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Enhancing Muslim Studies of Other Religions Through Digital Technologies

Integrasi Teknologi Digital dalam Kajian Muslim Terhadap Agama-Agama Lain

Haslina Ibrahim*, Aemy Elyani Mat Zain**, Safinah Ismail***, Nazneen Ismail****, Nur Aisyah Abu Hassan*****, Fatin Farzana Dass Meral*****

Abstract

Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed contemporary lifestyles and have significantly impacted both formal and informal learning. The study of religions, without exception, must leverage digital technologies to enhance its societal roles and impact. This paper therefore explores the possibility of adopting an innovative approach in Muslim scholarship on religions by introducing the use of digital applications in the study of other religions, a vital sub-discipline of *Usuluddin*. Additionally, the paper examines how digital technologies can foster a more inclusive approach to understanding diverse religious perspectives thereby promoting positive inter-religious dialogue and

* **Haslina Ibrahim** Ph.D. Associate Professor at the Dept. of *Usul al-Din* and Comparative Religion, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: haslina@iium.edu.my

** **Aemy Elyani Mat Zain** (Corresponding Author), Ph. D. Lecturer, at the Dept. of Dakwah and Usuluddin, Faculty of Islamic Civilization Studies, Selangor Islamic University (UIS) 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: aemyelyani@uis.edu.my

*** **Safinah Ismail**, Ph. D. Lecturer, at the Dept. of Dakwah and Usuluddin, Faculty of Islamic Civilization Studies, Selangor Islamic University (UIS) 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: safinah@uis.edu.my

**** **Nazneen Ismail**, Ph. D. Lecturer, at the Dept. of Dakwah and Usuluddin, Faculty of Islamic Civilization Studies, Selangor Islamic University (UIS) 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: nazneen@uis.edu.my

***** **Nur Aisyah Abu Hassan**, Lecturer, at the Dept. of Civilization and Human Development Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Selangor Islamic University (UIS) 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: nuraisyah@uis.edu.my

***** **Fatin Farzana Dass Meral**, Research Assistant, Student M.A., at the Dept. of Dakwah and Usuluddin, Faculty of Islamic Civilization Studies, Selangor Islamic University (UIS) 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: 24mt09002@postgrad.uis.edu.my

meaningful engagement. Through qualitative interviews with experts in religious studies, this paper presents their insights and recommendations on the conceptualisation of the digital application. Based on these findings, the paper argues for a symbiotic relationship between the traditional approaches and digital technologies. This integration is essential not only to maintain the relevance of Muslim studies on other religions in the digital age but also to advocate for interreligious understanding, which is instrumental in achieving social harmony.

Keywords: Muslim Studies of Other Religions, Integration of *Usuluddin* and Digital Technologies, Digital Application, Interreligious Understanding, Social Inclusion.

Abstrak

Teknologi digital telah mengubah gaya hidup kontemporer dan memberikan dampak yang signifikan terhadap pembelajaran formal dan tidak formal. Tidak terkecuali, kajian terhadap agama-agama juga perlu memanfaatkan teknologi digital untuk meningkatkan peranan dan kesannya terhadap masyarakat. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk meneroka kemungkinan melaksanakan inovasi dalam kajian Muslim terhadap agama-agama lain, yang merupakan subdisiplin kepada bidang *Usuluddin*, melalui pengaplikasian teknologi digital dalam kajian tersebut. Selain itu, artikel ini juga bertujuan menganalisis samada digital teknologi dapat membina pendekatan yang inklusif terhadap agama-agama lain, seterusnya merangsang aktiviti dialog antara agama yang positif dan libatsama antara agama yang lebih bermakna. Artikel ini turut membentangkan pandangan dan saranan yang diperolehi melalui kaedah temubual dengan beberapa orang pakar mengenai konseptualisasi aplikasi digital dalam kajian Muslim terhadap agama-agama lain. Berdasarkan data tersebut, artikel ini menegaskan perlunya simbiosis antara pendekatan tradisional dan teknologi digital dalam kajian Muslim terhadap agama-agama lain. Integrasi ini sangat penting bukan sahaja untuk membuktikan bahawa kajian Muslim terhadap agama-agama lain masih relevan dalam dunia digital hari ini, tetapi yang lebih utama adalah untuk memperjuangkan pemahaman antara agama

yang merupakan instrumen penting dalam mencapai keharmonian sosial.

Kata Kunci: Kajian Muslim terhadap Agama-Agama Lain, Integrasi Usuludin dan Teknologi Digital, Aplikasi Digital, Pemahaman Antara Agama, Keterangkuman Sosial.

Introduction

We have entered an era where digital technology is no longer considered a luxury. In today's context and the foreseeable future, digital technology has become and will continue to be integral to human life. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has further accelerated the dominance of technology in our daily lives. In education, countless applications have been introduced to help achieve learning outcomes. As a result, smartphones and tablets have become indispensable tools for formal and informal learning, often replacing textbooks and workbooks. Undoubtedly, digital technology enhances both guided and independent learning experiences.

Teaching and learning in this digital age require innovative approaches and orientations. The world today is vastly different and more complex than in the past. Technology has transformed the world into a global village, significantly influencing human values and lifestyles. Not only has it created a cyber world that fosters human dependency on virtual means to navigate the real world, but it has also exposed people to one another to such an extent that living in seclusion is nearly impossible.

In light of these developments, adopting a more pragmatic approach to Muslim studies of other religions is indispensable. Keeping pace with digital technology is therefore essential. While classical works on religions remain important, they are often limited to archival data that may no longer be relevant today. Thus, new research on religions must utilise the latest tools to ensure that studies are reliable and findings remain current. In the spirit of innovation, this paper explores the possibilities of introducing a digital-based application in Muslim studies

of other religions. Expert opinions in the field have been sought and will be thoroughly discussed in the following sections. Their insights are crucial for conceptualising the digital application, a fundamental step before its development.

Research Methods

This paper is based on the research titled *Needs Analysis and Implementation Guidelines for Digital Applications on Interreligious Tolerance in Malaysia*. The study employs an exploratory design approach, integrating both library research and fieldwork. Data were collected from various online and printed sources, including articles, books, reports, and websites, as well as through interviews with experts. Participants were selected using purposive non-probability sampling, and in-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions. The paper aims to present and analyse some of the findings from these interviews, which primarily involved Muslim academics and religious activists. Finally, the research data were analysed using thematic, comparative, and contextual analysis methods

Muslim Studies of Other Religions and Their Traditional Methods

Within the intellectual tradition of Islam, studies of religions were developed as a sub-discipline of *Usuluddin*. It evolved through the intellectual endeavours of Muslim theologians, who strived to prove the truth of Islam, to defend Islam against false accusations, to rectify the right teaching of Islam and to challenge the truth of other religions ¹. Learning *Usuluddin* and its sub-disciplines—ranging from epistemologies, logics, metaphysics, cosmology, eschatology, axiology, and studies of religions – becomes more challenging with the advent of digital-based learning. Nevertheless, *Usuluddin* has survived throughout human history thanks to the wisdom of its proponents.

Different methods and approaches were introduced by its champions. For example, while Ibn Hazm, al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Abu 'Isa Al-Warraq used dialectical approaches to Christianity and the

¹ Haslina Ibrahim, "In Defence of Religious Truth: The Crisis of Intellectual Veracity in the Study of Religion," in *Kalam And Its Relevance In Muslim Scholarship Of Religion: An Integrated Approach*, ed. Haslina Ibrahim (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: IIUM Press, 2023).

Bible. Shahrastani is known for his descriptive and encyclopaedic treatments of religions ². Al-Biruni's discourse however stands out as he adopted an empirical and phenomenological approach in studying Brahminism. Other important approaches, such as the historical methods, were employed by historians like Al-Mas'udi, Al-Tabari and Al-Ya'qubi. At the brink of the 20th century, Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi revived the discourse with his notable work, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas*, sparking new interest among contemporary Muslim scholars in the studies of religions ³.

Despite the growing interest, there have been dilemmas regarding the choice of appropriate approaches and methodologies. Modern Orientalists, such as Jacques Waardenburg, have been critical of Muslim scholars' work in the study of religions. Waardenburg regarded Muslim theologians' work as biased and prejudicial toward religions other than Islam. Specifically, he doubted whether Islamic theology, or more precisely *Usuluddin*, could adopt a neutral and objective study of religions.⁴ Waardenburg's lack of appreciation for *Usuluddin* is understandable given his secular orientation in modern study of religions. The secular trend began with Friedrich Max Müller, who introduced Comparative Religion, followed by other schools that adopted reductionist approaches to the study of religions.⁵

The situation is different in the Muslim scholarship of religions. The study has its roots in *Usuluddin* and thrived under the *Kalam* discourse. Even Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi who is often cited as a modernist Muslim scholar, showed some influence of theological approaches, despite his criticism of the theological methods for the allegedly inherent prejudice against other religions. When he introduced 'meta-religion principles' in his studies of Christianity, he emphasised that they are universal principles of judgment that are necessary and needed in the

² Bruce B. Lawrence and Muḥammad ibn Abd al-Karim Shahrastānī, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, Religion and Society ; 4 (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

³ Isma'il Ragi Al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas* (Montreal, Canada: McGill University Press, 1967).

⁴ Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵ Ibrahim, "In Defence of Religious Truth: The Crisis of Intellectual Veracity in the Study of Religion."

studies of religions. He argued that modern approaches have misguided the discipline by claiming that judgments are unnecessary for objectivity's sake.⁶

While al-Faruqi agreed that suspension of judgment is necessary when gathering data on religions, he emphasised that the suspension should be temporary. Al-Faruqi developed meta-religion principles as guidelines for judgment, so researchers can conclude their studies on religions. He argued that religious facts are not static like those in natural science. Religious facts are dynamic, consisting of meanings and values that must be lived to be fully appreciated. That is why making judgments is essential to understand and live by the meanings embedded in religious facts ⁷.

Despite the differences in objectives, methods, and approaches between the traditional Muslim methods and Western secular methods, studies of other religions continue to be taught and learned according to their distinctive methodologies. Within the Muslim scholarship, studies of other religions fall under theological studies, while in the West, it has established itself as an independent discipline known as religious studies. This disparity highlights the gap between the two areas of scholarship and influences the development of the digital application, which is the central focus of this article. We anticipate that developing the digital application within the framework of Muslim scholarship is more complex than under modern scholarship. This is because the former is normatively oriented, while the latter is non-normatively oriented. The former scholarship is more concerned with questions of religious truth compared to the latter. The challenge lies in determining to what extent the digital application can reconcile educating the public—by raising awareness of other beliefs— without levelling all religions.

⁶ Al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas*.

⁷ Ismail Raji Al Faruqi, "Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 3, no. 1 (September 1, 1986): 13–57, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v3i1.2902>.

Digital Transformation and Muslim Studies of Other Religions

Studies of religions within the context of *Usuluddin* brings us to another central issue of this paper: integrating the study with innovative digital methodologies. Is this possible and feasible? Is there a need for such integration? Does *Usuluddin* possess the flexibility to adopt an inclusive approach to religion? Could digital transformation serve as the ideal starting point for *Usuluddin* to assume a more dynamic role in fostering interreligious understanding and relationship in today's context?

To answer these questions, several interviews were conducted with Muslim experts in the field. Five of them are senior academics in the study of religions, while another four are interreligious activists. We discovered that eight out of the nine respondents agreed that a digital application should be introduced. One respondent who is an interreligious activist declined the idea. He believed that there are other better means to inculcate the right values and behaviour when interacting with people from different religions, such as using animation series, short videos and comics. Three respondents commented that the digital application is more strategic because people today do not have the habit of reading. Another four respondents believe that studies of religions must keep abreast of technology, and we must capitalise on it to educate people about religions other than their own. Additionally, most of the respondents view that since everyone has a smartphone, it is a more practical way of educating the public rather than asking them to learn about other religions via formal means. One respondent claimed that young people are ignorant about the dos and don'ts in the different religions because they were not exposed to them in schools and universities. The respondents also commended that the digital application should promote the truth, beauty, and tolerance of Islam, while another respondent said the application should be able to measure one's level of tolerance.

To gain a broader perspective on the potential features, we asked the respondents to propose a suitable menu to be included in the digital application. Most respondents suggested incorporating quizzes and games that promote tolerance, with varying difficulty levels and explanations of the lessons at the end of each session. Two respondents

proposed using animation, believing it would be more engaging for users. Nearly all respondents agreed that the application should include short videos promoting positive values crucial for interreligious relations. Two respondents mentioned the potential for an interactive chat box, though one noted its effectiveness would depend on the administrator's prompt and accurate responses. One respondent emphasised that the application should be *Da'wah*-oriented and based on Qur'anic exegetical works.

However, none of the respondents mentioned the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the digital application despite its prominence today. In fact, AI's integration into educational digital applications can further enhance the learning experience by making it more personalised and engaging⁸. Rico C. Jacoba highlighted that AI's ability to bridge linguistic and cultural divides makes it a powerful enabler of cross-cultural communication and interreligious cooperation⁹. He emphasised that AI has the potential to foster interreligious harmony. It can promote collaboration among diverse faith groups by connecting them based on shared objectives and interests. Additionally, AI can ensure that religious texts and resources are accessible to everyone, including those with disabilities. Moreover, AI can be used to engage various faiths in ethical discussions about the responsible use of technology and the moral implications of AI's advancement within religious contexts¹⁰.

Additionally, the respondents generally concurred that the application should aim to educate the public rather than being confined to formal education or academic purposes alone. Though the idea is good, this broadens the scope and adds complexity to the digital application. Hence, the application will need to consider its potential users, their preferences, and the expected user experience. Nevertheless, based on the interviews, it can be concluded that the idea of introducing a digital application to educate people about other religions and promote tolerance has been well-received by the experts.

⁸ Alexandara Harry, "Role of AI in Education," *Interdisciplinary Journal and Hummanity (INJURITY)* 2, no. 3 (March 24, 2023): 260–68, <https://doi.org/10.58631/injury.v2i3.52>.

⁹ Rico C. Jacoba, "Exploring the Role of Artificial Intelligence in Interreligious Discourse," *Religion and Social Communication* 21, no. 2 (December 31, 2023): 375–400, <https://doi.org/10.62461/RCJ100323>.

¹⁰ Jacoba.

Improving Inter-Religious Understanding Through Digital Applications

Digital technologies are expected to dominate human lifestyles in the years to come. Increasingly, various digital applications are becoming available, offering a range of services including mapping, banking, education, taxation, and healthcare. While this may pose challenges for senior citizens and others who cannot afford smartphones or internet access, the use of digital technologies has become indispensable at this point. The use of technology in education not only improves students' adaptability but, most importantly, it provides support and empowers teachers ¹¹.

Digital technologies have expanded learning opportunities beyond conventional methods. Currently, many courses that do not require hands-on or technical experience offer certification and degree programs through digital platforms. Indeed, some individuals choose to engage with digital platforms either to utilise their leisure time productively or to deepen their understanding. In this context, developing a digital application to educate individuals about world religions should also be considered. Therefore, *Usuluddin*, and studies of religions as its sub-discipline, must also transcend the traditional classroom-based learning. Adopting pragmatic and practical approaches is essential to enhance the relevance and dynamism of *Usuluddin* and Muslim scholarship of religions in the contemporary era. As a matter of fact, *Usuluddin* provides the foundation and the framework for Muslims' scholarship of religions. On the contrary, the absence of theology in modern religious scholarship makes it susceptible to diverse approaches and methods that not only add to its complexities but also render it meaningless for people of faith.

Diana L. Eck, a Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University, has exemplified how studies of religions can

¹¹ Miguel A. Cardona, Roberto J. Rodríguez, and Kristina Ishmael, "Artificial Intelligence and Future of Teaching and Learning: Insights and Recommendations" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2023), <https://tech.ed.gov>.

transcend the traditional classroom setting.¹² In 1991, she initiated the Pluralism Project, which explores the American pluralistic society and promotes interreligious dialogue and engagement. In 1996, she launched the Pluralism Project website, which became a major tool for outreach and education. This website was named "Best of the Web" in the Spirituality category at the 7th Annual Webby Awards and remains active today. The Pluralism Project also produced various media, including films and documentaries, to facilitate engaged learning about religious diversity and interfaith relations. The project has also successfully published an award-winning CD-ROM titled, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*.¹³ Eck is determined to translate her philosophy of religious pluralism through Comparative Religion by promoting interreligious coexistence within America's secular and pluralistic society. Despite the novel methods and approaches, her philosophy of religious pluralism was highly debated by Muslim scholars. This is because she believes that studies of religion should avoid judging religious truth, as America is a melting pot. She wishes to do away with exclusivism, so it upholds the American national motto *e pluribus unum*: "out of many, one."¹⁴

Today, many faith-based communities utilise technology to access religious resources such as exegetical interpretations of religious texts, moral and spiritual guidance, doctrinal and legal advice. These communities also network with each other through digital technologies. The intersection of faith and digital innovation increases intra and interconnectivity among people of the same faith and those of different faiths, facilitating dialogue among them. Julian Bond, the former Director of the Christian Muslim Forum (2006 to 2015), is a proponent of online interfaith dialogue. He acknowledges the challenges ahead but believes

¹² D. L. Eck, "Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 4 (October 17, 2007): 743–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfm061>.

¹³ Diana L. Eck, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Diana L. Eck, "A New Religious America: Managing Religious Diversity in a Democracy: Challenges and Prospects for the 21st Century" (MAAS International Conference on Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies, Kuala Lumpur, 2002), <https://www.pcc.edu/illumination/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2018/05/article-a-new-religious-america..pdf>.

that if religious believers are willing to admit their own ignorance and engage positively, there is great potential for mutual understanding.¹⁵

There is an interesting research finding regarding the use of digital means among young people in Barcelona to engage in online interreligious dialogue. The researcher noted that 65% of respondents were believers, yet many of them lacked knowledge of their own religion. Some immigrant respondents used digital means to preserve their identity and culture. He also found that they used digital means to enhance individual religious practices, making them more comfortable with online correspondence with someone of the same religious background. Only 20% of respondents used digital platforms to learn about their own or other religions, even though a few asserted that digital tools are a way to learn about other religions.¹⁶ This raises the question of how to build bridges that can connect different religious online communities.

Promoting a More Inclusive Understanding of Diverse Religious Perspectives

The intersection between religion and digital technologies has given rise to the field known as digital religion studies. It was first discussed by Stephen O'Leary in *Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religions on Computer Networks*.¹⁷ The publication of *Religion and Cyberspace* discussed how religious experience is generated and enacted online.¹⁸ Later, there was an article that recognised the embeddedness of internet in everyday life and its impact on physical life leading to the publication of *Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical*

¹⁵ Julian Bond and Alice Sandham, "Can Interfaith Dialogue Happen Online?," *Can Interfaith Dialogue Happen Online?* (blog), May 29, 2017, <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/blog/can-interfaith-dialogue-happen-online>.

¹⁶ Míriam Díez Bosch, Josep Lluís Micó Sanz, and Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, "Typing My Religion. Digital Use of Religious Webs and Apps by Adolescents and Youth for Religious and Interreligious Dialogue," *Church, Communication and Culture* 2, no. 2 (June 16, 2017): 121–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2017.1347800>.

¹⁷ Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1996): 781–808.

¹⁸ Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, eds., *Religion and Cyberspace*, 1st ed (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005).

Lenses in Digital Religious Studies which further examine the connection between the cyber and physical realms.¹⁹

Heidi A Campbell defines digital religion studies as “a framework for articulating and investigating the evolution of religious practices online, which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously”. In her opinion, it is an area that investigates the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended and integrated.²⁰ Campbell emphasised that the creation of the internet has created new possibilities for religious discourse.²¹

Presently, digital technologies, including websites, social media platforms, and mobile applications, have been used to communicate religious teachings to followers. These platforms provide valuable religious information such as texts, spiritual guidelines, legal injunctions, and religious etiquette. Since this information is accessible to anyone with an internet connection, no religion can remain isolated. Technology has also transformed virtual communities into reality, enabling individuals to come together and share insights about their respective religions. Additionally, technology has introduced new methods for religious education, helping people deepen their knowledge and understanding of their own religion as well as others. This fosters digital inclusivity among religious communities, paving the way for improved interreligious interaction and engagement.

When discussing inclusivity, we are not suggesting that digital applications should abandon the fundamental objectives of *Usuluddin* and studies of religions within the Muslim scholarship. Rather, the use of digital technologies should aim to invigorate its dynamic and relevant role in contemporary times. *Usuluddin* and studies of religions will

¹⁹ Mia Lövhelm and Heidi A Campbell, “Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical Lenses in Digital Religion Studies,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (January 2017): 5–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649911>.

²⁰ Heidi A. Campbell, “The Dynamic Future of Digital Religion Studies,” in *Stepping Back and Looking Ahead: Twelve Years of Studying Religious Contact at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Bochum*, vol. 13, Dynamics in the History of Religions (BRILL, 2023), 217–36, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004549319>.

²¹ A. Campbell, 222

continue to uphold their traditional objectives, though it may require some updates in their methods and approaches.

By inclusivity, we mean social inclusion rather than theological inclusivism or religious pluralism. Abdullah Saeed defines theological inclusivism as positive attitudes towards other religions, and that all religions are valid, and salvation is possible for non-Muslims.²² This definition, however, overlapped with the meaning of religious pluralism that regards many religions are different paths to the same ultimate truth. Saeed, therefore, prefers social inclusivism as it espouses the belief that all humans possess dignity, all people are equal, and discrimination is wrong. A more practical definition of social inclusion refers to the situation whereby all individuals in society have equal opportunities to participate fully in various aspects of life, have access to quality education, social rights, cultural activities, economic growth, and political engagement.²³ Another definition regards social inclusion as processes, structures and policies instituted by a society to promote a sustainable social cohesion.²⁴ Saeed offers a Muslim perspective of social inclusion as “upholding the idea of living harmoniously with people of other religions while maintaining Islamic beliefs without diluting it ²⁵.”

Saeed presented his understanding of selected Qur'anic principles from an inclusivist perspective. He argued that while the *Qur'an* is critical of the belief systems of other religions, it nonetheless offers inclusive approaches toward their existence. He enumerated the inclusive principles along with corresponding verses;

- i. A merciful and just God created humanity from one soul (*nafs*) (39:6).

²² Abdullah Saeed, “Inclusivism and Exclusivism among Muslims Today between Theological and Social Dimensions” (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2020).

²³ Patricia Denkwicz, “Social Inclusion and Social Exclusion: A Necessary Conceptual Discussion,” in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives: Integrating Knowledge*, 1st ed. (Seven Editora, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2024.007-069>.

²⁴ Gary Bouma, “Religious Diversity and the Challenge of Social Inclusion,” *Social Inclusion* 4, no. 2 (April 19, 2016): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v4i2.631>.

²⁵ Saeed, “Inclusivism and Exclusivism among Muslims Today between Theological and Social Dimensions.”

- ii. God guided human beings through a series of prophets sent to all corners of the world with the same basic message, albeit applied with different rituals and rules (*shir'a* and *minhāj*) (5:48).
- iii. Muslims are expected to believe in all prophets and all scriptures, and all prophets taught the same essential message or followed the same way (*dīn*) (42:13).
- iv. Muslims should believe in what was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and what was revealed to other prophets before him (2:4).
- v. The *Qur'an* advises Muslims not to speak negatively about other religions including to the idols (6:108).
- vi. The *Qur'an* invites into dialogue with gentle and kind advise, and Muslims should avoid argument unless it is in a better way (29:36, 18:125).
- vii. Muslims should be fair, just, nice, gentle, kind hearted when dealing with people (2:178, 3:159, 16:91, 55:60).
- viii. Allah is the God of the entire universe and all creations.
- ix. All human beings are within the compassion and mercy of Allah
- x. All people, regardless of their diversity, are part of one family (49:13) as they are the children of Adam (17:70).
- xi. God's revealed religion has been based on one key idea throughout history that they should recognise and submit to the One God (2:136).
- xii. At the basic level, there is truth in many religions (2:62)
- xiii. Religious differences is part of God's plan (5:48)
- xiv. Those who surrender to the One God, believe in Him and the Last Day, and do good deeds will be saved (5:69).
- xv. All human beings can follow the religion of their choices, but they will have to bear the consequences of their choices. There is no coercion in matters of faith (109:6).

While Saeed is aware of the existence of Qur'anic verses that have been used to advocate exclusivism—a position he described as antagonistic, apprehensive, or negative towards other religions and the religious "other"—he was apologetic in noting that such a stance developed during the early centuries of Islam. In his opinion, exclusivism was not a mainstream position and should be open to new

interpretations in today's context. As an alternative, Saeed offers his views on the criteria of social inclusion:

1. All people have the same dignity and are therefore equal.
2. Muslims are required to maintain good social relations with all people regardless of their religious affiliation.
3. Muslims should respect all people regardless of the choices they make with regard to religion/belief and should not denigrate them.
4. Muslims should respect everyone's right to follow whatever religion they choose.

Saeed faces difficulties in reconciling what he perceives as the exclusivist and inclusivist verses of the *Qur'an*, stemming from his adherence to the pluralist philosophy of salvation, which categorises attitudes towards religious others into three groups: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Although he acknowledges that pluralism is a controversial philosophy in some Muslim countries, he finds himself entangled in the theological complexities introduced by pluralist philosophers; exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

In reality, Islam has long advocated for social inclusion, embracing diversity and coexistence in various aspects of life, such as gender, race, ethnicity, language, skin color, and social class. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the creation of digital applications on religions aims not at theological inclusion, but rather at social inclusion. This approach aligns with the ideals and realities of existence from the perspective of Islam.

To detail the potential topics related to social inclusion, we sought the views of several experts in Muslim studies of religions. We categorised their inputs into four major topics: concepts, doctrines, issues, and stories and cases. Based on their responses, we also identified subtopics for each category, which, in our opinion, can be further expanded beyond the experts' inputs.

1. Concepts	equality, welfare, environment, environment/nature, animals, the dignity of man, vicegerency, tolerance and importance, <i>muhibah</i> , interreligious dialogue, freedom of religion, justice, respectfulness, commonalities, lifestyle, the beauty of Islam, peace, sustainability, leadership, cooperation, unity in diversity, values, the beauty of Islam, ethics, <i>amar ma'ruf nahi munkar</i> , plurality, creation
2. Doctrines	Religious fundamentals and practices, god, prophets, do's and don'ts, sacred books, prayers, <i>syariah</i> /laws, <i>aqidah</i> /belief systems, religious ethics, religious festivals
3. Issues	<i>Kalimah Allah</i> , halal issues, festival greetings, visit to houses of worship, dos and don'ts related to culture and traditions, reversion/conversion,
4. Stories/histories/cases	Inspirational stories living in pluralistic societies, reversion to Islam, and religious icons.

Traditionally, *Usuluddin* encompasses discussions on divinity, revelation, angels, prophets, good and bad, and eschatology. Studies of religions in Muslim scholarship have explored these topics using comparative approaches with specific methods: polemical and apologetical, encyclopaedic, historical, textual criticism, and empirical. These are approaches and methods relevant to academia but may be too specialised for public consumption. Therefore, it is suggested that digital application can be customised based on the four topics derived from the experts' views to suit the needs of the targeted audience and to promote interreligious understanding and societal harmony. Altogether, the four topics underscore both the universal and specific aspects of religions, dispelling the myth that all religions are the same.

Integrating Traditional Religious Studies with Digital Application

The question of whether contemporary approaches to religious studies need revitalisation has been addressed by Muslim scholars in the field. Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi sparked this conversation in his article *Meta Religion: Towards a World Theology*.²⁶ He criticised the existing methodologies in the studies of religions, including the polemical methods of the traditionalist school, the secular reductionist methods of the modernist school, and the transcendental methods of the spiritualist school. While he acknowledged some merits in the phenomenological method, he critiqued it for avoiding judgment. Consequently, he proposed meta-religion principles as alternatives to counter the shortcomings of the phenomenological approach.

Another scholar critical of the traditional approaches in Islamic intellectual discourse is Abdulkader Tayob, who explored the emergence of critical discourse that has developed in Arabic since 1967.²⁷ However, at that point, he was more interested in the critical discourse of Islam rather than the discourse of the Islamists. In 2013, he published an article titled *Al Fārūqī between the History of Religions and Islamic Theology*. He acknowledges al-Faruqi's general approach using a new distinctive foundation proposed for Islamic theology.²⁸ He also appreciated al-Faruqi's axiological approaches but criticised that these approaches have failed to consider historical change and contingency, which are also responsible for changing religious traditions.

Mouhanad Khorchide and Ufuk Topkara challenged that Islamic theology should not be restricted and isolated from the rest of the world. Since Muslims have been exposed to many experiences, cultures and theologies, learning from other cultures is necessary and enriching for enhancing Muslims' understanding of Islam. They proposed that Islamic theology to participate in modern comparative theology discourse. In

²⁶ Al Faruqi, "Meta-Religion."

²⁷ Abdulkader Tayob, "The Study of Religion and Social Crises: Arab-Islamic Discourse in Late Twentieth Century," in *Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne (Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 101–26, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110211702.1.101>.

²⁸ Abdulkader Tayob, "Al-Fārūqī between the History of Religions and Islamic Theology," no. 60 (2013): 230–50.

this way, Islamic theology will go beyond challenging other faiths, and it will be able to create new means of understanding the other.²⁹

The above are some examples illustrating the dynamics of studies of religions under Muslim scholarship. Although the calls for revitalisation focused more on approaches and methods, our proposal to integrate digital applications into the studies also aims to enhance their dynamism. Digital application represents the latest technology that could serve as a tool to facilitate Muslim studies of other religions in the current context. While the incorporation of digital applications into Muslim studies of religions is still a novel concept and has yet to be widely debated, it is important to conceptualise this digital application before its creation. The digital application should be integrated with an appropriate framework, clear objectives, and a well-defined orientation. Recognising the role of *Usuluddin* in shaping Muslims' studies of other religions, we should develop the digital application under a similar framework and set of objectives. By embarking on this integration, we aim to highlight the dynamic roles of *Usuluddin*, rescuing it from intellectual stagnation and preparing it for the complex future.

Conclusion

The initiative to embark on research aimed at developing a digital application for Muslim studies of other religions stems from our recognition of Islam and its teachings in promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society. We have established our position that Muslim studies of other religions have their roots in *Usuluddin* and should continue the discourse under its umbrella. However, we also agree that Muslim studies of other religions need to be revitalised to uphold their relevance in today's context, thus appropriating the dynamic roles of *Usuluddin*.

To explore the feasibility of its approaches and methods, we compared the views of prominent scholars who have written on the needs of revitalisation. We concur that their calls for revitalising the discipline should be considered to complement our initiative in

²⁹ Mouhanad Khorchide and Ufuk Topkara, "A Contribution to Comparative Theology: Probing the Depth of Islamic Thought," *Religions* 4, no. 1 (January 31, 2013): 67–76, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel4010067>.

developing the digital application. Additionally, we interviewed nine experts in the study of religions, seeking their opinions on the need for the digital application and its potential topics and features. Only one respondent considered the digital application irrelevant, while the remaining respondents strongly believed that the application is urgently needed and would best serve as a medium for enhancing interreligious understanding, thereby promoting tolerance and coexistence, at least in the Malaysian context.

The respondents proposed that the digital application should include games, quizzes, short videos, positive testimonies, and sharing on the beauty of living together. Four major topics have been identified from the interviews as entries for the digital application: concepts, doctrines, issues, stories and histories of religions and religious coexistence. We acknowledge that these subtopics can be further enriched and expanded.

If Muslims aspire to actively promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence using our novel means and approaches, we must lead intellectually and pragmatically through action-driven research initiatives. Since the late 20th century, the intersection of religion and digital technologies has led to the emergence of digital religion studies within the modern scholarship of religions. Given the rapid pace of technological advancement and its profound impact on human lifestyles, as well as our increased exposure to coexistence in a pluralistic society, it is crucial to initiate strategic efforts that combine our traditional wisdom with modern technological tools. This helps to ensure that Muslims will continue to contribute intellectually and play positive roles in fostering peace and harmony in society.

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