A Critical Epistemological Review of The Liberal Islamic Network's Interpretation of The Qur'an

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Abstract

This article examines the cognitive and epistemological framework of the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL) in interpreting the Qur'an through a critical lens. The study explores how liberal Muslim thinkers employ rationalism, hermeneutics, and Western philosophical approaches to reinterpret sacred Islamic texts, often challenging traditional exegetical authorities. By focusing on three main pillars of liberal Islamic discourse religious pluralism, freedom of belief, and the separation of religion from politics this paper highlights the theological and sociopolitical implications of their views. Classical Islamic perspectives from Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr), hadith, and scholarly consensus are brought into comparison to reveal inconsistencies and epistemological gaps in the liberal approach. The paper concludes that liberal interpretations, though claiming to align with modern values and human rights, often neglect the necessary methodological discipline and foundational sciences of tafsīr. This poses a significant risk of misguidance and distortion in Islamic understanding, particularly among contemporary Muslim societies.

Key Words: Liberal, Islam, Qur'anic, Hermeneutics, Pluralism

Cite This Article:

Introduction

Mohammad Ariffin (2006) asserts that the roots of Liberal Islam can be traced to a longstanding intellectual trajectory shaped by various reformist impulses. Foundational texts such as Liberal Islam: A Source Book by Charles Kurzman and Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies by Leonard Binder, both published in 1988, serve as pivotal references for understanding the evolution of this ideology. The emergence of liberalization within Islamic thought is often linked to the forces of Islamic modernization and secularization, which sought to realign traditional religious authority with contemporary sociopolitical realities. The

establishment of the Liberal Islamic Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal, JIL) in 2001 marked a formal consolidation of liberal Islamic ideas in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia.

Drawing inspiration from reformist thinkers of the 1970s such as Nurcholish Madjid, Harun Nasution, and Mukti Ali, the movement embraced rationalism, religious pluralism, and critical reinterpretation of scriptural texts. These figures frequently synthesized Islamic teachings with Western philosophical frameworks in their attempt to reconcile religion with the demands of modernity. The broader liberalism movement in the West originated during the Reformation era, aiming to reduce ecclesiastical authority, limit monarchical power, safeguard private ownership, and uphold fundamental human rights. This intellectual legacy continues to influence contemporary liberal Islamic discourse across religious, political, economic, and cultural spheres.

According to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2010), individuals or groups with liberal-minded views are classified under the term "liberalism" from a linguistic standpoint. The word "liberalism" originates from the English language and conveys the notion of freedom. As noted by Siti Wahidah Mustapa and Muhd Najib Abdul Kadir (2020), the liberalism movement has significantly influenced the religious domain, mirroring the impact of the English Reformation. This historical movement aimed to dismantle the authority of religious institutions, particularly papacy, and to abolish clerical taxation imposed by the church. Consequently, the core objective of liberalist organizations is to weaken or eliminate the control of religious structures, including ecclesiastical institutions and monarchies that govern under the banner of divine authority.

This movement may be broadly categorized into two main groups: liberal Muslims and liberal non-Muslims. In the Malaysian context, the influence of the liberal Muslim group can be traced to its historical connection with Islamic modernism, particularly during the pre- and post-independence period. This movement was significantly shaped by the intellectual legacy of Middle Eastern reformists such as Jamaluddin al-Afghāni, Muḥammad ʿAbduh, and Rashīd Riḍā. Their ideas were further disseminated through influential local figures including Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin, Sheikh Muhammad Salim al-Kalali, and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, who played pivotal roles in adapting modernist thought within the Malay-Muslim intellectual tradition. These reformist thinkers adopted elements of Western philosophical frameworks to harmonize Islamic teachings with modern values, aiming to facilitate progress and societal reform. In the contemporary Malaysian context, figures such as Syed Akbar Ali, Zainah Anwar, and Astora Jabat have emerged as prominent advocates of liberal Islamic thought, continuing to promote reinterpretations of Islam through the lenses of modernity, human rights, and rational inquiry (Kamal Azmi Abd Rahman 2017).

Liberal Muslims generally do not overtly reject religion; instead, they engage in a process of re-evaluating and reinterpreting religious texts, particularly the Qur'an, based on logic, personal reasoning, and contemporary values. This includes a critical reassessment of the authenticity and applicability of the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths. In matters of law, adherents of this approach often advocate for the modification or reformulation of existing legal rulings to suit evolving societal norms and personal liberties. A prominent example is Amina Wadud,

a leading figure in the global progressive Islam movement, known for her unconventional positions on gender roles in religious practice. In Malaysia, the Sisters in Islam (SIS) organization represents a local manifestation of this progressive current. As described by Indriaty Ismail and Ahmad Muhyuddin Hassan (2021), SIS functions as a feminist movement that actively champions women's rights and frequently engages in public discourse on religious reform. Despite facing considerable controversy, SIS continues to defend its positions by framing them within the broader discourse of human rights and universal values, interpreted through a religious framework. This method of interpretation closely aligns with the core tendencies of liberal Islamic thought.

Liberal Muslim thinkers often reject interpretations they perceive as outdated, obsolete, or incompatible with modern sensibilities, including certain hadiths narrated by the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and classical scholars. From their perspective, religion must be adapted to contemporary realities to elevate human life in alignment with the ideals of modernity. This inclination may lead to the rejection or reinterpretation of long-established legal and moral injunctions found in both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. A fundamental issue with this approach is its tendency to selectively uphold or discard religious texts based on conformity with modern values, liberal ideologies, or human rights discourse. As noted by Siti Wahidah Mustapa and Muhd Najib Abdul Kadir (2020), such a stance often undermines the integrity of Islamic legal tradition by placing subjective human preferences above divine guidance.

This discourse surrounding the cognitive framework of liberal Islamic networks in relation to the Qur'an and hadith has sparked scholarly interest in understanding their underlying thought processes. Consequently, this study is driven by the aim to examine in depth the rationale and methodology employed by liberal Muslim thinkers in formulating novel interpretations of Shariah law. Focus is placed on how they justify reinterpretation of authoritative texts and the epistemological assumptions that underline such approaches, especially considering their claims to modern relevance and humanistic values.

Intellectual Foundations of the Liberal Islamic Network's Interpretive Framework

Mohammad Ariffin (2006) outlines several defining characteristics of liberal Islamic thought. These include a commitment to rationalism and secularism, rejection of the traditional implementation of Shariah, endorsement of religious pluralism, resistance to established religious authority, and the exercise of interpretive freedom regarding the Qur'an and hadith. Furthermore, liberal Islamic discourse tends to promote Western values and advocates for the liberation and empowerment of women. Such ideas are prominently reflected in the narratives of individuals associated with the progressive Islam movement.

However, this study focuses specifically on the Liberal Islamic Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal) in Indonesia and aims to analyze three central components of its ideological framework: the promotion of religious pluralism, the defense of freedom of religion and belief, and the call for the separation of religion from political governance.

i.   The Promotion of Religious Pluralism in Liberal Islamic Discourse

According to Ahmad Mohamad (2021), the term "religious pluralism" is derived from the words "pluralism" and "religion." In Arabic, it is referred to as *al-taʿaddudiyyah al-dīniyyah*. From a historical standpoint, the idea of religious pluralism has existed for a significant period, often arising in response to interreligious conflicts. In contemporary times, it has re-emerged as a central theme in religious and cultural discourse.

As noted by the Fatwa of the Indonesian Ulema Council (2005), religious pluralism asserts that all religions are equal, and that truth is subjective to each faith. Accordingly, no religion has the right to claim that others are false, as every adherent is believed to ultimately attain salvation. This view is heavily supported by liberal Muslim thinkers, who often employ rational reasoning to reinterpret verses from the Qur'an and hadith to support such inclusivity. The same fatwa, however, explicitly states that pluralism, secularism, and liberalism are ideological constructs that fundamentally oppose the tenets of Islam. Islam, by nature, is exclusive in the domain of belief and worship, disallowing the fusion or syncretism of religious creeds and practices.

Based on these definitions and critiques, the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL) seeks to promote the idea that all religions possess equal validity. However, this perspective contradicts established Islamic doctrine, particularly the Qur'anic affirmation that Islam is the only religion acceptable before Allah. This is underscored in the verse:

وَمَن يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ ٱلْإِسْلَٰمِ دِينًا فَلَن يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي ٱلْآخِرَةِ مِنَ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ٨٥

Meaning: And whoever desires other than Islam as religion - never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers (Al-Quran, Al-Imrān 3: 85).

According to scholars such as Ibn Kathīr (2003), M. Quraish Shihab (2009), and Wahbah al-Zuḥailī (2013), the verse from Surah Āli ʿImrān (3:85) refers to individuals or communities who deviate from the divine law ordained by Allah. As a result, all their actions, religious deeds, and acts of worship are rendered invalid and will not be accepted by Him. The verse concludes by declaring that such individuals will be counted among the losers in the Hereafter, signifying not only their spiritual ruin in the life to come but also the futility of their efforts in this worldly existence. This warning is further reinforced by a hadith that explicitly

condemns innovations in religious matters, stating that any practice not grounded in the original teachings of Islam will be rejected and deemed inadmissible.

According to scholars such as Ibn Kathīr (2003), M. Quraish Shihab (2009), and Wahbah al-Zuḥailī (2013), the verse from Surah Āli ʿImrān (3:85) refers to individuals or communities who choose a path that deviates from the divine law prescribed by Allah. Consequently, all their actions, including religious observances and worship, are deemed void and will not be accepted by Him. The verse concludes with a strong warning that such individuals will be counted among the losers in the Hereafter. This indicates that their deviation results not only in spiritual loss in the next life but also in a lack of divine acceptance in this world, underscoring the exclusive truth claim upheld within Islamic theology.

ii.   Religious Freedom and Its Misinterpretation in Liberal Thought

The concept of religious freedom in Islam is commonly associated with the Charter of Medina, established by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as noted by Ain Balkis Mohd Azam et al. (2023). According to the Dictionary of Law (2006), religious freedom refers to an individual's right to choose, profess, and practice a particular religion without fear of coercion or persecution. It includes the liberty to perform acts of worship, engage in teaching and propagation, and express religious identity openly.

In Islamic teachings, however, religious freedom is not absolute; it is governed by specific conditions that differ for Muslims and non-Muslims (Siti Aisyah Samudin & Aisyah Mohd Chabidi, 2023). For non-Muslims, Islam recognizes the right to practice and promote their respective faiths without intimidation or harm, based on the principle of non-coercion. For Muslims, however, religious freedom does not extend to renouncing Islam or rejecting fundamental obligations such as prayer or the wearing of hijab. Misunderstandings arise when liberal interpretations ignore these distinctions and promote an unrestricted concept of freedom, one that contradicts the normative Islamic framework.

The Qur'anic discourse on religious freedom, particularly Surah al-Baqarah verse 256, is often cited by liberal groups to support absolute freedom of belief. However, such interpretations often overlook the exegetical context and conditions outlined by classical scholars, leading to misapplications of the verse in liberal discourse.

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي ٱلدِّينِ قَد تَّبَيَّنَ ٱلرُّشْدُ مِنَ ٱلْغَيِّ فَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِٱلطَّٰغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدِ ٱسْتَمْسَكَ بِٱلْعُرْوَةِ ٱلْوُثْقَىٰ لَا ٱنفِصَامَ لَهَا ۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ٢٥٦

Meaning: There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing (Al-Quran, Al-Baqarah 2: 256).

According to al-Wāḥidī (1994) and al-Aṣfahānī (1999), Surah al-Baqarah verse 256 prohibits the coercion of individuals to embrace Islam, as the truth and evidence of Islam's authenticity have already been clearly presented. If a person is rightly guided, they will accept Islam sincerely and voluntarily. However, for those who are not receptive to guidance, compulsion yields no benefit, as faith requires conviction, not force. This verse also affirms that true believers detach themselves from idolatry and satanic influences, instead adhering firmly to the path of righteousness and divine truth.

Liberal thinkers, however, often interpret this verse as allowing unrestricted freedom to embrace or leave Islam at will. Such a reading undermines the sanctity and consistency of Islamic principles by portraying the religion as flexible to personal preference. For instance, liberal advocates argue that individuals may convert to or abandon Islam without consequence or restriction. While the Islamic framework acknowledges the autonomy of non-Muslims in practicing their respective religions, it does not endorse such freedom for Muslims in core matters of faith and law.

The Charter of Medina, established by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), did not compel non-Muslims to convert to Islam. Instead, it guaranteed the freedom of religious practice for non-Muslim communities, particularly the Jews, within the boundaries of the Islamic polity. Clause 25 of the Charter states:

> "The Banu 'Awf Jews are a community consisting of individuals who have faith. The Jews practice Judaism as their religion, while the Muslims practice Islam as their religion. This freedom applies to both their allies and them, except those who act unjustly and commit wrongdoing.

The concept of freedom discussed in this context refers specifically to the protection of non-Muslim communities from coercion, intimidation, or harm in practicing their respective religions. However, liberal interpretations often extend this principle beyond its intended scope, suggesting that Muslims themselves are not bound to adhere to Islamic obligations. Such claims include the notion that Muslims are not required to observe the hijab, perform daily prayers, or maintain their Islamic faith, including the freedom to convert to or abandon Islam. This misreading has led to significant theological confusion and poses a threat to the integrity of Islamic belief. In practice, many Muslims influenced by liberal ideologies have advocated for the normalization and legalization of actions that are explicitly prohibited in Islamic law, including owning dogs without necessity, the intentional consumption of pork and alcohol, and participating in religious celebrations of non-Muslim communities. These trends reflect a growing divergence from traditional Islamic principles, driven by a liberal worldview that prioritizes personal autonomy over established religious norms.

iii.   Secular Autonomy and the Liberal Separation of Religion from Politics

Liberalism in politics emphasizes the importance of human rights as fundamental entitlements that should be granted to every individual. These rights include freedom of expression, freedom of worship, equal treatment under the law, and the right to participate in political processes. Such freedoms, upheld within the liberal tradition, are considered essential for personal development and are pursued actively through political and legal advocacy. Human beings are thus encouraged to think independently and to form judgments based on logical and contextual considerations, especially on matters concerning divinity, human nature, and the structure of the universe. This freedom enables individuals to determine their own moral and existential truths.

Within this framework, liberal political philosophy establishes a clear distinction between secular and divine authority, as well as between religious and political domains. Each is permitted to function autonomously to achieve separate and specific objectives. The central premise is that every individual is entitled to freedom of thought, expression, and fair participation in civil discourse and governance (Wan Kamal & Zaizul, 2018). This model demonstrates that humans are not inherently bound to any single belief system or traditional authority. Rather, individuals are perceived as free agents who can assess political, cultural, educational, economic, and religious structures based on personal reasoning. Liberalism, in this context, calls for emancipation from the constraints of traditional religious teachings, which are often considered outdated or no longer relevant. Political liberalism, therefore, supports the limitation of religious influence in state affairs, seeking instead to protect the autonomy of the individual. To prevent the abuse of power and ensure the safeguarding of civil rights, this model advocates for a structured separation of powers and the clear division between religious authority and political governance.

Furthermore, proponents of liberalism encourage individuals to reinterpret, analyze, or reject Sharīʿah evidence that conflicts with Western philosophical paradigms. This is based on the notion that ultimate truth cannot be claimed exclusively by any institution, especially religious ones. In this view, moral values are not absolute; rather, they are relative and contingent upon individual perception, shaped by sociocultural contexts. The determination of what is right or wrong is, therefore, not grounded in divine command or state authority but depends entirely on personal and societal judgment. As such, the permissibility or prohibition of any action, including punishment, is not inherently moral or immoral; it is simply a matter of subjective evaluation.

This line of reasoning reflects the cognitive approach of liberal groups, which deviates from the prescriptive moral framework found in the Qur'an. Their reasoning is characterized by autonomous thinking and behavior shaped by individual judgment. Notably, when such liberals advocate for fairness and justice towards other communities but encounter criticism themselves, they often respond with strong opposition, especially towards religious or governmental authority that challenges their stance. As noted by the Pejabat Mufti Wilayah

Persekutuan (2019), one of the essential traits required in a leader—particularly one responsible for public guidance—is wisdom and sound understanding. Allah SWT said:

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا لَمَّا صَبَرُواْ ۖ وَكَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ ٢٤

> Meaning: And We made from among them leaders guiding by Our command when they were patient and [when] they were certain of Our signs (al-Quran, al-Sajdah 32: 24).

Ibn Kathīr (1999) states that if a person appointed as a leader demonstrates patience in fulfilling God's commands and avoiding His prohibitions, upholds the mission of His Messengers, and adheres to the message they were entrusted with, such a person will undoubtedly emerge as a righteous leader. These leaders will guide their communities based on divine revelation, enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong in accordance with the Qur'anic principles of justice and morality.

As a result, liberalism challenges the authority traditionally granted to religious scholars such as muftis in the exercise of ijtihād, advocating instead for individual freedom to engage in independent reasoning on religious matters. Liberal thinkers often contend that the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad are contextually bound to seventh-century Arabian society and therefore should not be applied in the present era. Within this framework, Sharīʿah is viewed not as a fixed and universal system but as a set of guidelines that must prioritize freedom and human needs, allowing for flexible application depending on societal circumstances. Consequently, they argue that Islamic law should not contravene human rights. In contrast, classical Islamic teachings maintain that if a ruler upholds Allah's commands, obedience from the citizens is obligatory.

Such perspectives illustrate a profound divergence between liberal and traditional epistemologies. Liberalism elevates human autonomy as the ultimate measure of moral and legal validity, whereas Islam grounds legitimacy in divine command and prophetic tradition. This divergence creates tension in discourses surrounding governance, particularly in Muslim-majority societies that uphold Sharīʿah as a source of legal and moral authority. The liberal emphasis on personal freedom often sidelines the communal and transcendental aspects of Islamic law, weakening its capacity to function as a comprehensive system that regulates both individual conduct and societal order.

Moreover, the rejection of hadith and the reinterpretation of Qur'anic injunctions without reference to classical interpretive methodologies reflect an epistemological shift away from naqlī (transmitted) knowledge towards ʿaqlī (rationalist) frameworks. While Islamic scholarship traditionally emphasizes the integration of both rational and transmitted sources, liberal interpretations frequently marginalize the authoritative role of ijmāʿ, qiyās, and other usūl al-fiqh tools. This not only disrupts the coherence of Islamic legal theory but also leads to fragmented understandings of religion that prioritize subjectivity over scholarly consensus. The

long-term consequence is a form of theological relativism that may erode the sanctity and unity of Islamic law across the umma

Conclusion

The study critically examined the epistemological and cognitive framework of the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL) in interpreting the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. It revealed that the liberal movement operates on a foundation of rationalism and individualism, often detached from the established disciplines of Islamic jurisprudence and exegesis. By prioritizing personal reasoning over transmitted knowledge (naqlī), liberal thinkers reinterpret core religious texts based on contemporary socio-political ideals, particularly those related to pluralism, freedom of belief, and the separation of religion from politics.

Through this analysis, it becomes evident that liberal Islamic discourse promotes a form of religious pluralism that contradicts the exclusivist theology upheld in Islamic orthodoxy. The claim that all religions are equally valid undermines the Qur'anic declaration of Islam as the only accepted path with Allah, as seen in Surah Āli ʿImrān (3:85). Similarly, liberal interpretations of religious freedom neglect the structured and conditional nature of freedom in Islam, especially the differentiation between rights granted to Muslims and non-Muslims. The Charter of Medina offers a model of coexistence without compromising Islamic identity and theological integrity, a balance often overlooked in liberal reinterpretations.

Moreover, the liberal proposition to separate religion from politics challenges the Islamic conception of governance rooted in divine guidance. While liberalism upholds individual freedom and secular autonomy, Islamic governance is founded on moral leadership, collective welfare, and obedience to divine injunctions. The rejection of the prophetic hadith and the disqualification of classical methods of ijtihād present a serious disruption to the integrity of Islamic law. By dismissing the principles of ijmāʿ, qiyās, and maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, liberalism fails to provide a coherent alternative legal framework grounded in the Islamic tradition.

This epistemological conflict has far-reaching consequences. The rise of theological relativism fueled by hermeneutic and rationalist reinterpretations, risks fragmenting the unity of Islamic legal discourse and weakening the spiritual resilience of Muslim societies. Without the methodological discipline required for valid tafsīr, liberal approaches often drift into subjective interpretations that can mislead believers and distort the religion's original message. This not only destabilizes the religious fabric of the ummah but also threatens the moral compass of Islamic civilization in the face of modern ideological currents.

In conclusion, while the liberal Islamic network seeks to modernize Islamic understanding considering contemporary realities, its approach raises fundamental challenges to the preservation of religious authenticity. The reinterpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah must remain grounded in scholarly rigor, epistemic humility, and reverence for divine revelation. True reform in Islam does not require the abandonment of its intellectual legacy but rather a

thoughtful engagement that bridges reason and revelation without compromising the sacred trust of divine guidance. Moving forward, it is essential for Muslim scholars and institutions to critically engage with liberal discourses while reaffirming the methodological integrity of the Islamic tradition.

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