

THE THEOLOGY OF DIVINE NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES: A Comparative Examination of Salafi and Ash'ari Doctrines

Muhammad Adli

Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, Aceh, Indonesia

Email: Mutiaraadli97@gmail.com

Putri Rahmah Nur Hakim

Universitas Serambi Mekkah, Aceh, Indonesia

Email: putrirahmah.nurhakim@serambimekkah.ac.id

Irwan Abdullah

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: irwan.fib@ugm.ac.id

Annisa Dwi Lestari

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: annisadwilestari@mail.ugm.ac.id

Tabrani ZA

Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Indonesia

Email: tabraniza@scadindependent.org

ABSTRACT

This study examines the theological debate between Salafi and Ash'ari traditions regarding the interpretation of Asmā' wa Ṣifāt (the Divine Names and Attributes). It explores its implications for identity construction and social dynamics within contemporary Muslim communities. The research employs a qualitative approach using controversy mapping and thematic analysis of narrative data derived from religious lectures, online discussions, and relevant scholarly texts representing both theological orientations. The findings demonstrate that the debate surrounding Asmā' wa Ṣifāt is not merely a doctrinal disagreement but reflects a multilayered contestation involving social, epistemological, and symbolic dimensions. The literalist interpretive tendency associated with Salafi thought, and the rational-theological approach emphasized within the Ash'ari tradition, contribute to the emergence of polarization, exclusivist patterns of da'wah, and the marginalization of moderate religious discourse in certain contexts. Moreover, the study reveals that religious interpretation functions as a social practice embedded in power relations, identity formation, and the construction of religious authority within the contemporary Muslim public sphere. By highlighting

these dynamics, this research underscores the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives in understanding intra-religious theological disputes. It emphasizes the ethics of difference as an essential framework for managing diversity and reducing conflict within Muslim societies.

Keywords: *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt*; Salafi Theology; Ash'ari Theology; Islamic Kalam; Theological Debate; Religious Discourse

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, theological debates among Sunni Muslims have re-emerged, particularly those concerning the doctrine of *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* (the Divine Names and Attributes). Several contemporary studies indicate that these discussions are no longer confined to classical theological texts or academic settings but have expanded to include Islamic boarding schools, universities, urban religious study circles, and digital platforms. Empirical research in several Muslim communities shows that differing interpretations of divine attributes, especially regarding *tanzih* (divine transcendence), anthropomorphic expressions, and the legitimacy of *ta'wīl* (allegorical or contextual interpretation), have, in some contexts, contributed to intellectual polarization and social tension within religious communities (Khoirir, 2024). The proliferation of online religious discourse has further amplified these debates, enabling theological disagreements to circulate widely and sometimes intensify in public digital spaces. Each group establishes educational institutions to spread its beliefs, thereby deepening fragmentation and polarization within the Muslim community (Ismail et al., 2023). Within this discourse, the interpretive differences between Salafi and Ash'ari theological traditions have become particularly visible. Salafi scholars generally emphasize a textual approach in understanding divine attributes, adhering closely to the literal meanings of Qur'ānic and prophetic texts while avoiding speculative interpretation.

In contrast, the Ash'ari tradition allows the use of rational theological reasoning and controlled interpretive methods such as *ta'wīl*, particularly when literal interpretations might imply anthropomorphism. These methodological differences have often produced theological tensions that extend beyond doctrinal disagreement and influence patterns of religious authority, preaching practices, and communal identity among Muslims (Abdullah & Mohamed Osman, 2018). For instance, heated debates on social media and physical clashes in some communities show that theological tensions have spread to people's daily lives, especially in socializing, whether frontally or non-frontally (Kini, 2019). This debate goes beyond purely doctrinal issues; it

also influences how believers practice their faith, shape collective identities, and define religious authority within the broader religious public sphere (Tempo, 2024). Therefore, examining this controversy is essential for understanding the dynamics of contemporary Islamic thought and for identifying possible common ground amid the diversity of theological traditions.

The concept of *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* itself occupies a central position within Islamic theology. It refers to the divine names and attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān and hadith, which are foundational to understanding the nature of God in Islamic belief (Hakim et al., 2024). Classical Muslim scholars developed various interpretive frameworks to reconcile the affirmation of divine attributes with the principle of God's absolute transcendence. Within this intellectual tradition, Salafi and Ash'ari theological orientations represent two influential approaches. The Salafi approach tends to affirm the attributes as stated in the revealed texts while refraining from describing their modality (*bilā kayf*). In contrast, the Ash'ari approach allows interpretive reasoning to safeguard God's transcendence when literal readings appear problematic (Suparman & Soga, 2024). These methodological distinctions have made the doctrine of *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* a recurring point of theological discussion within Sunni Islam.

In the literature, several studies have categorized the debate between the Salafi and Ash'ari on *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* into two opposing models: textual fundamentalism and moderate rationalism. Pramita (2023) regards this polarization as a legacy of the classical epistemological conflict between *bayani* (textual) and *burhani* (rational) reasoning, which shapes Muslim interpretations of sacred texts. Sunandar (2023) argues that the Salafi literalist approach tends to foster an exclusive narrative that is resistant to differing views. In contrast, the Ash'ariyyah seek to reconcile faith and reason through the Kalam theological method. A contemporary study by Oktiasari (2021) suggests that this debate has a direct effect on narratives of extremism, especially when Salafi literal interpretations are used to justify symbolic and even physical violence in the name of divinity. This evaluation shows that *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* cannot be read simply as a theological debate but also has a praxis dimension that affects the social construction of Muslims. Therefore, it is important to use a multidisciplinary approach to dissect this issue, whether through classical textual studies, mapping of discourse conflicts, or sociological studies of religious knowledge.

Several shortcomings in previous studies on the relationship between Salafi and Ash'ariyyah groups require critical evaluation. First, most research focuses primarily on doctrinal issues and da'wah discourse, without thoroughly examining how these theological differences influence educational institutions and the social practices of Muslim communities (Hasbullah et al., 2022). Secondly,

some studies, such as Haykel (2022), have emphasized the importance of understanding ideological differences but have not discussed how these differences shape the exclusivity of educational institutions that reinforce social segregation between groups. Third, the existing literature has not examined how theological tensions in digital spaces, such as social media, contribute to the emergence of social polarization in Muslim communities, both culturally and relationally (Noor & Abur Hamdi, 2022). These gaps indicate that the impact of theology is not merely discursive, but also concrete in the socio-religious life of the *ummah*, an aspect that has not yet been comprehensively addressed in academic scholarship.

The findings of this study are similar to those of Marhamah & Abdullah (2020), who note tensions among schools of Islamic theology in Indonesia, particularly between purists and traditionalists. Other similarities can be seen in Sinani's (2022) research, which highlights the importance of inclusivity in interpretation and Islamic law to avoid extremism. Although numerous studies have examined Salafi and Ash'ariyyah theology, they largely remain confined to normative and doctrinal debates. This study argues that differing theological interpretations are not merely abstract disagreements but actively shape patterns of religious authority, community boundaries, and social relations within Muslim society. This evaluation underscores the urgent need to orient research toward a more practical dimension, namely, investigating how theological differences between Salafis and Ash'ariyyah shape the development of educational institutions, patterns of da'wah, and social interactions among Muslims at the community level. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by adopting an approach that moves beyond purely theological analysis, integrating sociological and cultural perspectives to understand better the concrete impact of these intellectual debates on the everyday lives of contemporary Muslims.

This study argues that theological disagreements regarding *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* should not be understood solely as abstract doctrinal debates. Rather, they function as social practices that influence the construction of religious authority, community identity, and patterns of interaction within the Muslim public sphere. By employing a controversy-mapping approach combined with thematic analysis, this research seeks to examine how the debate between Salafi and Ash'ari theological perspectives is articulated within contemporary discourse and how it contributes to broader social dynamics. Through this perspective, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of intra-Muslim theological controversies and their implications for religious discourse in contemporary society.

The controversy between the Salafi and Ash'ariyyah groups reflects ongoing

tensions in contemporary Muslim theological discourse, particularly concerning the interpretation of *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt*. While the Salafi group emphasizes a literal adherence to the Qur'an and hadith, the Ash'ariyyah adopt a rational approach that allows *ta'wīl*. These differences extend beyond theological debate and influence patterns of religious interaction, authority, and social relations within Muslim communities (Fernando et al., 2023). The phenomenon is significant because it reveals how competing truth claims may foster stereotyping, marginalization, and polarization, while also raising questions about the possibility of bridging interpretive differences within the framework of moderate Islamic education.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design, using a controversy-mapping approach, to examine how the debate over *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* is articulated and contested. The research focuses on narratives and interpretations expressed by both groups in lectures, study circles, online discussions, social media content, and relevant scholarly works (Qudsy, 2016). Primary data were obtained through observations of lectures, religious study sessions, and online discussions involving representatives of both groups. Secondary data were collected from academic journals, classical and contemporary works on Islamic theology, and relevant online media sources. Data were selected using purposive sampling, based on their relevance to the controversy surrounding *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt*. Data were selected purposively based on their relevance to the controversy and analyzed thematically to identify dominant patterns, interpretive conflicts, and points of convergence. By comparing perspectives across sources, this study seeks to demonstrate how theological differences contribute to broader processes of polarization within the *ummah* (the global Muslim community) and to situate these dynamics within their contemporary social and educational contexts.

HISTORICAL GENEALOGY OF THE ASMĀ' WA ṢIFĀT DEBATE

To deepen the discussion, the author should trace the historical genealogy of the debate on *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* to its earliest theological roots. The controversy did not originate with the later labels “Salafi” and “Ash'ari,” but can be traced back to the formative period of Islamic theology in the 2nd–3rd centuries Hijri. Early disputes emerged in response to questions about divine transcendence (*tanzih*) and anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur'an and Hadith. Groups such as the Mu'tazila emphasized divine transcendence and rational interpretation, often interpreting attributes metaphorically to avoid implying resemblance to creation. In contrast, traditionalist scholars like Ahmad ibn Hanbal upheld affirming the attributes *bilā kayf* (without asking how) and without *ta'wīl*, marking one of the earliest structured responses to theological

speculation.

The crystallization of the debate further developed in the 4th century Hijri with the emergence of Ash'ariyah, founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari. Initially influenced by Mu'tazilite thought, al-Ash'ari later adopted a mediating position: affirming the divine attributes while permitting *ta'wīl* when literal readings might imply anthropomorphism. This methodological difference between affirmation without modality and controlled rational interpretation laid the groundwork for what would later evolve into the modern Salafi–Ash'ari polarity. By situating the controversy within this broader historical trajectory, readers gain a clearer understanding that the debate is not merely contemporary polemics but part of a long-standing theological effort within Sunni Islam to reconcile revelation and reason.

Table 1.
Forms of Theological Controversy on *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* between Salafi and Ash'ariyyah

Theological Concept	Scriptural Expression	Salafi Interpretation	Ash'ari Interpretation	Source
<i>Istiwa'</i> (Divine Establishment on the Throne)	إستوى على العرش	Affirmed literally as <i>'alā wa irtafa'</i> (God is above the Throne) while maintaining <i>bilā kayf</i> (without asking how).	Interpreted as <i>ist-awlā</i> (symbolizing divine authority or dominion).	https://quran.com/id/20
Divine Hands	بِيَدَيَّ (bi-yadayya) – “with My two hands”	Affirmed as a real attribute (<i>yad ḥaqiqiyyah</i>) befitting God's majesty without resemblance to creation.	Interpreted metaphorically as power (<i>qudrah</i>) or will.	https://quran.com/id/38?startingVerse=75
Divine Descent	ينزل ربنا إلى السماء الدنيا	Affirmed as a real descent appropriate to God's majesty (<i>nuzūl yalīqu bi-jalālihi</i>).	Interpreted as the manifestation of divine mercy or response to supplication.	الدرر السننية = الموسوعة الحديثية - شروح الأحاديث (dorar.net)
Seeing God	رؤية الله	Affirmed that believers will literally see God in the hereafter.	Often interpreted as spiritual perception or vision of the heart.	الدرر السننية = الموسوعة الحديثية - شروح الأحاديث (dorar.net)

Theological Concept	Scriptural Expression	Salafi Interpretation	Ash'ari Interpretation	Source
Face of God	وجه الله	Affirmed as one of God's attributes without describing its modality.	Interpreted as referring to the Divine Essence (<i>al-dhāt</i>).	https://quran.com/id/2?startingVerse=115
Divine Light	الله نور السماوات والأرض	Considered one of the divine attributes as stated in the text.	Interpreted metaphorically as divine guidance (<i>al-hudā</i>).	surah An-Nur - 1-64 - Quran.com

The theological controversy surrounding the interpretation of *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* highlights the methodological differences that distinguish the Salafi and Ash'ari traditions. As illustrated in the table above, each group relies on distinct epistemological foundations in interpreting Qur'anic and prophetic texts. The Salafi approach emphasizes a literal understanding of revelation, adhering closely to the interpretive model of the first three generations of Muslims (*salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) and affirming divine attributes without questioning their modality (*bilā kayf*). In contrast, the Ash'ari tradition integrates textual evidence with rational reasoning, allowing interpretive methods such as *ta'wīl* and *tafwīd* to prevent anthropomorphic interpretations of the divine attributes (Nurjanah et al., 2022). These differing interpretive strategies demonstrate that the debate is rooted not merely in doctrinal disagreement but also in distinct epistemological orientations within Sunni theology.

Despite these methodological differences, both traditions share a common objective: preserving the transcendence and uniqueness of God while maintaining fidelity to the revealed texts (Hasibuan et al., 2020). However, the coexistence of these interpretive paradigms often generates confusion among segments of the broader Muslim community, particularly among lay believers who may lack sufficient theological training to grasp the complexity of the debate. In such circumstances, religious scholars play a central role in interpreting doctrine and guiding public understanding. Their authority in issuing religious opinions and preserving doctrinal coherence shapes how these theological perspectives are transmitted within educational institutions, religious discourse, and community life (Atabik, 2021). Consequently, the debate over *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* not only reflects theological diversity but also illustrates how religious authority and knowledge production shape belief and practice in contemporary Muslim societies.

THE BASIS OF CONSIDERATION USED BY THE PARTIES

Table 2
The Basis of Consideration in the Debate on *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt*

Basis of Controversy	Salafi Perspective	Ash'ari Perspective
Textual Foundation	Salafi scholars emphasize a literal understanding of the Qur'ān and Hadith. Scriptural texts are interpreted according to their apparent meaning without resorting to <i>ta'wīl</i> , except when clear evidence indicates that the literal meaning is impossible. They apply the principles of <i>bilā kayf</i> (without asking how) and <i>bilā tashbīh</i> (without likening God to His creation), affirming the divine attributes as mentioned in the texts without describing their modality.	Ash'ari scholars emphasize the role of reason and rational theology in interpreting religious texts. They argue that scriptural interpretation should remain consistent with the principles of rationality while preserving divine transcendence. Consequently, they interpret certain attributes in ways that avoid <i>tashbīh</i> (anthropomorphism) and <i>tajsīm</i> (attributing physical form to God).
Theological Approach	Salafi theology emphasizes adherence to the interpretive methodology of the <i>salaf al-ṣāliḥ</i> (the first three generations of Muslims: The Companions, the Successors, and the Successors of the Successors). This generation is considered to possess the most authentic understanding of Islamic teachings, supported by prophetic traditions describing them as the best generations of the Muslim community (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī).	The Ash'ari tradition prioritizes safeguarding the doctrine of <i>tawḥīd</i> (the absolute oneness of God). It emphasizes that God is entirely unlike His creation, as stated in Qur'ān 42:11: "There is nothing comparable to Him." This principle serves as the basis for avoiding literal interpretations that could imply anthropomorphism.
Interpretive Method	Salafi scholars generally reject the use of <i>ta'wīl</i> and limit the application of <i>tafwīd</i> (consigning the ultimate meaning to God). They argue that excessive interpretation may distort the original meaning of revelation and introduce speculative theology into matters of faith.	Ash'ari theologians employ <i>ta'wīl</i> to interpret scriptural expressions that appear anthropomorphic in order to preserve divine transcendence. They also apply <i>tafwīd</i> , delegating the ultimate meaning of certain attributes to God when human reason cannot fully comprehend them.

The theological understanding between the Salafis and the Ash'ariyyah reflects different approaches to understanding Islam's sacred texts. Salafis adhere to a literal reading of the Qur'ān and Hadith, accepting Allah's attributes according to their apparent meaning without seeking interpretation, guided by the principles of *bilā kayf* and *bilā tashbīh* (Muzakki, 2019). They reject symbolic or metaphorical

readings unless there is very clear evidence that shows that the literal meaning is impossible. Instead, the *Asy'ariyah* emphasizes the role of reason and logic in understanding religious texts, ensuring that interpretations of God's attributes align with rationality while avoiding likening God to His creatures or attributing physical forms to Him. When necessary, the *Ash'ariyyah* approach applies rational principles to interpret God's attributes symbolically, preserving His majesty and divinity without equating Him with His creation (Nurdin et al., 2022).

The different perspectives between Salafi and *Ash'ariyah* in understanding the attributes of God reflect two approaches that both seek to maintain the purity of the concept of *Tawhid* but have different epistemological foundations. Salafis argue that sacred texts such as the Qur'an and hadith should be understood literally in accordance with the understanding of the *Salafus Shalih*, because they believe that textual interpretation directly reflects the purest authority of faith and is free from erroneous interpretations (Rahman, 2012). Critically, this method can pose challenges in interpreting verses that are difficult to grasp literally, given the constraints of modern language and context. In contrast, the *Asy'ariyah* adopts a more adaptive approach, using *ta'wil* to explain God's attributes that might otherwise appear anthropomorphic. This approach is rooted in logic and metaphorical interpretation to avoid equating God with His creatures, as is the principle in QS. Ash-Shura (42:11). "They also utilize *tafwid* as a form of intellectual submission, leaving to God the meaning of things that the intellect cannot grasp". In a critical framework, this strategy offers flexibility in maintaining the consistency of *tawhid*, but can trigger differences in interpretation that are considered to undermine the uniformity of teachings by others (Jamil, 2013)

Critically, each approach presents both strengths and limitations. Salafis prioritize a straightforward, literal interpretation to prevent deviation, yet this approach can overlook the deeper, more nuanced meanings within the sacred texts (Hakim et al., 2025). In contrast, the *Asy'ariyah* perspective seeks to balance textual fidelity with rational reasoning, allowing for flexibility in contemporary contexts, though it may be perceived as leaving room for speculative interpretation (Adli, 2024). The ongoing dialogue between these two schools highlights the need for thorough theological discussion to grasp the true essence of *tawhid* while preserving the core principles of the faith (Hakim et al., 2025).

IMPLICATIONS OF BELIEF CONTROVERSY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

The faith controversy between the Salafis and the Ash'ariyyah has several implications that affect social relations and the dynamics of the Muslim community. Here are three main trends that have emerged:

Table 3
Implications of Belief Controversy and Social Relations between Salafi and Ash'ariyyah

Type Controversy	Directly Occurring Tendencies	Social Impact	Source
Polarity and Fragmentation in Muslim Communities	Theological differences create polarization and fragmentation among Muslims. Communities are often divided based on their theological affiliations, leading to a lack of unity in addressing other shared concerns.	Disputes stemming from these differences can disrupt social relations, reduce communal solidarity, and in some cases escalate to open conflict where groups compete for influence.	https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/ketika-pengajian-ustaz-khalid-basalamah-dibubarkan/1 https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/wahabi-09102015190337.html
Establishment of Strong Group Identity	Both Salafi and Ash'ariyyah groups reinforce their identity by emphasizing theological differences and maintaining the perceived purity of their teachings.	Strong group identities can lead to exclusivity, reduced receptivity to inter-group dialogue, and reinforced social barriers between Muslim communities.	https://muallimi-nenamtahun.net/berita/membentengi-aswaja-nu-dari-wahabi-salafi
Impact on Education and Da'wah	Each group spreads its teachings through educational institutions and da'wah activities, often critiquing the opposing group's views.	This can create an ideological battleground in religious education, influence young Muslims toward a particular theological stance, and reinforce intolerance of differences.	https://www.islamtimes.org/id/gallery/322831/1/mufti-perak-malaysia-haramkan-ajaran-wahabi

The dispute between Salafi and Ash'ariyyah theological orientations carries substantial social consequences for Muslim societies. It frequently gives rise to polarization and fragmentation, generating tensions that divide communities along lines of theological identification (Dewantri et al., 2023). This situation can weaken the sense of solidarity and hinder efforts to bring the ummah together

to address shared concerns (Airlangga PH et al., 2024). If these tensions are not carefully managed, they may escalate into open conflict, as has been observed in certain regions of the Islamic world. This condition shows that differences in theological understanding are not only an academic problem, but also have a real impact on social harmony (Anthony et al., 2021).

Polarization in the controversy between Salafi and Ash'ari theological approaches regarding the interpretation of *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* is evident in theological labeling, the delegitimization of scholarly authority, and the segregation of religious-social spaces (Nursyahbani et al., 2025). The Salafi group, which adheres to the methodology of the first three generations and rejects (*ta'wīl*) of the divine attributes, often views the Ash'ariyyah's kalam-based approach as a deviation from the purity of creed (Saleh, 2010). Conversely, the Ash'ariyyah, rooted in the intellectual tradition of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, regard strict literalism as insufficient to address rational and philosophical challenges. This polarization is reflected in sermons, da'wah literature, and digital discourse, where mutual criticism and accusations of deviation frequently occur. As a result, mosques, educational institutions, and study circles often become segmented along theological lines, thereby increasingly shaping social interaction by ideological identity (Supena, 2024). Thus, polarization operates not only at the discursive level but also in the formation of firm social boundaries between "us" and "them" in everyday religious life.

This polarization contributes to tendencies toward extremism when exclusive truth claims develop into rigid attitudes that deny the legitimacy of other groups. In such contexts, methodological differences are framed as existential threats to the purity of tawhid rather than as legitimate diversity within the Sunni intellectual tradition (Haqqi & Shofaussamawati, 2023). If not managed through a moderation-oriented approach, the divide between textualist and rationalist paradigms can escalate into radical attitudes, including excessive accusations of unbelief (*takfir*), branding others as innovators (*bid'ah*), or even justifying repressive actions against opposing groups (Bakar & Sabri, 2025). Social media further accelerates this process by reinforcing echo chambers and amplifying confrontational narratives (Yusoff, 2023). Therefore, theological polarization surrounding *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* has the potential to serve as an entry point to identity-based religious extremism, particularly when methodological differences are interpreted as existential conflicts rather than as part of the dynamic intellectual heritage of Islam.

The findings of this study indicate that the controversy over *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* between Salafi and Ash'ariyyah groups is fundamentally rooted in differing epistemological paradigms rather than purely doctrinal contradictions. The

Salafi orientation, often associated with the interpretive legacy of scholars such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal, emphasizes textual fidelity by affirming divine attributes according to their apparent meanings while avoiding inquiries into modality (*bilā kayf*) or resemblance (*bilā tashbīh*) (Ātpek & Beránek, 2025). In contrast, the Ash'ariyyah tradition, systematized by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, permits controlled rational interpretation to safeguard divine transcendence from anthropomorphic implications (Ardae & Wan, 2019). Although both approaches aim to preserve tawhid, their divergent methodologies generate tensions that extend beyond theology into questions of authority, legitimacy, and orthodoxy.

Extremism manifests when these methodological differences are transformed into exclusive truth claims. Rather than recognizing interpretive plurality within Sunni theology, some discursive spaces frame alternative approaches as deviations, innovations, or theological errors. This dynamic fosters doctrinal absolutism, in which interpretive preference becomes a marker of authentic belief (Rusdin et al., 2025). Delegitimizing labels such as accusations of excessive rationalism or anthropomorphism function as symbolic tools of exclusion, narrowing the boundaries of acceptable theological discourse (Arifah et al., 2024). In this context, disagreement shifts from scholarly debate to identity-based confrontation, reinforcing rigid group boundaries within the Muslim community.

Institutional and digital mechanisms further exacerbate the escalation of extremism. Educational and da'wah institutions often transmit theology within a single interpretive framework, unintentionally cultivating intellectual insularity among followers (Masyura, 2021). Meanwhile, digital media platforms amplify polemical narratives by privileging emotionally charged, simplified content over nuanced theological explanations (Suri & Tanjung, 2025). Complex classical discussions about divine attributes are reduced to binary oppositions, encouraging polarization among audiences who may lack formal theological training (Abdullah & Ibrahim, 2011). As a result, theological disagreement becomes personalized, publicly contested, and socially intensified.

Socially, this dispute contributes to cognitive polarization, consolidation of exclusive group identities, and fragmentation within Muslim communities. Theological methodology becomes intertwined with communal belonging, influencing patterns of religious authority and shaping intergroup relations (Haerul et al., 2023). If unmanaged, such polarization risks weakening solidarity and fostering intolerance, particularly among younger generations exposed to confrontational religious discourse (Herdiana et al., 2025). However, the study also suggests that extremism is not inherent in either theological

tradition: rather, it emerges when interpretive diversity is reframed as an existential threat (Abdullah, 2015). A more dialogical and inclusive engagement with theological plurality may therefore serve as a constructive pathway toward reducing polarization while preserving the shared commitment to divine transcendence central to both traditions.

Previous studies tend to focus on political dynamics or legal discourse. In contrast, this research offers a socio-scientific mapping approach that emphasizes the relationship between theological interpretation and its social implications in education and community life. Indeed, applying a controversy-mapping framework enables a deeper, more systematic exploration of how epistemological tensions are expressed in public arenas, whether through spoken narratives, written texts, or symbolic and behavioral forms. By tracing these patterns, the study moves beyond surface-level doctrinal disagreements and uncovers the broader dynamics that shape how knowledge claims are constructed, defended, and contested in society. Accordingly, this research offers a meaningful contribution to the understanding of intra-Muslim disputes by framing them not merely as theological divergences but as contests over interpretation, legitimacy, and influence within the public sphere. Such insights are valuable for advancing contemporary Islamic studies, particularly approaches that prioritize contextual awareness and pay closer attention to the social relationships and power structures embedded in religious discourse.

As a follow-up to the findings and analyzes above, a conceptual strategy is needed to strengthen the moderation approach in Islamic education. Islamic educational institutions should formulate a theology curriculum that accommodates multiple interpretive traditions, integrating both text-oriented and reason-based approaches while highlighting the ethical principles of engaging with differences. Such a framework would encourage students to appreciate methodological plurality rather than viewing it as a source of division. From a pedagogical perspective, the controversy-mapping framework can be adapted into a reflective and analytical learning model within courses on creed (*'aqidah*) or Islamic intellectual history. By guiding students to examine how theological debates emerge, develop, and influence social realities, this approach fosters critical thinking and nurtures a more balanced and dialogical understanding of doctrinal diversity (Masduki et al., 2022)

Rather than assigning doctrinal authority to a single religious organization, a more constructive approach would be to facilitate inclusive scholarly dialogue among diverse theological representatives. The objective would not be to standardize interpretation, but to formulate shared ethical principles for managing disagreement in educational and community contexts. On the policy

level, rather than creating specialized training focused solely on *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt*, existing religious education frameworks could incorporate discussions on theological diversity and the ethics of disagreement. Such integration would better reflect the historical plurality within Sunni thought. Future research may expand on this study through interdisciplinary approaches, such as discourse analysis and digital ethnography, to explore how theological debates evolve in contemporary digital and educational spaces. In this way, managing difference can become a constructive element in fostering a more reflective and dialogical Islamic intellectual tradition.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the controversy between the Salafi and Ash'ariyyah groups over the concept of *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* is not merely a matter of theological interpretation but also reflects complex social, epistemological, and political dynamics in contemporary Muslim society. The textual-literal orientation of the Salafi movement and the rational-theological framework of the Ash'ariyyah frequently fail to converge because each upholds its interpretive model as the most legitimate in understanding divine attributes. Consequently, theological disagreement extends beyond doctrinal debate, influencing social interactions, da'wah activities, and Islamic education, potentially reinforcing group exclusivism and ideological boundaries.

Furthermore, religious interpretation is deeply embedded within broader social contexts, where the production and defense of theological meaning are linked to authority, control over religious knowledge, and symbolic capital in the public sphere. Interpretive differences are therefore not purely theological, but also shaped by negotiations of power and legitimacy in Muslim societies. When these differences are not managed with an ethic of difference, they can escalate into identity conflicts and weaken *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic Brotherhood), particularly when ordinary believers are exposed to confrontational or polarizing rhetoric. Such disputes, however, can also be reframed as opportunities for dialogue and intellectual enrichment within the Islamic tradition.

Conceptually, this study highlights that interpretive dispute, including those between Salafi and Ash'ariyyah circles, should not be analyzed solely through doctrinal lenses but as social practices embedded in epistemological and sociological realities. Using a controversy-mapping framework and a descriptive qualitative approach oriented toward social and discourse analysis, this research demonstrates how religious interpretations shape group identities and influence everyday social practices, particularly in education and da'wah.

The study also contributes to interdisciplinary tafsir scholarship by integrating sociology of knowledge, public discourse theories, and religious education, providing a contextualized analytical model for understanding intra-Muslim conflicts.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. The research scope was limited to text narratives and social media, leaving interpersonal and community dynamics underexplored. The role of religious institutions, such as *pesantren* and da'wah organizations, in mediating the controversy over *Asmā' wa Ṣifāt* was not fully examined. Additionally, the qualitative approach was not complemented by quantitative data, which could have strengthened the validity of the findings. Future studies should investigate how Islamic educational institutions negotiate theological differences through curricula and pedagogy, thereby offering more practical strategies to reduce intra-religious tensions and promote constructive dialogue within Muslim communities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdullah, I. (2015). *Konstruksi dan Reproduksi Kebudayaan*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Abdullah, M., & Ibrahim, A. Z. (2010). Tawhid Uluhiyyah, Rububiyyah dan al-Asma' wa al-Sifat Menurut Tafsiran Muhammad Rasyid Rida dalam Tafsir al-Manar. *Jurnal Usuluddin*, 31, 49–64. Retrieved from <https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/JUD/article/view/7378>
- Abdullah, N., & Mohamed Osman, M. N. (2018). Islamisation in the Indonesian Media Spaces: New Sites for a Conservative Push. *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 2(1), 100–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20566093.2018.1525894>
- Adli, M. (2024). *Kajian Syarah Hadis (Studi Atas Syarah Al-Arba'in An-Nawawiyyah Karya Muhammad bin Shalih Al-'Usaimin)* [UIN Sunan Kalijaga]. Retrieved 2025 from <https://digilib.uin-suka.ac.id/id/eprint/63960/>
- Airlangga PH, A. R., Saputri, W. A., & Nurhakim, P. R. (2024). Socio-Religious Behavior on Consumption Patterns during the Israel-Palestine Conflict in Muslim Society. *IAS Journal of Localities*. <https://doi.org/10.62033/iasjol.v1i2.22>
- Anthony, M., Sabri, M. F., Wijekoon, R., Abdul Rahim, H., Abdullah, H., Othman, M. A., & Md. Yusoff, I. S. (2021). The Influence of Financial So-

- cialization, Financial Behavior, Locus of Control, and Financial Stress on Young Adults' Financial Vulnerability. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v11-i19/11738>
- Ardae, M., & Wan, N. M. S. N. (2019). Sejarah Pembahagian Tauhid Rububiyah, Tauhid Uluhiyyah, dan Tauhid Asma wa Sifat dalam Pengajian Usuluddin. *Insancita*, 4(1), 17-34. <https://doi.org/10.2121/incita-jisi-sea.v4i1.1197>
- Arifah, A., Sinaga, S. F., & Pasaribu, R. (2024). Tauhid dan Moral Sebagai Karakter Utama dalam Pendidikan Islam. *Integrasi: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora*, 1(3), 89–112. <https://doi.org/10.56114/integrasi.v2i1.11328>
- Atabik, A. (2021). The Discourse of The Qur'anic Metaphors: The Embryo of Theological Sects' Disputes in Comprehending the Holy Qur'an. *Esensia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, 1(1), 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v22i1.2705>
- Dewantri, P. A., Pattiserlihun, S. C., & Hakim, P. R. N. (2023). Navigating Religious Hegemony and Human Rights Based on KUHP: Al-Zaytun's Controversial Case. *Poros Onim: Jurnal Sosial Keagamaan*, 3(1), 150–175. <https://doi.org/10.53491/porosonim.v4i2.742>
- Fernando, H., Galuh Larasati, Y., Abdullah, I., Jubba, H., Mugni, A., & Persadha, P. D. (2023). The De-existence of Islamic Political Parties in General Elections: A Case Study of Indonesia as a Muslim-majority Country. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.225838>
- Haerul, H., Iqra, I., Muhammad Hamad Al-Nil, B. M. A., & Mahmoud EL-Sakhawy, R. (2023). The Role of the Teacher in Instilling Tauhid-Based Education in Students in the Perspective of the Qur'an. *Solo Universal Journal of Islamic Education and Multiculturalism*, 5(1), 143–167. <https://doi.org/10.61455/sujiem.v1i01.35>
- Hakim, P. R. N., Abdullah, I., ZA, T., Lestari, A. D., & Hasaniy, N. R. (2025). Negotiating Religious Identity in Digital Communication Discourse: A Study of Acehnese Hijab TikTokers. *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies*, 9(2), 323. <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v9i2.25583>
- Hakim, P. R. N., Pabbajah, M., Wisetrotomo, S., Andiko, B., & Sari, I. P. (2025). Revitalizing Local Wisdom Values in Nandong Smong Musi-

- cal: Strengthening Educational Materials in Gen Z. *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan*, 26(1), 333. <https://doi.org/10.24821/resital.v26i1.15451>
- Hakim, P. R. N., Sampurno, M. T., Abdullah, I., Kailani, N., & Larasati, Y. G. (2024). Digital Sufism: The Transformation of Piety in Gus Ulil's On-line Teachings. *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Humaniora*, 22(2), 191–218. <https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v22i2.13872>
- Haqqi, M. N., & Shofaussamawati, S. (2023). 'Allāl al-Fāsī and Sahal Mahfudh: Maqāṣid asy-Shari'a as the Meeting Point of the Different Inclinations Rooted in Sunni Tradition. *Addin*, 17(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.21043/addin.v17i1.17114>
- Hasbullah, H., Wilaela, W., Masduki, M., Jamaluddin, J., & Rosidi, I. (2022). Acceptance of the Existence of Salafi in the Development of Da'wah in Riau Islamic Malay Society. *Cogent Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2107280>
- Hasibuan, U. K., Ulya, R. F., & Jendri, J. (2020). Tipologi Kajian Tafsir: Metode, Pendekatan dan Corak dalam Mitra Penafsiran al-Qur'an. *Ishlah: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin, Adab dan Dakwah*, 2(2), 96-120. <https://doi.org/10.32939/ishlah.v2i2.9>
- Haykel, B. (2022). O prirodi selefijskog mišljenja i djelovanja / On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action. *Context: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.55425/23036966.2018.5.1.61>
<https://idr.uin-antasari.ac.id/27997/2/AWAL%20SKRIPSI.pdf>
- Ismail, I., Hendri, N., & Nurhakim, P. R. (2023). Minangkabau's Doro Tradition: Coexistence of Customary Law and Islamic Law in Caning Punishment. *Samarah*. <https://doi.org/10.22373/sjhk.v7i1.15904>
- Jamil, M. M. (2013). Revitalisasi Islam Kultural. *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan*, 21(2), 271. <https://doi.org/10.21580/ws.2013.21.2.245>
- Khoirir, A. (2024). Perdebatan Tauhid Sunni dan Salafi tentang Sifat Tuhan di Media Sosial. *Perpustakaan UIN Antasari*, 39–90. Retrieved 2025 from
- Kini, A. (2019). Pembubaran Pengajian Ustaz Firanda di Aceh: Ini Penjelasan Panitia. *Kumparan.Com*. Retrieved 2025 from <https://kumparan.com/acehkini/pembubaran-pengajian-ustaz-firanda-di-aceh-ini-penjelasan-panitia-1rIB5btFH0Y/full>
- Marhamah, & Abdullah, A. H. (2020). Reform of The Islamic Education System in Indonesia, according to Azyumardi Azra. *Islam Universalia: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.24260/alalbab.v14i2.3760>

[org/10.56613/islam-universalia.v2i1.149](https://doi.org/10.56613/islam-universalia.v2i1.149)

- Masyura, N. A. (2021). Tauhidullah (Rububiyah, Uluhiyah, dan Asma wa Sifat). *Open Science Framework Preprints*, 5(2), 51–67. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/vw748>
- Muhammad Noor, U., & Abur Hamdi, U. (2022). Resisting Anthropomorphism: Evaluation of Abū Sulaymān Al-Khaṭṭābī's (D. 388/998) Approach to Ṣifāt Traditions. *Journal of Religious and Theological Information*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2021.1979304>
- Muzakki, A., Rosidi, I., & Hartono, T. (2022). Islam on the Air: The Struggle for Salafism through Radio in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 12(1), 59–84. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v12i1.59-84>
- Muzakki, K. A. (2019). Salafi's Textualism in Understanding Qur'an and Hadith. *Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.15408/quhas.v8i1.13378>
- Nurdin, M. S., Haddade, A. W., & Santalia, I. (2022). The Concept Of Mutakallimin In The Interpretation of Dilalah Al-Lafa and Its Implications in Ikhtilaf Fikh. *International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2(2), 116–140. <https://doi.org/10.24252/ijis.v2i2.35012>
- Nurjanah, N., Aniqoh, A., & Muntaqo, R. (2022). Living Hadist dan Qur'an dalam Membentuk Religiusitas Anak Sejak Dini dalam Bingkai Moderasi Beragama di Purworejo. *Jumat Keagamaan: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat*, 1(2), 25–44. https://doi.org/10.32764/abdimas_agama.v3i2.2628
- Nursyahbani, I., Hasbillah, A. 'Ubaydi, & Farid, M. (2025). The Discourse on Contemporary Ta'lil Al-Hadith: The Thoughts of al-Huwaynî, Mamdûh, and al-Malîbârî. *Ulul Albab: Jurnal Studi Islam*, 26(2), 233–260. <https://doi.org/10.18860/ua.v26i2.34773>
- Oktiasari, R., Asyari, H., & Zamroni, M. A. (2021). Strategy of Teacher Competency Development Program in Madrasah Tsanawiyah. *Nidhomul Haq : Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 6(2), 442–456. <https://doi.org/10.31538/ndh.v6i2.1592>
- Pramita, S., Ilfah, A., & Sapri, S. (2023). Studi Akidah : Konsep Teologi dalam Pemikiran Asy'ariyah, Salafi dan Wahabi. *Asian Journal of Islamic Studies and Da'wah*, 2(1), 58–69. <https://doi.org/10.58578/ajisd.v2i1.2423>
- Qudsy, S. Z. (2016). Living Hadis: Genealogi, Teori, dan Aplikasi. *Jurnal Living Hadis*, 1(1), 177. <https://doi.org/10.14421/livinghadis.2016.1073>

- Rahman, Y. (2012). Penafsiran Tekstual dan Kontekstual terhadap al-Qur'an dan Hadith (Kajian terhadap Muslim Salafi dan Muslim Progresif). *Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.15408/quhas.v1i2.1329>
- Rusdin, R., Kahar, M. I., & Anggraeni, D. (2025). Implications of Ibn Taymiyyah's Trilogy of Tawheed Thought Against the Radicalism Movement in Islamic Education. *Ijorer : International Journal of Recent Educational Research*, 6(5), 1742–1755. <https://doi.org/10.46245/ijorer.v6i5.1080>
- Saleh, W. A. (2010). Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsir in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 12(1–6), 6–40. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2010.0103>
- Sinani, B. (2022). Post-Salafism: Religious Revisionism in Contemporary Saudi Arabia. *Religions*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040340>
- Sunandar, D., Syafei, Z., & Muhajir, M. (2023). Critical Analysis of Shalih Ibn Fauzan's Tauhid Materials on Three Modern Islamic Boarding Schools in Banten. *Scaffolding: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam dan Multikulturalisme*, 5(7), 774–793. <https://doi.org/10.37680/scaffolding.v5i3.3880>
- Suparman, Y., & Soga, Z. (2024). Studi Analisis Tafsir, Takwil dan Hermeneutika dalam Memahami Al-Qur'an. *Dirasa Islamiyya: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 3(1), 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.61630/dijis.v3i1.51>
- Supena, I. (2024). Epistemology of Tafsir, Ta'wil, and Hermeneutics: Towards an Integrative Approach. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 14(1), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.141.08>
- Suri, N., & Tanjung, M. (2025). Metaphor and Symbolism in the Language of the Quran: A Linguistic Study on the Concept of Tauhid (Analysis of Surah al-Fatihah). *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 106(1). <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.3>
- Tempo. (2024). Pengajian Syafiq Riza Basalamah Dibubarkan Banser, Begini Kronologinya versi Panitia Penyelenggara. Retrieved 2025 from *Tempo.Co*. <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1837126/pengajian-syafiq-riza-basalamah-dibubarkan-banser-begini-kronologinya-versi-panitia-penyelenggara>
- Ťupek, P., & Beránek, O. (2025). Monotheism of the Divine Names and Attributes as a Defining Criterion of Salafism. *Die Welt Des Islams*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-20240035>
- Yusoff, M. F. B. M. (2023). Biographical-Dictionary Classification as an Al-

ternative Narrative of 3rd and 4th Hijri Century Ḥadīth Studies: An Abstract Historical Framework. *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah*, 13(1), 120–134. <https://doi.org/10.7187/GJAT072023-8>