



Understanding Religion from a Cultural Perspective: The Role of the Anthropological Approach in Islamic Studies Methodology

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ABSTRACT

Religion and culture are closely interconnected aspects of human society. In Islam, religious teachings originate from the Qur'an and Sunnah as normative foundations, while religious practices develop within diverse socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, anthropology has become an important approach in Islamic Studies because it enables scholars to understand how Islamic teachings are interpreted, practiced, and transformed within different cultural settings. This article aims to examine the role of anthropological approaches in understanding religion from a cultural perspective and their contribution to contemporary Islamic Studies. This study employs a qualitative library research method by analyzing the Qur'an, Hadith, classical and contemporary tafsir, anthropological literature, and recent scholarly publications. Data were analyzed using content analysis. The findings indicate that anthropological approaches provide significant contributions to explaining the interaction between religious texts and social realities. Anthropology enriches Islamic Studies by offering contextual, empirical, and culturally sensitive perspectives without neglecting the normative foundations of Islam. Furthermore, this approach supports the development of moderate, inclusive, and adaptive Islamic scholarship in responding to contemporary social and technological changes.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Islamic Studies, approaches to religion are no longer confined to normative analyses centered on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Instead, they have expanded to include empirical approaches that examine religious practices as they are lived and experienced within society. This paradigm shift demonstrates that religion should not be understood merely as a set of transcendent doctrines, but also as a social phenomenon shaped by historical, cultural, political, and societal contexts in which it is practiced. According to Robert W. Hefner (2021), Islam across different regions of the world exhibits diverse forms of religious expression resulting from the interaction between normative Islamic teachings and local cultural traditions. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of religion requires a multidisciplinary approach capable of explaining the dynamic relationship between religious texts and social realities, Allah the Almighty states:

"O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honorable of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Surely, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware" (Qur'an, Surah Al-Hujurat [49]: 13).

This verse indicates that cultural diversity is part of **Sunnatullah** (the divine order established by Allah) and should be understood as a means of fostering harmonious social relationships rather than as a source of conflict. According to M. Quraish Shihab in *Tafsir Al-Mishbah*, differences in ethnicity, culture, and language are part of Allah's divine wisdom, intended to encourage human beings to know one another (*ta'aruf*), cooperate, and build a peaceful and harmonious society rather than to demean or discriminate against one another.

Clifford Geertz (1973) defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." This perspective emphasizes that religion should not be understood solely through its normative doctrines but also through the symbols, rituals, traditions, and social practices that evolve within particular cultural contexts.

Research conducted by Zainal Abidin Bagir (2021) demonstrates that integrating normative Islamic approaches with social science and humanities perspectives is essential for advancing Islamic Studies. Such integration enables a more contextual, moderate, and socially responsive understanding of religion in addressing contemporary societal challenges. Similarly, Abdullah Saeed (2020) argues that contemporary interpretations of Islam should take into account social, cultural, and historical contexts in order to preserve the universal values of the Qur'an while ensuring their continued relevance in responding to modern issues.

Religion is one of the fundamental aspects of human life that shapes beliefs, moral values, social behavior, and cultural identity. In Islamic Studies, religion is understood not merely as a theological doctrine but also as a comprehensive way of life (*dīn*) encompassing spiritual, ethical, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Islam provides universal guidance through the Qur'an and the Sunnah while encouraging Muslims to engage with changing social realities in a manner consistent with the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*).

The Qur'an emphasizes the universality of Islam while recognizing the diversity of human societies. Allah states:

"Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam." (Qur'an, Surah Āl 'Imrān [3]: 19).

This verse highlights Islam as the divinely ordained religion. However, Islamic teachings were revealed to guide human beings living within diverse historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, Islamic Studies require approaches that integrate textual understanding with empirical analysis of Muslim societies.

According to Amin Abdullah (2022), contemporary Islamic Studies should move beyond the dichotomy between normative and empirical approaches. Instead, Islamic scholarship should integrate religious sciences with the social sciences and humanities in order to understand Islam as both a revealed religion and a lived social reality. This integrative-interconnective paradigm enables scholars to examine religious texts alongside historical, cultural, political, and anthropological contexts.

Similarly, Harun Nasution argued that Islam should not only be understood through theological doctrines but also through rational and historical inquiry. Such perspectives have significantly influenced the development of multidisciplinary approaches in Islamic Studies.

Anthropologists regard religion as an integral component of culture because religious beliefs are expressed through symbols, rituals, customs, and social institutions. Culture provides the social framework through which religious values are interpreted and practiced by different communities.

Clifford Geertz (1973) famously defines religion as:

"A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men..."

According to Geertz, religion constructs a worldview that gives meaning to human existence. Religious rituals, myths, and sacred symbols function as cultural mechanisms that shape people's perceptions of reality.

Likewise, Emile Durkheim (1912) argues that religion is fundamentally a social institution that reinforces collective consciousness and social solidarity. Religious rituals strengthen communal identity by distinguishing between the sacred and the profane.

A different perspective is offered by Talal Asad (1993), who criticizes universal definitions of religion and argues that religious traditions should be understood within their historical and political contexts. According to Asad, religion is historically constructed through power relations, discursive traditions, and institutional practices.

These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that religion cannot be separated from cultural processes. Instead, religion continually interacts with social structures, historical experiences, and local traditions.

Anthropology is an empirical discipline that seeks to understand human cultures through observation of everyday life. Within Islamic Studies, anthropological approaches focus on how Muslims practice, negotiate, and reinterpret religious teachings in diverse social settings.

Rather than asking whether a religious practice is theologically correct, anthropology investigates how religious meanings are produced, maintained, and transformed by believers themselves.

According to Robert W. Hefner (2021), Islam is characterized by considerable diversity because Muslim communities continuously interact with local traditions, political institutions, economic structures, and global processes. Consequently, Islamic practices differ significantly across regions while maintaining commitment to the same fundamental religious principles.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized interdisciplinary approaches to Islamic Studies.

Abdullah Saeed (2020) argues that contemporary Qur'anic interpretation should consider changing social and historical contexts to preserve the universal values of Islam while addressing modern challenges.

Samuli Schielke (2020) introduces the concept of *lived Islam*, demonstrating that everyday religious experiences are often more complex than formal theological doctrines.

Meanwhile, Zainal Abidin Bagir (2021) emphasizes that integrating Islamic theology with the social sciences enables more comprehensive analyses of religious pluralism, interfaith relations, and social transformation in Indonesia.

Although these studies have enriched Islamic scholarship, relatively few have specifically examined how anthropological perspectives contribute to understanding religion from a cultural perspective while simultaneously integrating Qur'anic foundations, classical Islamic scholarship, and contemporary anthropological theories. This gap provides the academic justification for the present study.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a library research approach. Library research was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine and synthesize theories, concepts, and scholarly discussions concerning religion, culture, anthropology, and Islamic Studies through documentary sources rather than field observations. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Islamic teachings and cultural practices by critically analyzing existing academic literature.

The study adopted an anthropological approach within the framework of Islamic Studies. Anthropological inquiry views religion as a lived social and cultural phenomenon, emphasizing how religious beliefs, rituals, symbols, and traditions are practiced and interpreted in everyday life. Rather than focusing solely on normative theological doctrines, this approach seeks to understand the interaction between Islamic teachings and the socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

The data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisted of the Qur'an, authentic Hadith collections, and classical as well as contemporary Qur'anic commentaries (*tafsir*), including *Tafsir al-Mishbah* by M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, and *Jāmi' al-Bayān* by al-Ṭabarī. Secondary sources included scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on anthropology, religion, Islamic Studies, and cultural studies published between 2020 and 2026. Foundational works by Clifford Geertz, Talal Asad, Robert W. Hefner, Emile Durkheim, Victor Turner, Koentjaraningrat, Abdullah Saeed, Amin Abdullah, and Zainal Abidin Bagir were also used to establish the theoretical framework.

Data collection was conducted through systematic literature review. Relevant publications were identified using academic databases, including Scopus-indexed journals, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Dimensions, Crossref, and accredited Indonesian journals (SINTA).

The selection criteria included relevance to the research topic, publication quality, recency, and academic credibility.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis involved several stages: (1) identifying relevant literature, (2) organizing and classifying data according to major themes, (3) interpreting theoretical concepts and empirical findings, (4) comparing perspectives from Islamic scholarship and anthropological theories, and (5) synthesizing the findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of religion from a cultural perspective. Comparative analysis was also employed to examine similarities and differences among classical anthropological theories, contemporary anthropological perspectives, and modern approaches in Islamic Studies.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing information from the Qur'an, Hadith, classical and contemporary tafsir literature, anthropological theories, and recent empirical studies. The integration of these diverse sources ensured that the analysis remained balanced, comprehensive, and academically rigorous while maintaining coherence between normative Islamic teachings and empirical social realities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religion as a Cultural Reality

The findings of this study demonstrate that religion cannot be understood solely as a normative system based on sacred texts but must also be viewed as a cultural reality manifested through the everyday lives of believers. Although the Qur'an and the Sunnah constitute the primary sources of Islamic teachings, the implementation of these teachings is continuously shaped by historical experiences, social interactions, and cultural traditions.

The Qur'an acknowledges cultural diversity as part of God's divine design. Allah states: *"O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honorable of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you."* (Qur'an, Surah Al-Hujurat [49]:13)

This verse indicates that cultural diversity is neither accidental nor contradictory to Islamic teachings. Rather, it represents Sunnatullah, encouraging mutual recognition (*ta'aruf*), cooperation, and peaceful coexistence among humanity. According to M. Quraish Shihab in *Tafsir Al-Mishbah*, differences in ethnicity, language, and culture are intended to enrich human civilization and strengthen social harmony rather than create discrimination or conflict.

From an anthropological perspective, religion functions not only as a belief system but also as a cultural institution. Clifford Geertz (1973) defines religion as "a system of symbols" that shapes people's worldview and provides meaning to human existence. Religious symbols, rituals, myths, and ceremonies become mechanisms through which believers interpret reality and organize their social lives.

Similarly, Emile Durkheim (1912) argues that religion reinforces collective consciousness and social solidarity. Religious rituals create shared values that strengthen social cohesion and maintain the continuity of cultural traditions.

These findings indicate that Islam, while grounded in divine revelation, is expressed through diverse cultural forms across Muslim societies. Therefore, understanding religion requires integrating normative Islamic teachings with empirical analyses of cultural practices.

The Interaction between Islam and Local Culture

One of the major findings of this study is that Islamic teachings and local cultures continuously interact through processes of adaptation, negotiation, and acculturation. Rather than replacing indigenous traditions entirely, Islam has historically transformed many local customs by integrating Islamic ethical principles into existing cultural frameworks.

Indonesia provides numerous examples of this interaction. Religious traditions such as Tahlilan, Yasinan, Maulid Nabi, Sekaten, Grebeg, Robo-Robo in West Kalimantan, Sedekah Laut, and Haul ceremonies illustrate how Islamic values coexist with local cultural expressions.

These practices should not be understood merely as cultural rituals but as social institutions that strengthen communal solidarity, reinforce religious identity, and preserve collective memory. According to Robert W. Hefner (2021), Islam has never developed as a culturally homogeneous religion. Instead, Muslim societies continuously reinterpret Islamic teachings in response to local social, political, and historical conditions while maintaining commitment to core religious principles.

This finding is consistent with the concept of lived religion, proposed by Samuli Schielke (2020), which emphasizes that everyday religious life often involves negotiation between religious ideals and practical realities. Muslims do not simply apply religious texts mechanically; rather, they interpret them within their cultural and social environments.

Consequently, anthropological perspectives reveal that cultural diversity within Islam should be understood as an expression of historical and social adaptation rather than theological deviation.

The Contribution of Anthropological Approaches to Islamic Studies

This study demonstrates that anthropology contributes significantly to the development of contemporary Islamic Studies by expanding the scope of analysis beyond doctrinal interpretation.

Traditional Islamic scholarship primarily emphasizes textual interpretation (*tafsir*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), and prophetic traditions (*hadith*). While these disciplines remain indispensable, they do not always explain how religious teachings are practiced within complex social environments.

Anthropology addresses this limitation by examining Islam as a lived social experience. The contribution of anthropological approaches can be summarized into several dimensions:

First, anthropology explains religious diversity within Muslim societies.

Second, anthropology interprets religious symbols and rituals from the perspective of community members.

Third, anthropology analyzes the interaction between religion, politics, economy, and culture.

Fourth, anthropology promotes contextual interpretations of Islamic teachings without neglecting their normative foundations.

According to Talal Asad (1993), religion should be understood through historical and discursive traditions rather than through universal definitions detached from specific societies.

Likewise, Amin Abdullah argues that Islamic Studies should adopt an integrative-interconnective paradigm that combines religious sciences with social sciences and humanities.

The present findings support these perspectives by demonstrating that anthropological inquiry enriches rather than replaces normative Islamic scholarship.

Religious Practices in Contemporary Indonesia: An Anthropological Perspective

Indonesia represents one of the most culturally diverse Muslim societies in the world. Consequently, Islamic practices display considerable regional variation while maintaining shared theological foundations.

For example, the Robo-Robo tradition among Malay communities in West Kalimantan commemorates historical memories while incorporating Islamic prayers and communal gatherings.

Similarly, Tahlilan functions as both a religious ritual and a mechanism for strengthening social solidarity among community members.

From Victor Turner's theory of ritual, such ceremonies generate *communitas*, a social condition characterized by equality, togetherness, and shared spiritual experience.

Meanwhile, Geertz's symbolic anthropology interprets these rituals as symbolic systems through which Muslims express their worldview, moral values, and collective identity. Therefore, these traditions should not merely be classified as cultural customs but should also be understood as meaningful expressions of Islamic spirituality embedded within local cultural contexts.

Anthropology, Digital Religion, and Artificial Intelligence

One of the most significant contemporary developments identified in this study is the emergence of digital religion. The widespread use of social media platforms, online religious education, virtual mosques, digital Qur'an applications, and Artificial Intelligence has transformed religious communication and practice.

Digital technologies have expanded access to Islamic knowledge while simultaneously creating new challenges concerning religious authority, authenticity, misinformation, and ethical responsibility. Anthropological approaches remain highly relevant because they investigate how Muslims incorporate digital technologies into everyday religious life.

Rather than asking whether digital religion is theologically legitimate, anthropology examines how believers construct religious meaning through online interactions. Recent developments in Artificial Intelligence further illustrate this transformation.

AI-powered applications now assist Muslims in Qur'anic learning, prayer scheduling, Arabic translation, Islamic education, and religious information retrieval. However, Islamic ethical principles require that AI be utilized responsibly, ensuring that technological innovation remains aligned with the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*).

Thus, anthropological approaches provide valuable analytical tools for understanding the evolving relationship between religion, technology, and culture in the twenty-first century.

Implications for Contemporary Islamic Studies

The findings of this study suggest that integrating anthropological perspectives into Islamic Studies contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of religion. Rather than creating opposition between normative and empirical approaches, anthropology complements traditional Islamic scholarship by explaining how religious teachings are interpreted and practiced within diverse cultural settings.

This interdisciplinary perspective encourages moderation, inclusivity, intercultural dialogue, and social harmony while preserving the theological foundations of Islam. Consequently, contemporary Islamic Studies should continue developing integrative approaches that combine Qur'anic interpretation, classical Islamic scholarship, anthropology, sociology, history, and digital humanities.

Such integration enables Islamic scholarship to remain relevant in responding to contemporary challenges, including globalization, multiculturalism, digital transformation, and Artificial Intelligence.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that understanding religion requires not only a normative approach based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah but also an empirical perspective that considers the cultural and social realities in which religious beliefs and practices are embedded. The anthropological approach provides a valuable analytical framework for explaining how Islamic teachings are interpreted, practiced, and negotiated within diverse cultural contexts. Rather than viewing religion merely as a system of theological doctrines, anthropology reveals religion as a lived experience expressed through symbols, rituals, traditions, and everyday social interactions. The findings indicate that Islam and culture maintain a dynamic and complementary relationship. Islamic teachings preserve their universal theological principles while simultaneously interacting with local cultural traditions through processes of adaptation, acculturation, and reinterpretation. This interaction has produced diverse expressions of Muslim religiosity in different regions without undermining the fundamental values of Islam. Consequently, cultural diversity should be understood as part of *Sunnatullah* that enriches Islamic civilization and strengthens social cohesion rather than as a source of religious conflict. Furthermore, this study highlights that the anthropological approach makes significant contributions to the development of contemporary Islamic Studies. By integrating normative Islamic scholarship with anthropological perspectives, researchers can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of religious phenomena that incorporates theological, historical, cultural, and social dimensions. Such an interdisciplinary approach promotes

contextual, moderate, and inclusive interpretations of Islam while enhancing the relevance of Islamic scholarship in addressing contemporary societal issues.

The study also demonstrates that rapid technological development, particularly digital media and Artificial Intelligence (AI), has transformed religious communication, learning, and practice. These developments require Islamic Studies to expand beyond conventional textual analysis and engage with emerging forms of digital religiosity. Anthropological perspectives remain highly relevant in examining how Muslims construct religious meanings and identities within increasingly digital and interconnected societies.

Despite these contributions, this study is limited to qualitative library research and therefore does not include empirical field data from specific Muslim communities. Future research is encouraged to employ ethnographic methods, participant observation, in-depth interviews, or mixed-methods approaches to investigate how Islamic teachings are negotiated in various cultural settings. Comparative studies across different regions and countries would also enrich scholarly understanding of the dynamic relationship between religion, culture, and contemporary social transformation.

In conclusion, the integration of anthropological approaches into Islamic Studies does not diminish the normative foundations of Islam. Instead, it complements traditional Islamic scholarship by providing deeper insights into how religious teachings are lived, interpreted, and practiced across diverse cultural contexts. Such an interdisciplinary perspective contributes to the development of a more contextual, adaptive, and socially responsive Islamic scholarship capable of addressing the challenges of globalization, multiculturalism, digital transformation, and Artificial Intelligence in the twenty-first century.

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