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Polemical Exegesis and Hermeneutical Analysis in Misbah Mustofa's *Tafsir Al-Iklil*

Aunillah Reza Pratama*

UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Ahmad Baidowi

UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Subi Nur Isnaini

UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Moch Nur Syahrus Syahbana

Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim Üniversitesi, Türkiye

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*This article analyzes the polemical character of KH. Misbah Mustofa's Qur'anic interpretation in *Tafsir Al-Iklil*, emphasizing his critique of socio-religious authority. The study investigates how a pesantren-based scholar could produce confrontational interpretations and how this attitude is shaped by his pre-understanding of taqlid. Employing a qualitative textual analysis informed by Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, this research demonstrates that Misbah conceptualizes taqlid not as blind imitation but as adherence to established opinions of qualified mujtahid imams. This pre-understanding becomes a hermeneutical horizon that leads him to reject non-mujtahid authorities whose fatwas dominate public practice. As a result, his tafsir articulates polemical critiques toward religious leaders, institutions, and popular practices, including the ritual use of loudspeakers, exaggerated veneration of scholars, and the Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ). Misbah's interpretation thus reflects a fusion of horizons between the Qur'anic text and the dynamics of Javanese Islamic society, producing a critique rooted in the legitimacy of madhhab authority. Theoretically, this research offers a Gadamerian perspective on taqlid as a productive pre-understanding in Nusantara tafsir studies. Practically, it highlights the role of Qur'anic exegesis as an instrument of socio-religious critique and reform.*

Keywords: *Tafsir Nusantara; KH. Misbah Mustofa; Al-Iklil fi Ma'ānī al-Tanzil; taqlid; hermeneutika Gadamer*

*Correspondence: Aunillah Reza Pratama, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia
aunillahreza@gmail.com



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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Qur'anic interpretation and religious authority has increasingly become a central issue in contemporary studies of Indonesian Islam. Within this discourse, *tafsir* functions not only as an exegetical enterprise but also as a medium for contesting socio-religious legitimacy, particularly within communities where interpretive authority is institutionalized (Federspiel 1996; Rahman 1982). A striking example can be found in *Tafsir Al-Iklil* by KH. Misbah Mustofa (1916–1994), a pesantren-based scholar whose commentaries sharply criticize religious leaders and popular practices in Javanese Muslim society (Alwy and Arofah 2016; Rohman 2019). Contrary to the common view that pesantren scholars tend to preserve traditional authority, Misbah's *tafsir* adopts a polemical tone that challenges the legitimacy of certain religious figures.

This polemical tendency raises an important academic question: why would a traditionalist pesantren scholar produce confrontational *interpretations* of the Qur'an, and what shapes this critical attitude? Previous scholarship on Nusantara *tafsir* has generally highlighted its local, accommodative, and normative character, particularly within pesantren traditions that maintain religious authority through practices such as *taqlid* and cultural integration (Federspiel 1996; Azra 2002; Rohman, 2019:). Nonetheless, Misbah's interpretation reveals a distinctly different perspective, targeting critiques at *kiai*, scholars, and Muslim elites who promote practices like the ritualistic use of loudspeakers, the commercialization of the Qur'an through MTQ, and the excessive reverence of religious figures (Mustofa, n.d.). These phenomena indicate that his *tafsir* is not merely textual but performs a form of socio-religious critique directed toward authority.

Such polemics cannot be separated from Misbah's hermeneutical horizon. His interpretation is deeply informed by a specific understanding of *taqlid*, namely adherence to the established opinions of qualified *mujtahid* imams in classical jurisprudence (Hallaq 1984; Diltthey 1989). Unlike modern reformist critiques that reject *taqlid* altogether (Rahman 1982), Misbah affirms its legitimacy while strictly delegitimizing non-*mujtahid* authorities whose rulings dominate public religious life (Alwy and Arofah 2016). This pre-understanding not only shapes his reading of the Qur'anic text but also becomes the foundation of his criticism toward contemporary religious practices. Thus, polemical expressions in *Tafsir Al-Iklil* emerge from a particular epistemic commitment rather than from mere sociocultural preference or reformist sentiment.

To explain this phenomenon, this research employs Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the concepts of pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) and fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1975). The application of this framework enables an analysis of how Misbah's hermeneutical horizon interacts with Qur'anic text *and* socio-religious context to produce polemical critiques. Accordingly, this study aims to (1) explore Misbah's socio-intellectual background as a pesantren exegete, (2) examine the polemical orientation of *Tafsir Al-Iklil*, and (3) analyze how his hermeneutical pre-understanding of *taqlid* shapes his critique of religious authority. This approach demonstrates that Misbah's *tafsir* is not merely exegetical but represents a dialogical engagement between text, tradition, and socio-religious authority in Java, offering a theoretical contribution to the study of Indonesian Qur'anic interpretation and the dynamics of religious authority.

The unique polemical focus of *Tafsir Al-Iklil* cannot simply be analyzed through descriptive methods or socio-historical

accounts. It necessitates a theoretical positioning within the current body of scholarship on Nusantara tafsir, along with a precise conceptual development of taqlid as a form of interpretive pre-understanding. In order to place this research within a wider academic conversation and to clarify the analytical framework utilized, the subsequent section examines pertinent studies on Indonesian Qur'anic interpretation and delineates the theoretical underpinnings that guide this analysis.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on Indonesian Qur'anic exegesis generally highlight the complex negotiation between textual authority, local religious practices, and interpretive legitimacy. Such dynamics are clearly reflected in *Tafsir Al-Iklil* by KH. Misbah Mustofa (1916–1994), a pesantren-based exegete whose writings integrate classical jurisprudential knowledge with Javanese linguistic and cultural expressions. Ahmad Baidowi (2015) characterizes Misbah's tafsir as a form of "situated textualism," arguing that its Pegon-based interpretation not only transfers scriptural meanings but also functions as a mechanism for reproducing pesantren authority within Javanese Muslim communities. According to Baidowi, *Al-Iklil* is not merely a vernacularized commentary; rather, it serves as an epistemic tool through which religious authority is affirmed, legitimized, and disseminated in culturally grounded ways.

Islah Gusmian further advances the discourse by examining vernacular tafsir as an intellectual strategy within Indonesian Islamic scholarship. His first study (2016a) demonstrates that the use of local languages in Qur'anic interpretation enables pesantren scholars to communicate religious authority in an accessible manner while simultaneously maintaining

hierarchical control over interpretive knowledge. In his subsequent work (2016b), Gusmian argues that *Al-Iklil* does more than preserve classical norms; it performs critical engagements with contemporary religious practices while retaining allegiance to traditional authority. Although Gusmian successfully underscores the sociological role of tafsir in negotiating religious authority, his analysis remains focused on the social effects of interpretation rather than the epistemological foundations that generate its polemical tone.

More recent scholarship expands the thematic and methodological approaches to Misbah's exegetical project. Kurniawan (2020) and Nurhadi and Mujiburrohman (2022) affirm that Misbah's interpretations are deeply rooted in Shāfi'ī orthodoxy, demonstrating that his critiques of popular religious practices draw from classical jurisprudential frameworks rather than reformist reasoning. This legal commitment is complemented by Hadi (2022), who emphasizes the impact of ethical and spiritual frameworks in Misbah's tafsir, illustrating that Sufi sensibilities further bolster his textual authority. These studies together demonstrate that Misbah does not merely replicate classical scholarship; rather, he actively engages with it to scrutinize modern practices. Nevertheless, these works mainly outline the normative and thematic aspects of Misbah's critique without delving into the interpretive reasoning that explains why specific religious authorities are chosen as targets of his polemics. A particularly significant contribution is offered by Gusmian and Abdullah (2023), who provide detailed documentation of Misbah's criticisms of modern religious phenomena, including the ritual use of loudspeakers, the commodification of Qur'anic recitation through MTQ competitions, and the exaggerated veneration of kiai. Their study demonstrates that *Al-Iklil* functions as a critique of religious authority in

contemporary Java. However, while they successfully portray the confrontational style and socio-religious implications of Misbah's tafsir, their analysis remains descriptive in nature. They focus on the objects and effects of criticism but do not explain the underlying hermeneutical rationale that generates this polemical discourse.

Although existing scholarship has mapped the cultural embeddedness, jurisprudential loyalty, ethical dimensions, and polemical features of *Tafsir Al-Iklil*, it has not addressed the epistemological reason behind Misbah's confrontational interpretive stance. Previous studies have described what Misbah criticizes and how his critiques are articulated, yet they have not investigated why he privileges certain forms of authority while delegitimizing others so aggressively. The literature emphasizes sociological functions, normative judgments, and jurisprudential commitments, but it does not examine the hermeneutical horizon that guides Misbah's interpretive method. Consequently, the polemical expressions found in *Al-Iklil* have been understood primarily as responses to socio-religious conditions, rather than as hermeneutical outcomes arising from a specific pre-understanding of legitimate authority.

This research addresses that gap by demonstrating that Misbah's tafsir is shaped by a hermeneutical commitment to a particular conception of taqlid, namely the conviction that only the rulings of recognized mujtahid imams possess legitimate authority to be followed. Through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, this study argues that Misbah's polemics are not merely thematic or social critiques, but a fusion of horizons between Qur'anic interpretation and a taqlid-based epistemology of religious authority. In this framework, his criticisms emerge not from

reformist impulses or sociocultural preferences, but from a hermeneutical pre-understanding that structures tafsir as a means of defending the boundaries of authoritative knowledge in Islam.

Conceptual Framework

The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how interpretation is shaped by the interpreter's historically determined horizon. Rather than treating textual meaning as a neutral object accessible through *methodological* procedures, Gadamer asserts that understanding is always conditioned by the interpreter's pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*), which emerges from tradition, linguistic experience, and practical engagement with inherited knowledge (Gadamer 1975). Interpretation does not commence from a blank slate; rather, it arises from a dynamic horizon of significance that consists of assumptions, anticipations, and previous commitments that steer the reading process. In this regard, interpretation is a dialogical endeavor where an individual's horizon engages with the text through a reciprocal exchange of inquiry and reply, as opposed to a one-way extraction of meaning. A central category in this framework is the concept of "horizon," which refers to the range of meanings made possible by one's historical, cultural, and intellectual situation. A horizon is not a limit in a restrictive sense but a condition that allows meaning to emerge. It determines which questions are considered meaningful, which interpretations are deemed valid, and how authority is recognized. Within the Islamic legal tradition, this role of authority is historically embodied in the mujtahid as the exclusive source of legitimate juristic reasoning (Hallaq 1984). Classical jurisprudential thought maintains that only those who have attained the highest level of

ijtihād may generate legal rulings, and therefore only they constitute valid repositories of authority (Kamali 2003). Such a conception is *not* merely legal; it forms an epistemic worldview in which knowledge, authority, and tradition are inseparable.

Gadamer's idea of pre-understanding is crucial to operationalizing this hermeneutical framework in the study of *Tafsir Al-Iklīl*. Pre-understanding is not a methodological bias to be eliminated but a productive condition that enables interpretation. It is a set of inherited assumptions that shape how meaning is produced. In Misbah's regard, the pre-understanding that informs his tafsir is the belief that taqlid must be directed exclusively to the recognized mujtahid imams. This commitment leads him to reject religious authority claimed by contemporary figures—such as kiai, bureaucratic *ulama*, and Muslim intellectuals—whose opinions lack the genealogical grounding of classical *ijtihād*. Rather than reflecting sectarian loyalty, this rejection represents a hermeneutical stance in which interpretation is inseparable from the historical structures of epistemic legitimacy. As Frank Griffel (2021) argues, classical Islamic scholarship functions as a tradition of authority in which religious knowledge is not merely transmitted, but regulated by intellectual lineage and scholarly discipline.

The hermeneutical process reaches its peak in what Gadamer refers to as the "fusion of horizons," a dialogical transformation where the interpreter's horizon meets that of the text. In *Al-Iklīl*, this fusion does not merely uphold classical norms; rather, it assesses them in light of contemporary practices. When Qur'anic verses are interpreted through a taqlid-based epistemology, they serve as benchmarks for evaluating the legitimacy of social and religious expressions.

Consequently, Misbah's critique of enhanced ritual prayer, the commercialization of Qur'anic recitation in MTQ competitions, and the symbolic elevation of religious leaders does not stem from moral sentiment or reformist ideology. Instead, it arises from the interpretive result of a hermeneutical fusion between the meanings of the Qur'an and an epistemology grounded in classical authority. Within this context, tafsir transcends mere exegesis, evolving into a critical tool for safeguarding the boundaries of authoritative knowledge in Islam.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative hermeneutical approach using a library-based design combined with socio-historical contextual analysis. The primary objective is to examine how KH. Misbah Mustofa's exegetical criticism is *shaped* by his pre-understanding of taqlid and his lived pesantren environment, interpreted through the conceptual lens of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The primary source for this study is Misbah's *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*, comprising 30 volumes written in Arabic-Pegon. The selection of textual data follows two criteria: *First*, Qur'anic passages in which Misbah engages in polemical critique toward religious authorities or popular practices; *seconds*, interpretations in which Misbah explicitly discusses *taqlid*, authority, ritual practices, or intellectual freedom.

Secondary sources include academic works on Indonesian tafsir, pesantren tradition, *taqlid* discourse, and hermeneutics. An inclusion/exclusion strategy was applied to prioritize studies that (a) analyze locality and pesantren-based exegesis, (b) discuss criticism and theological authority, or (c) provide biographical insight relevant to Misbah's

hermeneutical horizon, while descriptive biographies without interpretive relevance were excluded.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed four stages:

First, Close Reading and Thematic Categorization: Passages from *Al-Iklil* were read closely and coded according to thematic concerns, such as critique of ritual practices, religious authority, textual reasoning, and rejection of blind taqlid.

Second, Identification of Pre-understanding: Indicators of Misbah's epistemic stance were extracted, focusing on his normative conception of legitimate authority (mujtahid imams), rejection of passive religiosity, and emphasis on intellectual independence.

Third, Hermeneutical Interpretation Using Gadamer: Each thematic unit was analyzed using Gadamerian categories, particularly pre-understanding and fusion of horizons, to interpret how Misbah's social context and pesantren experience interact with the Qur'anic text.

Fourth, Contextual Verification: Interpretive findings were validated by situating them within relevant socio-historical contexts (e.g., NU–Muhammadiyah debates, local ritual practices, New Order modernization) and comparing them with theoretical discourses on authority and taqlid.

Transliteration and Textual Handling

Arabic-Pegon quotations from *Al-Iklil* were transliterated using a modified ALA-LC (American Library Association–Library of Congress) system, adapted to Javanese phonetic conventions. This system was chosen for its precision and replicability in academic research. To avoid interpretive distortion, transliteration was cross-checked with the Pegon source and verified using comparative readings in published tafsir studies.

Validation and Triangulation

The validity of interpretation was strengthened through two forms of triangulation:

Source Triangulation: comparing Misbah's interpretations with classical exegetical references he cites (e.g., Rāzī) and with contemporary Indonesian exegetical debates.

Theoretical Triangulation: corroborating Gadamerian analysis with Islamic epistemological discussion on taqlid and authority to ensure hermeneutical conclusions do not rely solely on Western theoretical abstractions.

Research Limitations

This study recognizes several limitations. First, the hermeneutical interpretation is inevitably influenced by the researcher's own historical horizon, a limitation inherent in Gadamerian methodology. Second, the study focuses primarily on polemical and authority-related passages; therefore, it does not comprehensively examine other dimensions of *Al-Iklil* such as linguistic analysis or spiritual ethics. Third, transliteration from Pegon, despite methodological control, still bears the risk of semantic nuance loss. These limitations, however, do not undermine the value of the research but rather delineate its analytical scope.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Biographical and Socio-Intellectual Background of KH. Misbah Mustofa

KH. Misbah Mustofa (1916–1994) was a pesantren-based exegete who spent most of his life within the *traditional* Islamic educational network of Java. Born in Rembang and later settling in Bangilan, Tuban, he founded Pesantren al-Balagh, where he taught tafsir, fiqh, and Islamic preaching (da'wah). His intellectual orientation was shaped by classical Shāfi'i jurisprudence and a curriculum centered on the mastery of Arabic texts, *including tafsir*,

uṣūl al-fiqh, *nahw*, and *fiqh* (Alwy and Arofah 2016) This academic environment cultivated a deep respect for the epistemic authority of the mujtahid imams and established the premise that legitimate religious interpretation must be rooted in scholarly lineage *and* methodological discipline. Such a foundation later became Misbah's pre-understanding in interpreting the Qur'an, particularly in matters related to *taqlīd* and religious authority.

The *pesantren* tradition in which Misbah lived was not merely an educational institution but a socio-religious ecosystem that regulated authority through intellectual genealogy. *Pesantren* scholarship historically maintained that the ability to produce binding religious judgments (*fatwā*) belongs exclusively to recognized mujtahid scholars, while ordinary Muslims and lower-level jurists are required to follow them (*taqlīd*) (Rohman 2019). In this framework, knowledge is assessed not primarily through individual reformist ideas or contemporary sensibilities, but rather through its correspondence with established academic authority. Misbah's assertion that *fatwā* issued by modern *kiai*, bureaucratic 'ulama, or Muslim scholars lacked valid epistemic foundation must be interpreted within this inherited regulatory framework of authority, rather than as simple polemics or personal conflicts.

Simultaneously, the social dynamics of Javanese Islam during the 1970s and 1980s were experiencing significant changes. Ritual practices such as *slametan*, *tahlilan*, and *kenduren*, along with the symbolic veneration of *kiai*, existed alongside modernizing movements that brought forth new religious expressions, including enhanced worship and large-scale Qur'anic competitions (MTQ). (Alwy and Arofah 2016) These changes were not simply devotional shifts, but reconfigurations of religious authority in which modern institutions, state policy, and

urban Muslims began to share interpretive influence traditionally held by *pesantren*. The emergence of public religious figures who gained legitimacy through popularity, bureaucracy, or mass organization created a new competition over who is authorized to represent Islam for society at large.

Within this context, Misbah's critical tone in *Al-Iklīl* emerges as an intellectual defense of epistemic authority rather than sociopolitical reaction. His rejection of amplified worship, his critique of MTQ as the commercialization of the Qur'an, and his condemnation of religious leaders who encourage blind imitation are all directed toward protecting the epistemological integrity of Islamic knowledge from what he perceived as unqualified interpretive actors (Mustofa 1990; Mustofa n.d.). His criticism is thus a boundary-setting mechanism rooted in classical hermeneutical authority, not merely moral reproach.

Misbah's outlook must also be situated within the broader tension between NU's maintenance of traditional *taqlīd* and Muhammadiyah's call for direct scriptural interpretation (Azra 2002: 76). Although Misbah was socially aligned with *pesantren* culture often associated with NU, his stance did not defend *taqlīd* as passive imitation. Rather, he distinguished between legitimate *taqlīd*—directed to authoritative mujtahid scholars—and blind *taqlīd* toward contemporary figures who lacked methodological competence. This distinction constitutes Misbah's unique contribution to Indonesian Islamic discourse: he neither followed popular authority nor embraced modernist scriptural independence, but instead restored *taqlīd* to its classical epistemic discipline.

Therefore, Misbah's method of interpretation cannot be separated from the fusion between the Qur'anic text and the traditional intellectual horizon that shaped his scholarly identity. His *tafsir* represents

a hermeneutical negotiation grounded in pesantren values, classical jurisprudence, and the contestation of authority in modern Javanese Islamic society. What appears at first glance as social criticism is better understood as an epistemological stance that defends the boundaries of religious interpretation. In this sense, Misbah's *tafsir* demonstrates how the Qur'an becomes a site of contestation for authority, and how tradition functions as a regulating force that governs who may speak in the name of Islam.

Tafsir Al-Iklil: Hermeneutics of Authority and Social Critique

Tafsir Al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl presents itself as a conventional *Pegon* commentary, yet it uses *tafsir* not merely for instruction, but as a *mechanism* for regulating who may speak on behalf of the Qur'an. Rather than offering devotional explanation, Misbah Mustofa mobilizes interpretation as a boundary-making tool that distinguishes legitimate scholarship from unauthorized religious authority.

Rooted in a pesantren formation that locates binding interpretation exclusively in classical *mujtahid imams* (Rohman 2019), Misbah employs pedagogical devices such as *makna gandul*, grammar markers, and *Pegon* glossing to discipline how the Qur'an is read. These tools oblige readers to *follow* inherited linguistic and *fiqh* frameworks, thereby subordinating popular intuition to methodological competence and rejecting modernist shortcuts or populist exegesis.

This stance underlies his critiques of amplified worship, MTQ commercialization, and excessive reverence toward charismatic *kiai*: the issue is not ritual aesthetics, but the question of authority. By attributing sin to leaders who legalize improper practices or by challenging charisma without textual qualification, Misbah uses *tafsir* to

delegitimize untrained voices and to assert interpretation as epistemic resistance within the tradition.

Through its structure, pedagogy, and critique, *Al-Iklil* embodies what may be termed a hermeneutics of authority. Misbah's pre-understanding of *taqlīd* establishes interpretive boundaries; his pedagogical tools discipline readers into classical reasoning; and his social critiques use *tafsir* as a defense mechanism against epistemic corruption. The result is a fusion of horizons in which the Qur'an confronts the modern reconfiguration of religious authority, producing interpretations that are not merely explanatory, but regulatory. Thus, Misbah's *tafsir* is not a commentary on society—it is a governance of meaning.

Polemical and Controversial Interpretations of KH. Misbah Mustofa (Descriptive Inventory)

The following section does not aim to analyze these interpretations in detail, but rather to map the range of polemical and controversial *positions* that emerged in *Al-Iklil*. This descriptive overview functions as an initial inventory of Misbah Mustofa's exegetical tendencies, which will be hermeneutically examined in the subsequent section.

KH. Misbah Mustofa frequently employed his Qur'anic exegesis as a medium for socio-religious critique, directly addressing the practices of the Muslim community, including those of scholars, clerics, leaders, and *intellectuals* whom he considered misguided. In his interpretation of QS. al-Baqarah: 134, he rejected the traditions of *tawassul* and *tahlilan* on the grounds that an individual cannot obtain rewards from the deeds of others. He stated:

“Wong ora bakal oleh ganjaran saking wong liyo... wong kang wus mati ora bakal bisa nerima amal saking wong liyo.” (Mustofa n.d.: 127-128).

“No one will ever receive rewards from others... those who have died will never be able to benefit from the deeds of others.”

Consequently, he viewed *tawassul* and *tahlilan*, which are meant to convey merit to the deceased, as ineffective and lacking in value. In a similar *vein*, within his analysis of QS. al-Baqarah: 186, he expressed disapproval of the use of loudspeakers during acts of worship, including prayers and communal rituals, with the exception of those that are specifically mandated by Islamic law, such as *dhalāt jahrīyah* (audible prayers). By referencing hadiths and Qur’anic verses that advocate for supplication in a subdued tone, he condemned this practice as a religious innovation (*bid’ah*) and attributed the mistake to “those who profess to be scholars, leaders, or Muslim intellectuals.”

“Iki kabeh asale sangking polahe wong-wong kang ngaku ulama’ utawa nganggep awake suwjine pemimpin utawa Intelek Muslim... Yen sholat utawa do’a nganggo pengeras suwara iku kelebu maksiat, kabeh ulama’ lan pemimpin Intelek iku bakal mikul dusone.” (Mustofa 1990: 586).

“All of this originates from the behavior of those who claim to be scholars or regard themselves as leaders or Muslim intellectuals... If prayer or supplication is performed using a loudspeaker, it constitutes disobedience, and all such scholars and intellectual leaders will bear the sin.”

Misbah’s interpretation of QS. al-Nisā’: 3 demonstrates a controversial argument in support of polygamy. He even referred to a wife’s *menstrual* period as a form of “corruption” against the husband’s rights:

“A wife, every month, inevitably reduces her husband’s rights... if calculated over the course of a year, a wife commits corruption against her husband’s rights for a total of 84 days.” (Mustofa 1990: 1505).

In QS. al-Nisā’: 11, he defended the 2:1 inheritance ratio between men and women on the grounds that financial responsibility rests upon men, while harshly criticizing reformist scholars (*mujaddid*) who sought to equalize inheritance shares:

“...in fact, such a person has not sufficiently mastered the sciences of Islam. Their opinion is merely intended to promote themselves.” (Mustofa 1990: 1540).

Misbah’s socio-religious criticism also targeted the Family Planning (Keluarga Berencana, KB) program, which he likened to the killing of *male* infants during Pharaoh’s era, as well as the commercialization of the Qur’an in the *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur’an* (MTQ):

“Alquran diwaca perlu kanggo golek nama utawa golek duit... Akhire, kedudukane Alquran meh ora bedo karo orkes lan gambus.” (Mustofa n.d.: 1152).

“The Qur’an is recited merely to seek fame or money... In the end, the status of the Qur’an becomes almost no different from that of an orchestra or a musical performance.”

This exegetical approach exemplifies Misbah’s audacity in confronting established norms, critiquing prominent figures, and steadfastly opposing any compromises on matters he perceived as conflicting with the *integrity* of Islamic teachings. Consequently, *Al-Iklīl* transcends being merely an academic text; it serves as an ideological battleground where Misbah endeavored to reform religious practices in alignment with his personal interpretations. These instances demonstrate the breadth of Misbah’s polemical engagements; however, they fail to encapsulate the foundational interpretive rationale that gave rise to them. The subsequent section will thus explore how these contentious interpretations arise from his hermeneutical foundations, especially his preliminary understanding of *taqlīd* and the interplay between traditional authority and modern-day contexts.

Misbah's Attention to Taqlid and the Practice of Madhhab Adherence

Taqlid as Epistemic Pre-Understanding

Among the fundamental premises that shape KH. Misbah Mustofa's exegesis is the conviction that taqlid is not merely a juridical necessity for *ordinary* Muslims, but an epistemic mechanism that determines who possesses the authority to speak in the name of Islam. In *Al-Iklil*, taqlid is presented as a method of safeguarding interpretive lineage: following the great *mujtahid imams*—such as Abū Hanīfah, Mālik, al-Shāfi'ī, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal—preserves the continuity of disciplined reasoning that defines Islamic scholarship. Misbah asserts that scholars outside this rank cannot be imitated because they lack the methodological capacity required to derive religious rulings responsibly (Baidowi 2015). Thus, *taqlid*, in Misbah's view, becomes a filter that distinguishes legitimate exegetical authority from unqualified interpretation.

The emphasis on *taqlid* in *Al-Iklil* therefore reflects not ritual conservatism or mere fidelity to tradition, but a hermeneutical posture. Misbah approaches the Qur'an with the pre-conceived expectation that its application must be mediated through the methodology of recognized juristic authorities. This pre-understanding shapes not only whom he follows, but also whom he opposes. In other words, his tafsir is not a *personal* voice acting autonomously before scripture, but a voice positioned within the intellectual lineage he deems authoritative.

Madhhab Adherence as Intellectual Boundary

For Misbah, madhhab adherence is the practical manifestation of this epistemic discipline. Following a madhhab does not imply blind *imitation* of juridical outcomes, but allegiance to the methodological constitution of Islamic reasoning. He criticizes individuals who reject taqlid while

unknowingly expecting others to follow them. In one passage, he warns against “those who dazzle with eloquence yet have no depth of knowledge,” whose followers end up practicing taqlid toward unqualified leaders:

"Akeh wong-wong kang gampang blereng nyawang wong kang kosong nanging pinter omong, nuli ketarik hingga podo ninggalake lakune ulama salaf. Cubo dipikir, ulama-ulama'e Imam Syafi'i kang gedhe koyo Imam Ghazali, Imam Haromain, Imam Subki, Ibnu Hajar, Imam Romli, Imam Asnawi, Imam Suyuti, Imam Mahalli, Imam Mutawalli kang ora kitung akehe iku kabeh podo melu Imam Syafi'i kurang opo? Kabeh iku wong kang duso sebab taqlid marang Imam Syafi'i? Wong-wong kang mengkono iku nglarang taqlid nanging akhire anggota-anggotane podo taqlid marang dewekane, nanging akhire iki kabeh podo sasar. Keronu akeh wong kang ngakoni yen kedudukan dadi muttabi' nganggo ati (ora ilmu)." (Mustofa n.d.: 1701-1702).

Translation:

“Many people are easily dazzled by those who lack substance yet excel in eloquence, and they become so attracted that they abandon the practices of the Salaf scholars. Consider this: the renowned Shafi'i scholars such as Imam al-Ghazali, Imam al-Haramayn, Imam al-Subki, Ibn Hajar, Imam al-Ramli, Imam al-Asnawi, Imam al-Suyuti, Imam al-Mahalli, and Imam al-Mutawalli—countless in number—all faithfully followed Imam al-Shafi'i. What more could possibly be lacking?”

Such individuals forbid taqlid, yet in the end their followers also practice taqlid toward them, and ultimately they too go astray. This is because many who claim to be *muttabi'* in reality merely follow the dictates of their own desires.”

These figures, he argues, lack the scholarly credentials: they are neither *mujtahid* nor properly trained *muttabi'* (those who follow evidence methodologically).

By invoking the example of major Shāfi'ī scholars—al-Ghazālī, al-Haramayn,

al-Subkī, Ibn Hajar, al-Suyūthī, and others—Misbah presents *the madhhab* as a lineage of disciplined scholarship that guards against interpretive arbitrariness. When lay Muslims simply adopt rulings based on persuasion, charisma, or rhetoric, they are not practicing “independent reasoning,” but displacing authority from qualified jurists to popular figures with no epistemic legitimacy. Hence, *madhhab* adherence functions as an intellectual boundary that protects religious interpretation from the volatility of unregulated opinion, whether conservative or reformist.

Taqīd as Critique of Non-Mujtahid Authority

Misbah’s commitment to the authority of mujtahid imams leads him to critique two opposing currents in Indonesian Islam: excessive ritual traditionalism and populist scripturalism. On the one hand, he condemns ritual practices like slametan or kenduren when they are performed mechanically without juristic grounding (Mustofa n.d.) On the other hand, he rejects the modernist call to “return directly to the Qur’an and Sunnah,” arguing that such an appeal is naïve when advanced by those who lack the competency required for *ijtihād*. As he states in his commentary on Q. al-A’rāf 7: 38, Muslims are not allowed to “follow blindly without reflection,” yet most believers must still rely on expert guidance because they cannot engage methodologically with the sources:

"Iki ayat nuduhake yen wong isam iku ora keno anut krubyuk tanpo dipikir. Luwih-luwih ono ing masalah i'tiqad (keyakinan). Songko iku, saweneh ulama ono kang ora menangkake taqlid ono ing masalah amaliyyah. Saben-saben wong Islam kudu langsung

ngamalake opo kang dadi isine Al-Qur'an lan haditse Rasulullah saw. Yen ora biso supoyo takon marang wong kang ngerti, namung bahe akeh-akehe podo marengake taqlid marang salah sijine imam papat mandar wajib taqlid. (Mustofa n.d.: 1247).

Translation:

“This verse shows that Muslims are not allowed to follow blindly without reflection, especially in matters of creed (*i'tiqād*). For this reason, some scholars do not endorse *taqlid* in practical matters. Every Muslim must directly practice what is contained in the Qur’an and the Hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him). If they are unable, then they should ask those who possess knowledge. It is just that, in reality, most people follow one of the four Imams, which makes *taqlid* practically obligatory.”

Thus, Misbah’s critique is not directed at ritual per se or at reformist ideals, but at the displacement of interpretive authority from qualified *mujtahid* scholars to *untrained* religious actors—whether they emerge from *pesantren* charisma, modernist activism, bureaucratic religion, or popular intellectualism. His polemics therefore do not arise from social antagonism, but from a hermeneutical defense of what he considers legitimate channels of knowledge.

Hermeneutical Transition: From Pre-Understanding to Polemical Tafsir

Understanding Misbah’s conception of *taqlid* and *madhhab* is essential before examining his polemical interpretations. His controversies do not emerge from cultural rigidity or ideological opposition, but from a hermeneutical position that recognizes interpretive *authority* only in the classical mujtahid tradition. Accordingly, when Misbah condemns certain practices or figures, he does so as a consequence of his pre-understanding about who may mediate the Qur’an to society.

In this sense, taqlīd is not a subject within his tafsir—it is the lens through which the tafsir is written.

The following section will analyze how this epistemic pre-understanding generates Misbah's confrontational readings of the Qur'an, producing a fusion between textual meaning, classical authority, and the socioreligious dynamics of Indonesian Islam.

Hermeneutical Analysis of Misbah Mustofa's Exegesis

The exegesis of KH. Misbah Mustofa cannot be separated from the hermeneutical situation that shaped it. In Gadamer's view, understanding never begins from a neutral standpoint; the interpreter always carries a pre-understanding constituted by history, tradition, and authority (Gadamer 1975). Misbah's tafsir, therefore, cannot be explained merely by linguistic or theological reasoning alone, but must be understood as an encounter between the Qur'anic text and a classical fiqh-based consciousness embedded in pesantren tradition. His interpretive orientation emerges from a historical position rather than a purely textual exercise.

A central element of Misbah's pre-understanding is his conviction that taqlīd is legitimate only when directed toward the great *mujtahid* Imams such as Abu Hanifah, Malik, al-Shafi'i, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal. For him, taqlīd to *non-mujtahid* figures—especially contemporary ulama, kiai, or Muslim intellectuals who enjoy public authority—constitutes a theological and epistemological transgression. This perspective decisively shapes his hermeneutical posture: his tafsir frequently criticizes not the lay community but the "producers of religious authority." Thus, polemic becomes not a stylistic preference but a function of a jurisprudential worldview. In this sense, Misbah's

criticisms represent not personal antagonism, but an attempt to safeguard interpretive legitimacy according to the hierarchy of classical fiqh (Hallaq 1984: 11).

Ricoeur's concept of "appropriation" (1976) further elucidates Misbah's methodology. For Misbah, interpretation transcends mere explanation; it constitutes an existential assertion that reconfigures the text into a framework for guiding modern religious behavior. His tafsir does not aim for historical objectivity; rather, it endeavors to "bring the text home," thereby transforming the Qur'an into a moral and legal standard for assessing the religious practices within his community. Consequently, Misbah regards scripture as a normative authority that has the capacity to rectify both common practices and the interpretive actions of religious leaders. This hermeneutical stance engages with the socio-religious dynamics of Javanese society during the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterized by the increasing influence of charismatic scholarly authority and ritual performance on public expressions of religiosity (Supriyanto 2017: 36). Practices such as *slametan*, *tahlilan*, and *kenduren* were often performed in ways influenced more by the authority of local kiai than by classical jurisprudential frameworks. At the same time, the modernization of religious expression—such as the use of loudspeakers and the commercialization of Qur'anic recitation in MTQ competitions—facilitated the rise of public religious spectacle. Within Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons, Misbah's tafsir emerges from this encounter between textual norms and lived socio-religious conditions, generating a polemical discourse that challenges local authority and ritual innovation.

This dialogical process is evident in several of Misbah's recurring criticisms. His interpretation of QS. al-Baqarah: 186 and QS. al-A'raf: 55 and 205 leads him to condemn the use of loudspeakers in *du'ā'*

and ritual worship, identifying it as a *bid'ah* encouraged by *non-mujtahid* religious figures. Likewise, his tafsir of QS. al-An'ām: 126 and QS. al-A'rāf: 2 explicitly rejects the MTQ as a commodification of sacred scripture. These examples are not isolated; they reappear across multiple volumes of *Al-Iklīl*, indicating a consistent hermeneutical pattern that prioritizes textual fidelity and madhhab authority over public religious performance. His interpretation becomes an ethical intervention, challenging the authority structures that legitimize popular practices when they conflict with classical fiqh.

In contrast to many pesantren-based tafsir that accommodate local tradition as part of Islamic identity (Gusmian 2016b; Federspiel 1996), Misbah adopts a corrective and interventionist stance. He positions classical jurisprudence as a normative horizon that evaluates local practice. His tafsir resists both the uncritical preservation of tradition and the modernist rejection of madhhab authority. *Consequently*, Misbah situates himself between two poles of Indonesian Islamic discourse: he criticizes traditionalist ritual excess while simultaneously opposing the reformist move to eliminate madhhab hierarchy. This intermediary position forms a distinctive tafsir methodology within Indonesian Qur'anic scholarship.

The social implications of this method can still be observed today. At Pesantren al-Balagh—where Misbah taught—religious activities such as prayer, tahlilan, and dhikr are performed without the use of *loudspeakers*, reflecting a direct reception of his polemical hermeneutic. In surrounding communities, there is also a cautious attitude toward the commercialization of Qur'anic recitation, particularly in events that treat sacred recitation as entertainment or competition. As Supriyanto (2017) notes, Misbah's tafsir circulated not only in academic discourse

but also shaped ethical sensibilities among pesantren communities that sought to preserve the sanctity of the Qur'an.

Thus, Misbah's exegetical project represents a polemical hermeneutics grounded in the fusion of textual tradition and Javanese *religious* experience. His tafsir appropriates the Qur'an to regulate authority, purify practice, and reinforce classical jurisprudence against both ritual excess and anti-madhhab sentiment. Rather than merely commenting on scripture, *Al-Iklīl* stages a dialogical negotiation between classical norms and local realities, transforming tafsir into a critical intervention that shapes the lived religious life of its community.

Comparative Reading: Misbah, *al-Manār*, and the *Pesantren* Tradition

A comparison between KH. Misbah Mustofa and the modernist school of Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida shows both convergence and significant difference. Like *al-Manār*, Misbah rejected blind imitation (*taqlīd a'mā*) and encouraged Muslims to think about religious practice rather than follow ritual habit unquestioningly. However, their concepts of authority diverge sharply. *Al-Manār* called for a direct return to the Qur'an and Sunnah, reducing reliance on madhhab authority and encouraging legal rationalization (*Tafsīr al-Manār*). Misbah did not follow this path. Although he encouraged understanding and ethical reflection, he insisted that legitimate *taqlīd* is limited only to the mujtahid Imams—rejecting *taqlīd* to contemporary figures followed like jurists despite lacking *ijtihād* qualifications (Hallaq 1984; Rahman 1982). Thus, his criticism was not directed at the madhhab system itself but at those who assumed such authority without proper competence.

This divergence shapes the distinct focus of Misbah's critique. Whereas *al-*

Manār addressed systemic stagnation in Islamic thought, Misbah targeted specific “social persons” who shaped religious life through embodied authority—charismatic kiai, popular preachers, and local scholars whose influence stemmed from communal trust rather than institutional power (Gadamer 1975). This personalized critique differs not only from al-Manār but also from typical pesantren tafsir, which tends to accommodate practices like slametan, tahlilan, and merit transfer to maintain social harmony (Gusmian 2016b; Baidowi 2015; Hadi 2022). Misbah, however, was willing to challenge such customs when he deemed them lacking legal basis, as in his rejection of loudspeakers in worship and MTQ commercialization, positioning him as a rare pesantren scholar willing to “cross the current”(Gusmian 2016b).

However, this corrective stance also reveals limitations. Because Misbah explicitly mentioned the groups he critiqued, his confrontational style risked alienating communities that valued consensus and honored the symbolic authority of kiai. In a social environment where religious acceptance is *relational*, harsh criticism may gain less traction than gradual persuasion. In this sense, his consistency and boldness could be perceived as rigid, especially by traditionalists sensitive to community harmony. These tensions show that legal rigor does not always translate easily into cultural acceptance.

The social thrust of Misbah’s tafsir becomes apparent within the New Order period (1966–1998), when state policy promoted religious modernization and public performance through programs such as MTQ(Gusmian & Abdullah 2023).His rejection of Qur’anic commercialization and mosque loudspeaker culture was therefore a critique of state-supported religiosity that turned worship into public spectacle and

institutional competition, rather than a dispute over ritual aesthetics.

Positioned between accommodation and reform, Misbah occupies a “strict middle position.” Unlike Hasbi ash-Shiddieqy, he affirmed madhhab authority, yet he refused—against Bisri Musthofa—to extend taqlid to non-mujtahid figures (Ilyas et al., 2024). The result is moderation in theory but strict application in practice, resonating with Ricoeur’s notion of interpretation as the act of “applying scripture into current existence” (Ricoeur 1976).

Taken as a whole, these comparisons highlight both the significance and the tensions in Misbah’s approach. His tafsir is neither fully *modernist* nor wholly traditionalist, but an attempt to discipline religious life by grounding authority in classical jurisprudence while resisting local charisma and modern commodification. His personalized critiques reflect the concrete way authority operates in Indonesian Muslim society. Yet his approach also reveals a tension between legal precision and social sensitivity. Misbah’s work, therefore, embodies a polemical hermeneutic shaped by the fusion of textual tradition, socio-cultural experience, and an insistence on regulating religious authority(Gadamer 1975; Hallaq 1984; Rahman 1982).

Misbah’s Pre-understanding of Taqlid

Within the framework of Gadamerian hermeneutics, interpretation is never a neutral encounter. Every exegete approaches the text with an existing horizon of experience, belief, and tradition—what Gadamer refers to as pre-understanding (Gadamer 1975). It is through this horizon that dialogue with the text becomes possible, shaping the meaning that emerges from interpretation. In the case of KH. Misbah Mustofa, the most decisive pre-understanding that guided his exegesis is

the question of taqlīd and legitimate religious authority. Misbah did not regard taqlīd as a theological problem to be rejected outright. Instead, he viewed it as a khilāfiyyah issue—subject to juristic debate—as suggested in his interpretation of QS. al-A’rāf [7]:38, where he emphasizes that Muslims must not follow religious views without reflection, especially in matters concerning i’tiqād. However, when ordinary Muslims lack the capacity for independent reasoning, they may follow the opinions of those who possess knowledge and authority in the Islamic sciences. (Mustofa n.d.: 1247). For Misbah, this makes taqlīd functionally necessary while simultaneously demanding intellectual responsibility from the believer.

At the same time, Misbah consistently encouraged reliance upon mujtahid Imams. His tafsīr frequently cites classical juristic authorities, suggesting that ordinary Muslims should refer to the established wisdom of the four *madhhabs* rather than depending on the charisma or status of local scholars who have not been tested for scholarly integrity. A clearer demarcation *appears* in his exegesis of QS. al-Baqarah [2]:170, where he argues that those who are followed must demonstrate zuhd, sincerity, and profound accountability before God—traits that he associates with the scholars of ijtihād (Mustofa n.d.). In this sense, taqlīd is valid only if directed toward a legitimate authority.

From these statements, three central principles of Misbah’s pre-understanding of taqlīd emerge: First, taqlīd may be practiced and can even be obligatory, but only toward mujtahid Imams who possess scholarly accountability and moral integrity. Second, blind imitation (*taqlīd a’mā*) is *categorically* prohibited because it contradicts the Qur’anic demand for reflective submission. Third, legitimate authority must be judged not by local

popularity or institutional status, but by ethical and intellectual qualifications rooted in the classical tradition.

To summarize these epistemological boundaries, the following table maps the core structure of *Misbah’s* pre-understanding of taqlīd:

Table 1. Core Structure of Misbah Mustofa’s Pre-understanding of Taqlīd

Aspect	Misbah’s Position	Status	Underlying Criterion	Textual Basis in His Tafsīr
Taqlīd to Mujtahid Imams	Following classical mujtahid authorities (four madhhabs)	Valid / Necessary	Scholarly competency + tested integrity (zuhd, ikhlās)	QS 7:38 — Mustofa, n.d.: 1247
Taqlīd to Local/Non-Mujtahid Leaders	Following figures based on charisma or popularity	Invalid / Misguidance	Lacks epistemic accountability	QS 2:170 — Mustofa, n.d.
Blind Taqlīd (Taqlīd A’mā)	Following without understanding or reasoning	Forbidden	Qur’an demands reflective submission	QS 2:170; QS 7:38 — Mustofa, n.d.: 1247
Taqlīd in Creed (I’tiqād)	Belief based on imitation	Not permitted	Faith requires reasoning	QS 7:38 — Mustofa, n.d.: 1247
Public Religious Practice (Fiqh)	Ordinary Muslims follow mujtahid rulings	Permissible	Text-guided obedience via authoritative scholarship	QS 7:38 — Mustofa, n.d.: 1247

This conceptual structure shows how Misbah’s pre-understanding functions as an epistemic filter for his exegesis.

Legitimate authority must be classically *grounded*, blind imitation must be rejected, and the believer must engage reason when obeying religious guidance. Hence, when Misbah directs his critiques at particular scholars, kiai, or community leaders, he is not merely making polemical judgments but concretely defining who is unworthy of being followed in taqlīd according to the epistemic horizon that shapes his interpretation.

Thus, Misbah's critique of specific scholars and community *leaders* is not merely polemical, but a concrete effort to exclude those he views as unqualified for taqlīd within his epistemic framework. Yet this model reveals a limitation: by restricting legitimate authority to classical mujtahids, Misbah risks reinforcing a rigid hierarchy that may be unsustainable in modern contexts. Reformists like Abduh and Natsir insist that contemporary scholars must engage in ijtihād to address new realities (Rahman 1982; Natsir 1954), and Hamka similarly warns that excessive dependence on past authorities leads to stagnation (Hamka 1988). Misbah's selective taqlīd, therefore, should be read as a contextual negotiation rather than a universally applicable model.

Fusion of Horizons: The Text and Misbah's Social Reality

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) argues that interpretation takes place through a fusion of horizons, in which the meaning of a text emerges from the encounter between the textual horizon and the interpreter's socio-historical horizon. In *Al-Iklīl*, KH. Misbah *Mustofa's* polemical interpretations cannot be understood solely from the Qur'anic text he cited, but rather from the dialogical interaction between the text and the religious practices of Javanese Muslim society under the social and political climate of the New Order era.

Blind Taqlīd and the Cult of Religious Authority

In the pesantren culture of Java during the 1970s and 1980s, the authority of the kiai was frequently viewed as beyond question, both in intellectual and spiritual terms (Gusmian 2016b). Misbah noted that this reverence resulted in the uncritical acceptance of religious guidance from non-mujtahid clerics—an oversight he *considered* a misrepresentation of Islamic legal epistemology. This perspective influenced his interpretation of QS. al-Tawbah [9]:31, where the verse's admonition against granting religious leaders quasi-divine status was relevant not only to the medieval priesthood but also to the excessive veneration of modern kiai. The convergence of horizons is apparent here: the textual injunction against inappropriate authority intersects with Misbah's societal concerns regarding laypeople's reliance on local clerics, culminating in a critique of the religious authority framework within pesantren society.

Commodification of the Qur'an and Public Performance

Under the New Order, religion became increasingly public and *performative*, expressed through mass competitions such as Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ). Misbah interpreted QS. al-An'ām [6]:126 and QS. al-A'rāf [7]:2 through the concern that recitation had *shifted* from ethical devotion to artistic competition motivated by prestige and material gain. Rather than a commentary on recitation technique, his criticism represented a fusion between the Qur'an's ethical horizon and his discomfort with the commercialization of sacred practice. Misbah's exegesis thus operationalizes the text to intervene in public morality, targeting not only performers but also religious elites who endorsed MTQ for institutional benefit.

Loudspeaker Usage and the Ethics of Prayer

The rapid modernization of village mosques, including the adoption of loudspeaker technology, produced new forms of public worship. Misbah interpreted QS. al-A'rāf 7:55 as mandating humility and privacy in supplication. His critique of loudspeakers did not arise from textual literalism alone, but from a social horizon *disturbed* by what he perceived as disrespectful and noisy ritual performance. Consequently, he held scholars and Muslim intellectuals responsible for legitimizing what he saw as the transgression of devotional ethics. Here, the fusion of horizons takes place as the Qur'anic injunction to pray softly is appropriated to regulate a modern technological practice.

Table 2. Fusion of Horizons in Misbah's Tafsīr

Qur'anic Text (Textual Horizon)	Misbah's Social Horizon	Fusion Outcome (Interpretive Critique)
QS 9:31 – Warning against elevating religious leaders	Blind obedience to kiai and non-mujtahid clerics	Critique of excessive local authority and blind taqlid
QS 6:126; 7:2 – Ethical function of Qur'an	MTQ as commercialization of recitation	Condemnation of Qur'an as spectacle for prestige
QS 7:55 – Humility in prayer	Loudspeakers dominating worship in mosques	Rejection of loudspeaker-based dhikr/du'ā'

Misbah's approach *reflects* Gadamer's dialogical *hermeneutics*, treating the Qur'an as a normative tool for correcting religious life rather than merely explaining its meaning. Yet this method can also narrow interpretive authority, as his socially driven judgments may overlook broader jurisprudential diversity, making

his tafsir both ethically corrective and confrontational.

Campaign for Freedom of Thought

Critique of Blind Taqlid

Misbah Mustofa uses *Al-Iklil* not merely to convey Qur'anic meaning, but to cultivate what he perceives as intellectual responsibility among Muslims. His interpretation of QS. al-Baqarah [2]:170 highlights a foundational concern: taqlid a'mā—blind imitation—threatens the Muslim intellect by replacing reflection with passive conformity. When he reminds Muslims to keep exercising their intellect “even if no longer in school or pesantren,” Misbah affirms a lifelong obligation to think critically (Mustofa n.d.). In his view, taqlid is not a *devotional* shortcut for the ignorant; it is an epistemic practice that demands discernment. Only when directed to legitimate scholarly authorities, who possess both knowledge and moral character, does taqlid become a valid religious path.

This hermeneutical stance strengthens his interpretation of QS. al-Tawbah [9]:31. After drawing from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb*, which warns against religious figures who manipulate doctrine for self-glorification, Misbah shifts the horizon of *the* verse to critique the Javanese pesantren reality, where charisma and lineage sometimes replace scholarly merit (Mustofa n.d.). He stresses that Muslims should not surrender their reasoning to religious leaders merely because of cultural reverence. Therefore, his concept of freedom of thought is not rebellion against scholarly authority, but an insistence that the community retain a critical faculty capable of evaluating who deserves to be followed. By framing freedom in this way, Misbah aligns independence of

thought with Islamic ethical duty rather than with individualistic autonomy.

Freedom of Thought as Social Responsibility

Viewed within its historical context, Misbah's emphasis on intellectual freedom responds directly to the socio-cultural constraints of his time. In the 1970s–1980s Javanese Muslim society, particularly within pesantren networks, the authority of the kiai was central, often unquestioned, and deeply embedded in ritual life, communal organization, and religious guidance (Gusmian 2016b). Moreover, the New Order state supported religious uniformity that strengthened institutional control and discouraged dissenting intellectual expressions. In this environment, questioning authority—whether *political* or religious—could be perceived as destabilizing social harmony. Thus, advocating freedom of thought was not merely a theological claim; it was a subtle challenge to an entire system of cultural obedience.

In commenting on QS. al-Baqarah 2:119, where he instructs Muslims to uphold truth even at the risk of offending scholars, wealthy patrons, or officials, Misbah articulates a social ethic of courage grounded in religious duty (Mustofa n.d.: 106). Truth, in this framework, becomes an *equalizing* force: it is superior to lineage, status, charisma, or state authority. Importantly, Misbah does not call the public to overthrow scholarly authority, but to become intellectually equipped so that obedience is based on reasoned trust, not inherited reverence. Freedom of thought thus emerges as a communal obligation whose goal is to prevent the monopoly of religious interpretation by elites who have not proven their scholarly or moral legitimacy.

Negotiating Reformism: Misbah, Abduh, and Natsir

When placed in conversation with reformist thinkers, Misbah's position occupies an intermediary role between classical loyalty and modernist emancipation. Like Muhammad Abduh, he views excessive submission to religious authority as a source of intellectual stagnation, a root cause of Muslim decline (Rahman 1982). In harmony with M. Natsir, he argues that public reasoning must be encouraged so that Islamic teachings can be reclaimed by the community rather than monopolized by institution (Natsir 1954). Yet Misbah diverges from these reformists in method and emphasis: he does not advocate abolishing taqlīd, nor does he promote unrestricted ijthād. Instead, he reconstructs taqlīd as a disciplined practice anchored in the ethics and epistemic rigor of the classical mujtahid, not in contemporary charisma.

Yet this negotiated stance invites critique. By grounding valid taqlīd solely in classical mujtahid authority, Misbah risks reinforcing a hierarchy that keeps contemporary scholars epistemically subordinate. This raises a question: does his call for intellectual freedom empower present communities, or simply anchor legitimacy in the past? His tafsīr encourages public reasoning but still restricts the emergence of new scholarly authority in pesantren, suggesting that safeguarding epistemic credibility may conflict with democratizing intellectual authority.

Hermeneutical Implications

Within Gadamer's framework, Misbah's campaign for freedom of thought is a form of fusion of horizons, where the Qur'anic encouragement of reasoning intersects with the cultural context of charismatic authority. His pre-understanding of taqlīd, shaped by classical fiqh tradition and the pesantren's social landscape, guides his reading of verses on leadership, obedience, and truth. Rather than merely reproducing exegesis, he

reactivates the Qur'anic message, reinterpreting it to confront local structures of *dominance*. Misbah's tafsīr thereby functions as social intervention, connecting classical epistemology to modern ethical responsibility. In Gadamer's words, interpretation becomes an event in which both text and interpreter are transformed through dialogue (Gadamer 1975).

Thus, *Al-Iklīl* presents a distinctive contribution to Indonesian Qur'anic studies: rooted in tradition yet oriented toward intellectual emancipation. Misbah protects the authority of the mujtahid, while also seeking to liberate public *reasoning* from those who merely claim authority without embodying its requirements. His campaign for freedom of thought reveals that he saw tafsīr as a pedagogical act—an effort to build a critically capable Muslim community, not a passive audience of inherited religious discourse. In this way, *Al-Iklīl* becomes a defense of tradition against misuse, and simultaneously, a resistance to intellectual uniformity within the archipelago's pesantren culture.

Hermeneutical Position of Misbah in Indonesian Tafsir

Within the landscape of Indonesian Qur'anic exegesis, KH. Misbah Mustofa's *Al-Iklīl* occupies a distinctive hermeneutical position. Indonesian tafsir, as *affirmed* by Islah Gusmian, is never produced in a vacuum but emerges from the dialectic between the Qur'an and the socio-cultural realities of Muslim communities, resulting in a uniquely Indonesian expression of scriptural reasoning (Gusmian 2016b). Misbah's tafsīr reflects this paradigm clearly: although rooted in pesantren tradition, it does not merely preserve inherited teachings but actively critiques contemporary religious authority. In this sense, his tafsīr does not operate as an apologetic defense of tradition, but instead transforms tafsīr into a medium of

intervention against those who manipulate religious authority in practical life (Gusmian & Abdullah 2023).

A key hermeneutical foundation behind this interventionist style lies in Misbah's selective doctrine of legitimate taqlīd. Unlike modernist exegetes who reject taqlīd altogether, Misbah considers taqlīd not only permissible but sometimes necessary, provided it is directed solely toward genuine mujtahid imams—figures who possess both deep scholarship and spiritual integrity (Mustofa 1990). Conversely, he rejects taqlīd toward contemporary scholars whose knowledge is shallow, compromised by popularity, or driven by worldly interests. This principle underlies his frontal criticisms of religious elites who normalize practices such as the use of loudspeakers in prayer or the commercialization of the Qur'an through MTQ competitions, which he attributes to the irresponsibility of “scholars and Muslim leaders”. Yet, this stance also invites critical reflection: by restricting legitimate authority almost exclusively to classical mujtahids, Misbah risks reinforcing a new hierarchical boundary that limits contemporary ijtihād, potentially replacing one uncritical submission with another.

Misbah's method becomes clearer when read through Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons, which emphasizes that interpretation occurs through an encounter between the historical horizon of the text and the interpreter's context (Gadamer 1975). In the pesantren environment of 1970s–1980s Java, characterized by strong charismatic leadership, communal dependence on kiai authority, and increasing public religiosity shaped by state policy and mass ritual practices—Misbah perceived that religious *authority* was becoming commodified, politicized, and intellectually unaccountable. His tafsīr therefore reactivates Qur'anic verses to confront real social conditions rather than

addressing them abstractly. He does not merely explain the text; he uses it to criticize the cult of scholars, the legitimization of MTQ, and the technological spectacle of worship. Thus, in Misbah, tafsīr becomes both explanation and social intervention, a way to unmask the misuse of religious legitimacy (Gusman and Abdullah 2023).

The uniqueness of Misbah's position becomes sharper when compared with other Indonesian exegetes. Nawawi al-Bantani's *Marāh Labīd*, though authored by an Indonesian, reflects a Middle Eastern scholarly orientation and does *not* engage the socio-religious conditions of Java-Banten in the 19th century, focusing instead on linguistic exposition and classical jurisprudence. Quraish Shihab's *Al-Mishbah*, while offering highly relevant moral and universal insights for contemporary readers, avoids sharp critique of local religious actors or institutional practices, preferring persuasive ethical discourse. Conversely, Hamka's *Tafsīr al-Azhar* adopts a modernist stance that rejects taqlīd outright; Hamka argues that taqlīd is the root of intellectual stagnation and that Muslims must return directly to the Qur'an and Sunnah, unrestricted by *madhhab* loyalty (Hamka 1988). Misbah stands apart from these three. He does not merely preserve tradition like Nawawi, nor universalize ethics like Quraish Shihab, nor dismantle taqlīd like Hamka. He defends taqlīd yet weaponizes it as a critical tool against contemporary scholars who misuse religious authority.

Misbah's stance can be understood as critical traditionalism: he upholds the classical epistemology of the *pesantren* while using it to resist contemporary abuses of religious authority. *Al-Iklīl* demonstrates that tradition is not merely inherited but can be mobilized to challenge commodified piety, populist manipulation, and the *monopolization* of interpretation by

charismatic figures. In his hands, taqlīd is not passive obedience but a criterion of accountability that protects the integrity of religious reasoning.

Viewed through a hermeneutical lens, particularly Gadamer's notion of pre-understanding, Misbah shows that tradition can enable critique rather than restrict it. His epistemic loyalty provides a normative horizon from which current practices are evaluated and false authority is confronted. Thus, *Al-Iklīl* breaks free from the binary of "traditionalist" versus "modernist" tafsīr, illustrating how fidelity to *madhhab* authority can coexist with sharp criticism of unqualified interpreters. Tradition, for Misbah, becomes a tool of resistance that safeguards scriptural integrity within the Muslim community rather than a mechanism of mere preservation.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that Misbah Mustofa's hermeneutical stance in *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* is influenced by a selective pre-understanding of *taqlīd*, wherein obedience is deemed valid solely towards authoritative *mujtahid imams*, while *uncritical* adherence to modern scholars is to be dismissed; through this framework, he integrates the Qur'anic text with the socio-religious contexts of Java during the 1970s and 1980s, employing classical authority not only to *uphold* tradition but also to critique prevalent religious authority, which encompasses commodified Qur'an recitation, loudspeaker worship practices, and the veneration of the *kiai*. Consequently, the study addresses its research question by demonstrating that Misbah's tafsir functions as an interpretive intervention that activates Qur'anic meaning to safeguard epistemic integrity and foster intellectual freedom within the *pesantren* environment. Theoretically, this research contributes to Indonesian hermeneutical *tafsir* by demonstrating how

Gadamer's fusion of horizons can produce a model of Nusantara interpretation that is simultaneously traditional and counter-traditional, where classical Sunni jurisprudence becomes a method of critique rather than passive transmission. Practically, the study shows that critical tafsir can renew religious authority by encouraging Muslims to engage tradition with informed reasoning rather than charismatic obedience, thus offering a relevant paradigm for pesantren education. Nevertheless, Misbah's approach presents potential tensions, as his reliance on authoritative *mujtahids* may reintroduce hierarchy in new forms, and his confrontational tone risks generating social friction; these issues indicate the need for further research—particularly ethnographic inquiry—into how his *tafsir* is received and practiced in contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia.

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