly by understanding religion as a source of balanced, constructive, and inclusive social values. Accordingly, the promotion of moderation must be grounded in Islamic principles and intellectual traditions that reflect the historical, theological, and ethical dimensions of Islam.

Furthermore, Imam al-Ghazali's perspectives on ethical conduct, exemplary behavior, and the cultivation of moral character deserve particular attention in contemporary discussions of Islamic intellectual reform. His contributions provide an important foundation for examining the relationship between religious knowledge, ethical responsibility, and intellectual engagement. As discussed by Ahmad (2023), al-Ghazali's intellectual legacy demonstrates the importance of integrating critical reflection, scholarly reasoning, and ethical considerations in responding to contemporary religious and social challenges.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design based on library research, critical textual analysis, and contextual hermeneutics. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the primary objective of this research is to critically examine the intellectual foundations of classical Islamic thought, particularly its exclusivist tendencies, normative assumptions, and potential contributions to contemporary moderate reform in Indonesia. Rather than measuring religious attitudes through statistical instruments, this study focuses on interpreting ideas, examining intellectual arguments, and reconstructing the relevance of classical Islamic knowledge within contemporary socio-religious contexts. Library research enables the researcher to investigate classical Islamic texts alongside contemporary academic literature in order to identify continuities, contradictions, and transformations in Islamic intellectual traditions (Saeed, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research is grounded in a critical-interpretive paradigm that regards classical Islamic intellectual traditions as historically situated bodies of knowledge rather than immutable and homogeneous doctrines. Accordingly, the study does not intend to reject classical Islamic scholarship or accept it uncritically. Instead, it seeks to establish a balanced intellectual engagement by distinguishing between the fundamental ethical principles of Islam and interpretations that emerged under particular historical, political, and cultural circumstances. This perspective provides an analytical foundation for understanding how classical Islamic thought can be critically reconstructed without abandoning its intellectual and theological authenticity.

Historical and Contextual Analysis

The historical-contextual approach is employed to examine the circumstances surrounding the development of classical Islamic intellectual traditions. Classical Islamic scholarship emerged through complex interactions between religious interpretation, political authority, social structures, philosophical debates, and cultural transformations. Therefore, the ideas of classical Muslim scholars must be understood in relation to their historical settings rather than interpreted exclusively through contemporary assumptions. This approach is particularly important when examining theological exclusivism, jurisprudential rigidity, and the construction of religious authority within classical Islamic discourse. Historical contextualization helps

distinguish between universal Islamic values and intellectual positions that were influenced by specific historical circumstances (Saeed, 2006).

In this regard, the study examines selected intellectual contributions from classical Muslim scholars in theology (*kalam*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), philosophy (*falsafah*), and Islamic ethics (*akhlaq*). The works of scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Al-Shatibi, and Ibn Rushd may provide important perspectives for understanding the relationship between religious authority, rationality, ethical responsibility, and the objectives of Islamic teachings. Their intellectual contributions are analyzed comparatively to identify the diversity of reasoning within the classical Islamic tradition. Such an examination is expected to demonstrate that Islamic intellectual history contains not only authoritative and normative interpretations but also traditions of disagreement, intellectual negotiation, and critical reasoning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Religious Exclusivist Practices from an Islamic Perspective

Religious exclusivism refers to an attitude that regards one's own religious group as the sole possessor of truth while rejecting, marginalizing, or discriminating against other religious groups. Findings by Sukmayadi et al. (2023) indicate that exclusivist attitudes in religious contexts can contribute to the development of intolerance. Religious commitment, however, should be distinguished from fanaticism, intolerance, and the unwillingness to engage in dialogue. The fundamental issue does not lie in an individual's firm conviction in their religious teachings, but rather in behaviors that transform such convictions into instruments for restricting the rights and undermining the dignity of others.

From an Islamic perspective, the recognition of religious diversity represents an important dimension of faith and moral responsibility in social life. The Qur'an emphasizes the principle of human diversity in QS. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13, which explains that humanity was created as different nations and tribes so that people may know and understand one another. This verse highlights the importance of mutual recognition, respect, and social interaction across differences. Such diversity is understood as part of God's creation, reflecting His wisdom, mercy, and compassion.

Therefore, the practical evaluation of religious exclusivism should not merely focus on strengthening religious identity but also on transforming attitudes and addressing their social consequences. Exclusivist practices must be critically examined when they contradict the Islamic principles of justice, compassion, mutual respect, and the protection of human dignity. Consequently, it is essential to establish a clear distinction between religious commitment and intolerant behavior, particularly when the latter leads to discrimination, violence, or social exclusion.

Critical Perspectives of Classical Islamic Thought on Religious Exclusivism

Classical Islamic thought represents an intellectual heritage that provides valuable insights into religious knowledge, ethics, education, and social responsibility. Several classical Muslim scholars developed intellectual perspectives that can contribute to a critical understanding of exclusivist religious practices and promote a more constructive approach to religious differences.

1. Imam al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE): Religious Commitment and Ethical Perfection

Imam al-Ghazali was a prominent Muslim scholar whose intellectual contributions covered jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and Sufism. His thought emphasizes the importance of achieving ethical excellence and cultivating virtuous character. In *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali highlights the significance of sincerity, humility, self-discipline, and the purification of the heart. His ethical perspective suggests that religious knowledge should not become an instrument for arrogance, self-righteousness, or the excessive defense of personal opinions. Instead, intellectual debate should be directed toward discovering truth rather than merely defending individual positions.

Ahmad (2023) identifies al-Ghazali as one of the most influential critical thinkers in the Islamic intellectual tradition. His intellectual contributions demonstrate that religious understanding must be accompanied by ethical reflection, intellectual responsibility, and a willingness to evaluate one's own assumptions. His approach provides an important foundation for understanding the relationship between religious commitment and moral conduct.

This perspective is particularly relevant to addressing exclusivist religious practices. Individuals should not automatically perceive differences of opinion as threats to their religious convictions. Rather, differences should create opportunities for dialogue, mutual understanding, and intellectual development. Through this approach, al-Ghazali's thought provides a framework for cultivating religious commitment that is not only grounded in doctrinal conviction but also expressed through ethical behavior and respect for others.

2. Ibn Rushd (1126–1198 CE): Rationality and Intellectual Openness

Ibn Rushd was a prominent philosopher and jurist from Andalusia whose intellectual contributions significantly influenced Islamic philosophy and the relationship between reason and revelation. He emphasized the compatibility of philosophical inquiry and religious understanding. Through his work *Fasl al-Maqal*, Ibn Rushd explains the relationship between philosophy and religious law, arguing that rational inquiry should not be regarded as inherently contradictory to religious faith.

His perspective provides an important foundation for critical thinking, intellectual dialogue, and rational argumentation. Religious understanding requires processes of reflection and interpretation that take account of textual evidence, rational considerations, and contextual circumstances. Therefore, individuals should not reject the opinions of others merely because they differ from their own interpretations.

While al-Ghazali emphasizes ethical discipline and spiritual purification, Ibn Rushd highlights the importance of rational argumentation and intellectual openness. Research by Rahman et al. (2025) discusses the intellectual contributions of al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd in the development of Islamic philosophical discourse. Despite their different intellectual orientations, both scholars demonstrate the importance of critical reasoning in religious understanding.

In contemporary contexts, Ibn Rushd's thought remains relevant to fostering intellectual dialogue and strengthening public literacy. Society needs to develop the habit of examining the foundations of arguments before accepting or rejecting particular opinions. Such intellectual discipline can help overcome fanaticism and

encourage a scholarly tradition characterized by rationality, openness, and constructive disagreement.

3. Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328 CE): Understanding and Respecting Scholarly Differences

Ibn Taymiyyah was an influential Islamic scholar whose intellectual contributions addressed Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and religious interpretation. In his work *Raf' al-Malam 'an al-A'immat al-A'lam*, he discusses the reasons why prominent Islamic scholars may arrive at different legal opinions. He explains that differences among scholars can emerge from variations in their understanding of hadith, the availability of evidence, and the methodological approaches employed in deriving Islamic legal rulings.

This perspective demonstrates that differences of opinion do not necessarily indicate deviation or a deliberate rejection of religious truth. Different scholarly conclusions may arise from variations in intellectual backgrounds, interpretive methodologies, and the evidence available to individual scholars.

Ibn Taymiyyah's ideas are relevant to critically examining fanaticism and promoting respect for differences within contemporary Muslim society. Respecting differences does not mean accepting every opinion without criticism. Rather, it requires providing sufficient space for rational argumentation, objective evaluation, and constructive scholarly engagement.

The preceding discussion demonstrates that classical Islamic intellectual traditions provide important ethical, rational, and methodological foundations for understanding religious diversity. Al-Ghazali emphasizes ethical responsibility, Ibn Rushd highlights rationality and intellectual openness, while Ibn Taymiyyah provides insights into the recognition of legitimate scholarly differences. Together, these perspectives offer a valuable framework for critically addressing religious exclusivism and strengthening moderate Islamic discourse.

The Relevance of Classical Islamic Thought to Religious Moderation in Indonesia

Indonesia is characterized by considerable diversity in religious traditions, ethnic identities, cultural practices, and indigenous customs. Apandie et al. (2022) explain that the values of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and religious moderation are interconnected in promoting harmony, justice, solidarity, and peaceful coexistence within a pluralistic society. These circumstances require religious practices that uphold tolerance, sensitivity toward differences, balance, and mutual respect.

The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019) identifies several indicators of religious moderation, including national commitment, tolerance, nonviolence, and accommodation of local cultural traditions. These principles provide an important framework for developing religious practices that maintain religious identity while respecting the rights and identities of others.

Classical Islamic thought has considerable relevance to these indicators and can contribute to religious moderation through several important dimensions.

1. Strengthening Tolerance

Al-Ghazali's perspective on ethical discipline and the cultivation of virtuous character provides an important foundation for developing tolerance within Muslim

communities. Habibah et al. (2022) suggest that the internalization of religious moderation can strengthen tolerant attitudes across generations. Similarly, Ulfaturrohmatiririn et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of managing religious differences to maintain social harmony.

Tolerance does not require individuals to abandon their religious convictions. Rather, it involves recognizing differences and developing the capacity to coexist peacefully with individuals and groups who hold different beliefs. In Indonesian society, this principle should encourage respect for religious beliefs, religious organizations, worship practices, and the fundamental rights of others. Religious commitment must never become a justification for discrimination or persecution.

2. Strengthening National Commitment

Classical Islamic thought, particularly its ethical and philosophical dimensions, provides a foundation for promoting social responsibility and peaceful coexistence. Religious responsibility should not be limited to the relationship between human beings and God but should also encompass ethical obligations toward fellow human beings and society.

In the Indonesian context, national commitment involves respecting Pancasila, the Constitution, democratic principles, and human rights. Religious diversity should encourage individuals to contribute to national unity rather than intensify divisions based on group identities. Accordingly, classical Islamic ethical principles can support the development of a religious understanding that integrates spiritual commitment with civic responsibility and national solidarity.

3. Reducing Violence in the Name of Religion

Religious exclusivism can contribute to intolerant attitudes when differences are interpreted as threats that must be resisted or eliminated. Al-Ghazali's emphasis on ethical conduct and Ibn Taymiyyah's discussion of scholarly differences provide important intellectual resources for addressing such tendencies.

Differences in religious beliefs and interpretations should be addressed through dialogue, education, and applicable legal mechanisms rather than violence or coercion. Derung et al. (2023) emphasize that tolerance can be cultivated through practical approaches that prevent conflict and strengthen peaceful coexistence within society. Similarly, Jati et al. (2024) highlight the importance of dialogue in developing constructive relationships between Muslim communities and broader society.

These perspectives demonstrate that religious moderation requires active participation and cannot be achieved merely through formal institutional policies. It must also be reflected in everyday social interactions, educational practices, and community engagement.

4. Supporting Local Culture

Classical Islamic jurisprudence recognizes the importance of social and historical circumstances in the development and application of Islamic legal thought. This perspective is relevant to Indonesian society, where religious practices frequently interact with diverse local traditions and cultural identities.

Respect for local culture does not mean accepting every traditional practice without critical consideration. Rather, cultural traditions should be evaluated

according to their ethical substance, social benefits, and compatibility with Islamic principles. Through this approach, Muslim communities can preserve their religious identities while simultaneously appreciating and maintaining the cultural heritage of their surrounding communities.

Promoting Religious Moderation through Contemporary Policies

The promotion of religious moderation in contemporary society faces various challenges, including the rapid development of information technology, the spread of misinformation, identity-based fanaticism, and limited religious and digital literacy. Addressing these challenges requires practical strategies that integrate classical Islamic intellectual values with contemporary social and educational policies.

First, social media should be utilized to promote reliable information, critical thinking, and constructive public dialogue. The dissemination of religious information must be accompanied by careful verification of sources and consideration of contextual circumstances. Such an approach can reduce misinformation and prevent social polarization. In this regard, Ibn Rushd's emphasis on rationality remains relevant to encouraging individuals to examine information and evaluate arguments rather than accepting opinions without critical consideration.

Second, identity-based fanaticism should be addressed through the development of inclusive social relationships and intellectual openness. Religious identity should function as a source of ethical commitment rather than an instrument for marginalizing others. Al-Ghazali's reflections on ethical discipline and the purification of character provide an important foundation for encouraging humility, respectful communication, and intellectual maturity.

Third, religious education should place greater emphasis on cultivating attitudes toward differences. Educational processes should not merely transmit religious knowledge concerning legal rulings and doctrinal teachings but should also develop students' abilities to engage in dialogue, think critically, and respect others. The Islamic tradition of *ikhtilaf* (scholarly disagreement) demonstrates the historical importance of intellectual diversity and constructive debate in the development of Islamic civilization.

Accordingly, strengthening religious moderation requires collaboration among educational institutions, religious leaders, government agencies, and local communities. These efforts should be directed toward developing religious understanding that is comprehensive, contextual, balanced, and responsive to contemporary social challenges.

Synthesizing Classical Islamic Thought to Promote Religious Moderation

The intellectual contributions of al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Taymiyyah provide complementary perspectives for addressing exclusivist religious practices. Al-Ghazali emphasizes ethical principles and spiritual discipline, Ibn Rushd highlights rationality and intellectual openness, while Ibn Taymiyyah provides an important framework for understanding and respecting scholarly differences.

These perspectives can be synthesized into an intellectual and ethical foundation for promoting religious moderation. Religious commitment should develop alongside intellectual openness, social responsibility, and respect for human dignity.

Individuals should be able to maintain their religious convictions without undermining the beliefs, rights, or dignity of others.

Therefore, religious moderation should not be understood merely as a theological identity or a normative concept. Rather, it represents an ethical and practical orientation that requires proportionality, intellectual maturity, and social responsibility. Within the Indonesian context, these values are essential for strengthening national solidarity, preventing discrimination, and addressing conflicts arising from religious exclusivism.

Furthermore, classical Islamic thought should not remain confined to historical or intellectual discussions. Its fundamental principles must also be translated into practical commitments to justice, tolerance, social harmony, and the protection of human dignity. Through critical engagement with classical Islamic intellectual heritage, moderate Islamic reform can develop as a constructive response to contemporary religious and social challenges.

CONCLUSION

To achieve this objective, exclusive religious practices must be critically examined through an approach that emphasizes the importance of intellectual maturity, ethical awareness, and social responsibility. Such an examination is necessary to prevent the rejection of differences and the development of discriminatory attitudes within society. These attitudes must be distinguished from firm commitment to one's religious beliefs. Religious commitment should be grounded in a sound understanding of religious teachings while remaining open to differences and respectful of the rights and dignity of others. Classical Islamic thought provides important intellectual foundations for critically addressing exclusive religious practices through three major approaches. Imam al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of ethical conduct, spiritual purification, and moral responsibility. Ibn Rushd highlights intellectual rationality and the compatibility between religious revelation and human reason. Meanwhile, Ibn Taymiyyah underscores the importance of methodological rigor and contextual understanding in religious interpretation. These perspectives demonstrate that differences in religious understanding should not automatically be regarded as deviations or grounds for discrimination. Rather, they should be approached through critical reasoning, ethical reflection, and constructive intellectual engagement. In the Indonesian context, these intellectual contributions are particularly relevant to strengthening religious moderation through tolerance, social solidarity, national commitment, and the development of harmonious relationships within a multicultural society. Accordingly, religious moderation should not be understood merely as a response to social or political tensions but as an ethical and intellectual orientation that promotes justice, balance, peaceful coexistence, and respect for diversity.

Therefore, religious education and religious institutions play an essential role in promoting these values. Their responsibilities should extend beyond transmitting historical religious knowledge to cultivating ethical awareness, encouraging

intellectual dialogue, developing critical thinking, and strengthening mutual respect among members of society. This approach is necessary to ensure that classical Islamic intellectual traditions remain relevant to contemporary challenges, particularly in addressing the growing tendencies toward religious exclusivism and promoting moderate Islamic practices in Indonesia.

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