

SALAFIYAH THEOLOGY: BETWEEN THE PURIFICATION OF BELIEF AND THE THREAT OF RADICALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

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Abstrak

Artikel ini meninjau kembali teologi Salafi tidak hanya sebagai gerakan penyucian akidah yang berlandaskan pada al-Qur'an dan Sunnah, tetapi juga sebagai fenomena keagamaan yang kompleks, yang terbentuk oleh dinamika historis, etika, dan sosial. Dalam konteks modern, Salafisme menghadapi tantangan signifikan dalam mendamaikan komitmen terhadap literalisme tekstual dan kemurnian teologis dengan tuntutan masyarakat plural serta perubahan dalam penafsiran keagamaan. Melalui tinjauan pustaka yang bersifat fenomenologis, studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana para penganut Salafi merespons ketegangan antara otentisitas doktrinal yang kaku dan realitas transformasi sosial-politik yang dinamis. Penelitian ini menyoroti bahwa Salafisme, meskipun berakar pada klaim kembali kepada ajaran Islam awal (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ), tidak terlepas dari pengaruh modernitas, tekanan politik, serta wacana Islam global. Oleh karena itu, Salafisme tidak hanya dipahami sebagai sikap teologis semata, melainkan juga sebagai realitas sosial yang dijalani dan dipraktikkan, yang dibentuk oleh interaksi lintas negara, pemaknaan lokal, serta perdebatan internal dalam komunitasnya. Unsur-unsur seperti pembentukan identitas, pengendalian spiritual, kerangka etika, serta batasan komunitas menjadi elemen penting dalam memahami wajah Salafisme kontemporer. Dengan pendekatan hermeneutik dan reflektif, studi ini memandang Salafisme sebagai sebuah pengalaman keberagamaan yang dinamis dan hidup dalam konteks global Islam maupun dalam ekspresi lokal yang beragam. Temuan ini menunjukkan perlunya pemahaman yang lebih bernuansa terhadap teologi Salafi, tidak semata sebagai gerakan reaksioner atau literalistik, tetapi sebagai jalan spiritual yang terus bergulat dengan perubahan zaman, tanpa kehilangan klaimnya atas kemurnian tauhid dan konsistensi teologis.

Kata Kunci: Teologi Salafiah, Purifikasi Aqidah, Radikalisme, Islam Kontemporer.

Abstract

This article revisits Salafi theology not solely as a movement for creed purification grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, but as a multifaceted religious phenomenon shaped by historical, ethical, and social dynamics. In modern contexts, Salafism faces pressing challenges in reconciling its foundational emphasis on textual literalism and theological purity with the demands of pluralistic societies and evolving interpretations. Through a phenomenological literature review, this study seeks to understand how Salafi adherents navigate the tension between the rigidity of doctrinal authenticity and the fluidity of sociopolitical transformation. Rather than reducing Salafism to a singular ideological expression, this research highlights its internal complexity one that involves identity construction, spiritual discipline, ethical frameworks, and

community boundaries. The paper emphasizes that Salafism, while rooted in the claim of returning to the pristine teachings of early Islam (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ), is not immune to the influences of modernity, political pressures, and global Islamic discourses. As such, Salafism represents not only a theological stance but also a lived social reality shaped by transnational connections, local interpretations, and internal debates. By applying hermeneutic and reflective approaches, this study presents Salafism as an evolving tradition that engages in continuous reinterpretation of tauhid (divine unity), religious authority, and social ethics. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of Salafi theology as a dynamic spiritual path, not merely a reactionary or literalist movement. It challenges dominant narratives that portray Salafism as monolithic, instead suggesting that its adherents actively negotiate their place in the world through complex engagements with scripture, community, and modernity. This perspective invites further inquiry into how traditional religious movements adapt to global transformation while striving to maintain theological coherence and spiritual authenticity.

Keywords: *Salafism; Phenomenology; Purification; Social Transformation; Tauhid; Identity; Theological Authenticity.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the Islamic world has undergone highly complex dynamics, marked by increasing intellectual pluralism, the challenges of globalization, and the emergence of religious movements with diverse ideological orientations. One significant phenomenon that continues to be debated in contemporary Islamic discourse is the resurgence of the Salafi movement as a form of purification of Islamic teachings. This movement is known for its commitment to pure monotheism (tawhid), its rejection of innovation (bid'ah), and its efforts to return to the understanding of Islam's early generations (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ). However, within a broader socio-political context—particularly following the 9/11 attacks and geopolitical developments in the Islamic world—Salafi theology is often associated—whether fairly or simplistically—with narratives of radicalism and religious extremism. The emergence of various groups claiming a Salafi identity yet harboring aggressive political agendas further complicates efforts to understand the movement's theological stance. On the one hand, Salafism represents an effort to return to the purity of Islamic teachings; on the other hand, some of its interpretations and practices are accused of contributing to the reinforcement of narratives of intolerance and even violence in the name of religion. This context makes the study of Salafi theology not only relevant but also crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the development of contemporary Islamic thought. In Indonesia's multicultural society, which is religiously and doctrinally diverse, tensions have also emerged between mainstream Nusantara Islam and the puritanical doctrines promoted by Salafi groups, which are becoming increasingly active across various sectors, ranging from education and social media to da'wah organizations. (Ulum, 2016).

A number of studies have examined the development of the Salafi movement, whether from a historical perspective, in terms of its global networks, or regarding its ideological discourse. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how Salafi theology, as a framework of belief, is interpreted and implemented by its adherents in various social contexts, particularly in regions with moderate Muslim

populations such as Indonesia. Furthermore, conceptual ambiguity continues to blur the line between the normative purification of faith and actions laden with radical ideology. Existing literature tends to adopt a dichotomous approach, classifying Salafism as either extreme or moderate without delving into its internal dynamics and the diversity of its expressions. (Mahmuddin, 2017).

Therefore, a study is needed that not only examines normative Salafi texts but also considers how these texts are lived out, interpreted, and responded to by individuals or communities within social reality. Using a phenomenological and reflective approach, this article seeks to fill a gap in the literature, which currently offers little in the way of bridging the gap between theological discourse and the practical realities of contemporary Muslims. The main questions this study seeks to answer are: How is Salafi theology understood and practiced in the context of contemporary Islam, particularly in Indonesia, and to what extent do interpretations of doctrinal purification contribute to or, conversely, prevent religious radicalization? This question arises from the need to distinguish between legitimate purification movements within the framework of Islam and radical expressions that undermine the values of humanity and justice in Islam. (Khoiruddin, 2014)

The primary objective of this article is to conduct an in-depth examination of the dynamics of Salafi theology as a movement for the purification of creed and how it interacts with the issue of radicalization in the context of contemporary Islam, particularly in Indonesia. This study seeks to examine not only Salafi doctrines and normative principles but also social practices, community responses, and how the concept of theological purification is understood and implemented by its adherents in real life. This research holds both academic and practical significance. Academically, this study will enrich the body of research on contemporary Islamic theology, particularly by offering a more nuanced understanding of the internal dynamics of the Salafiyah movement. This study is expected to serve as a reference for scholars interested in the study of Islamism, religious ideology, and identity politics. In practical terms, the findings of this research can assist policymakers, Islamic education practitioners, and da'wah institutions in formulating da'wah and deradicalization approaches that are more accommodating, contextual, and grounded in an accurate understanding of the current social and religious realities of the Muslim community.

This article begins with a literature review on the concept of Salafi theology and the purification of faith. The next section discusses the methodological approach and analytical framework employed. Subsequently, the findings of the study will be presented through an analysis of various expressions of Salafism in Indonesia, followed by a critical discussion of these findings. The article concludes with a summary and recommendations for further research.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using library research and critical discourse analysis (Anak, 2008) This approach was chosen because it aligns with the primary objective of the research, namely to gain an in-depth understanding of the theological and ideological dynamics within contemporary Salafism, particularly in relation to the concept of doctrinal purification and tendencies toward radicalization. As a study grounded in conceptual issues and religious discourse, this method enables the exploration of texts, interpretations, and religious practices in a contextual and intertextual manner.

The data in this study is sourced from primary documents in the form of works by classical and contemporary Salafi scholars that are frequently cited in the doctrine of tawhid and the purification of faith, such as the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Nasiruddin al-Albani, Abdul Aziz bin Baz, and Salafi figures in Indonesia. In addition, secondary data in the form of scientific journal articles, academic books, research reports, and other scientific studies relevant to the theme were also used. Research was also conducted on digital content such as official Salafi da'wah websites, YouTube channels, social media, and other online publications that reflect Salafi discourse and expression in the Indonesian context.

Data collection was conducted using systematic documentation and literature review methods. The collected documents were analyzed using a thematic content analysis model, which focused on identifying key themes, such as tawhid, bid'ah, purification, theological exclusivism, and the relationship with narratives of radicalism. The analysis also drew upon phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches to capture subjective meanings and the dimensions of religiosity as a lived experience (lived religion) within the Salafi community in specific social contexts.

To strengthen the interpretation, this study applies the principles of critical discourse analysis as developed by Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk. This approach views religious discourse not merely as a theological representation, but also as an ideological instrument that plays a role in shaping power, identity, and community boundaries. Thus, Salafi texts are analyzed not only in terms of their normative aspects but also in terms of how they shape social relations and responses to modernity, pluralism, and religious authority..

The validity and credibility of the data are ensured through triangulation of sources and approaches. The author compares various strands within the Salafi movement (scholarly, activist, and jihadist), and examines how their interpretations interact with Indonesia's socio-religious context. This study does not involve direct observation or field interviews, but focuses on representations and the construction of meaning through texts and public discourse.

With this approach, it is hoped that the research will provide a deeper and more critical understanding of how Salafi theology is understood not only as a static doctrine but also as a living discourse that influences social construction and religious ideology within contemporary Muslim societies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Salafiyah Theology and the Purification of Faith

Salafiyah theology is based on efforts to restore the faith of Muslims to its original form as understood by the generation of the al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ, namely the Companions, the Tabi'in, and the Tabi' al-Tabi'in. This concept of purifying religious belief stems from the view that the religious practices of Muslims have been largely tainted by innovations (bid'ah), superstitions (khurafat), and foreign elements not derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah. (Syakhrani, 2023) Within this framework, the Salafiyah developed a strict doctrine of tawhid, which encompasses tawhid al-rububiyah (the acknowledgment of Allah's lordship), tawhid al-uluhiyah (worship of Allah alone), and tawhid al-asma wa al-sifat (the affirmation of Allah's names and attributes as stated in the texts). (Soehadha, 2016)

Salafis reject all forms of allegorical interpretation of sacred texts, as well as the excessive use of reason in matters of faith. They also oppose takwil, tasybih, and rationalistic theological approaches such as those developed by the Ash'ari and

Maturidi schools. In this context, the purification of faith is understood as a process of freeing Muslims from teachings considered deviant and bringing them back to the purity of early Islam. In Salafi doctrine, this is not merely normative but also constitutes a call to da'wah and a mission of social renewal.

Although this concept is theologically consistent, in practice its meaning and application often shift depending on the social and cultural context in which its adherents live. In Indonesia, for example, this concept of purification is sometimes interpreted as a critique of traditional Islamic practices such as tahlilan, visiting graves, or celebrating the Prophet's birthday. This has sparked tensions between Salafi groups and traditional Islamic groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). (Lubis, 2015)

The Salafi theological concept is essentially a response to the historical dynamics of Islamic thought, which is viewed as having deviated significantly from its primary sources, namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In line with the views of Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani and Ibn Bāz, the Salafi movement emphasizes the importance of returning to a pure understanding of Islam as practiced by the generation of the al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ. This is known as the doctrine of "al-ruju' ila al-salaf," namely the return of the ummah to early religious practices without the interference of philosophy, local culture, or mystical traditions. (Istianah & Darodjat, 2023)

According to Harun Nasution, rationalism in Islam developed through the Mu'tazilah and Ash'ariyah schools, in which reason plays a role in interpreting religious doctrine. However, the Salafiyah movement rejects such an approach on the grounds that excessive use of reason can obscure the meaning of the sacred text. This is reflected in the rejection of ta'wil and tasybih, as well as the rejection of allegorical interpretation (majazi) in understanding the names and attributes of Allah (tauhid asma' wa sifat). (Homepage & Astapala, 2024) In their view, these texts must be accepted at face value, in accordance with the principle of bi la kaifa (without asking how).

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, Peter L. Berger explains that every religious movement undergoes a process of interpretation influenced by the social structure in which it develops. In the Indonesian context, the concept of Salafi doctrinal purification is not merely a theological project but also a cultural and ideological one. When Salafis criticize practices such as tahlilan, grave visits, or the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday, such criticism is often directed at traditional Islamic symbols that have become deeply rooted in the culture, particularly within NU circles. (Siregar, 2024)

As noted by Clifford Geertz in his study **The Religion of Java**, Islam in Indonesia has a complex layered structure, in which elements of local tradition are integrated with Islamic values. A rigid purification movement, in this context, has the potential to create social friction and internal divisions within the Muslim community. Salafi criticism of traditional religious rituals is often interpreted not merely as a correction of doctrine, but also as a form of delegitimization of the authority of traditional religious scholars. (Katili, 2024)

Furthermore, in his theory of religious revivalism, John L. Esposito explains that purification movements such as Salafism emerged as a reaction to modernity and the crisis of Muslim identity. Therefore, the purification of faith is not merely a matter of theological refinement, but also an expression of efforts to rebuild Islamic identity amid the challenges of globalization, liberalism, and secularism.

However, as noted by Azyumardi Azra, the major challenge facing such movements in Indonesia is their failure to engage with the pluralistic social and cultural

reality. If the purification of religious doctrine is interpreted in an exclusive and confrontational manner, it can lead to polarization and threaten the social cohesion of the Muslim community itself.

The concept of Salafi doctrinal purification is part of the dynamics of contemporary Islamic theology, which calls for a return to the original sources of Islam. However, in practice, the application of this doctrine is highly dependent on the social and cultural context. When this concept is applied rigidly and without an inclusive socio-cultural approach, it has the potential to trigger horizontal conflicts within a diverse Muslim society. Therefore, a prudent approach to purification must be accompanied by an understanding of the diversity of religious expressions present in society. (Aziz, 2024)

The Practice and Spread of the Salafiyah in Indonesia

The Salafi movement in Indonesia has been gaining strength since the Reformation era, particularly with the opening up of global information and communication channels that have facilitated the spread of transnational ideologies. Through da'wah networks, educational institutions, social media, and online lectures, Salafi doctrine is disseminated systematically and on a massive scale. Study centers in cities such as Solo, Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and Makassar exemplify the growth of active Salafi communities dedicated to preaching the doctrine of pure monotheism. (Hafid, 2020)

In practice, the Salafi community in Indonesia is divided into several variants, including Salafi ilmiah (focused on scholarly study and peaceful da'wah), Salafi harakiah (more politically active), and Salafi jihadiah (adopting a revolutionary or militant approach). These differences impact their da'wah strategies, relations with the state, and attitudes toward other Islamic groups. Their communication patterns are generally exclusive, emphasizing the importance of distancing themselves from gatherings and groups considered deviant. This leads to the formation of strong religious-social enclaves within their communities, including distinct lifestyles, dress codes, and even children's education systems.

On the one hand, the Salafi community demonstrates moral discipline and a commitment to consistently adhering to Islamic law. On the other hand, a rigid approach to doctrine and sharp criticism of local Islamic practices often lead to social resistance and even horizontal conflict. An analysis of the rise of the Salafi movement in Indonesia following the Reformasi era can be explained through a multidisciplinary approach, particularly by drawing on theories of religious revivalism, transnational communication, and the sociology of religion.^a

The following is a discussion of the topic, including theoretical references and relevant quotations from the provided text:

1. The Theory of Revivalism and Responses to Modernity

John L. Esposito explains that purification movements such as Salafism emerged as a reaction to modernity, identity crises, and globalization. In the Indonesian context, the Reformasi era opened the floodgates to freedom of expression and the flow of information, which helped facilitate the spread of Salafi ideology through global media, such as the internet and online lectures. (Sejarah & Qodir, 2008)

Purification movements such as Salafiyah emerged as a reaction to modernity and the Muslim community's identity crisis. Therefore, the purification of faith is not merely a matter of theological refinement, but also an expression of efforts to rebuild

Islamic identity. The strength of the Salafi movement is a cultural and ideological expression of identity anxiety in the midst of modernity. (Qodir, 2014)

2. Transnationalism and Global Communication Flows

The Reform Era strengthened transnational connections, facilitating the spread of Salafi ideology from the Middle East to Indonesia. This aligns with Olivier Roy's argument in **Globalized Islam** that contemporary Islamic movements are undergoing "deterritorialization," in which ideologies spread across national borders through technology, rather than solely through traditional channels. (Iqbal, 2019) "With the opening up of global information and communication flows, Salafi doctrine has been disseminated systematically and on a massive scale." Salafism leverages digital channels and new media to build cross-border da'wah networks.

3. Internal Variations Within The Salafi Movement: Three Spectrums

The division of Salafism into Salafi Ilmiyah, Harakiyah, and Jihadiyah reflects a diversity of strategies and approaches. This is consistent with the "movement spectrum" theory in political science, in which a single ideology can give rise to a spectrum of practices ranging from peaceful to radical. This indicates that the Salafi movement is not monolithic but has undergone internal fragmentation. The Salafi community in Indonesia is divided... into, among others, Salafi ilmiyah, harakiyah, and jihadiyah. (Sholehuddin, 2013), Salafi fragmentation affects their relations with the state and other Islamic groups.

4. Social Enclave and the Sociology of Religion

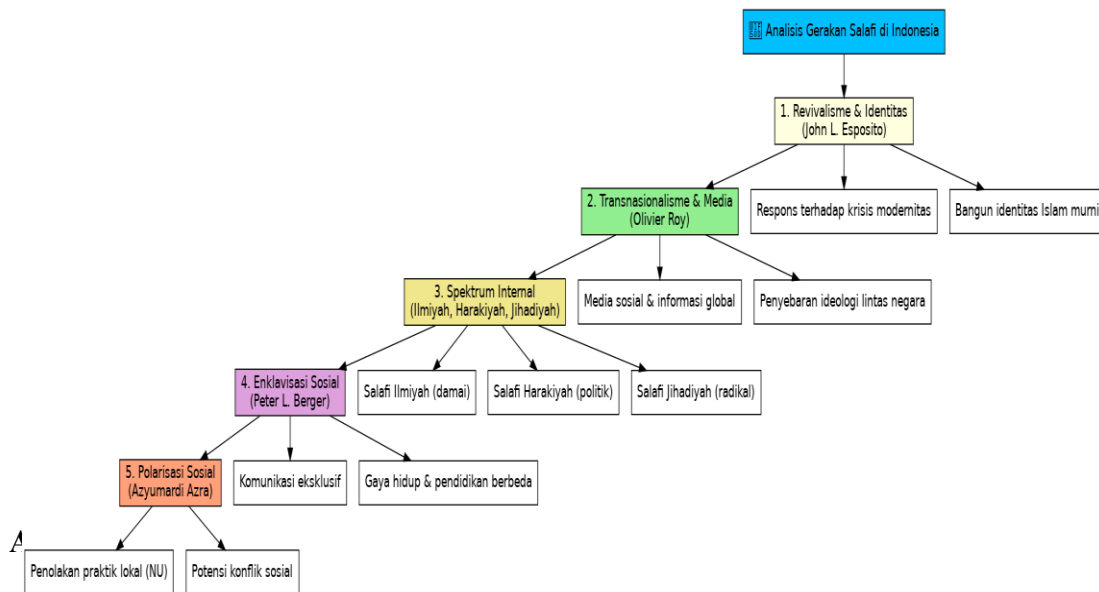
According to Peter L. Berger, religious expression will always be tied to social structures and everyday interactions. Salafi communities tend to form social enclaves, with distinct lifestyles and exclusive communication patterns, reflecting the dynamics of social segregation based on religious ideology. (Irham & Lubis, 2021). This has led to the formation of strong religious social enclaves... including in terms of lifestyle and the education system for children. The Salafi movement has created a distinct cultural identity, but it has also led to social segmentation.

5. Polarization and Horizontal Conflict

As noted by Azyumardi Azra, an exclusive approach to purification can lead to social polarization and threaten the cohesion of the Muslim community. Rejection of deeply rooted local practices (such as tahlilan and Maulid) has the potential to create conflict with traditional Muslim communities, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). (Kumble et al., 2020)

"If the purification of faith is interpreted in an exclusive and confrontational manner, it can lead to polarization..." Salafi theological conservatism sparks social resistance and can divide the community if not accompanied by a dialogical approach.

The Salafi movement in Indonesia is a concrete example of how global ideologies are transformed into local practices, shaped by technological advancements, post-Reformasi freedoms, and an identity crisis. However, the success of their missionary efforts depends heavily on their willingness to engage in dialogue and coexist within a pluralistic society.



One of the key debates arising from this study is how to distinguish between the theological purification of faith and radical political and extremist expressions. Many people associate Salafi teachings with radicalization, particularly due to symbolic and terminological similarities with jihadist groups.

However, normatively, scholarly Salafi clerics actually reject violence and anarchic actions. They focus more on preaching tawhid and educating the faithful. However, in some cases, doctrines regarding al-wala' wa al-bara' (loyalty and enmity) and takfir (declaration of apostasy) have been misused by a small number of actors to justify acts of violence.

Radicalization occurs not because of Salafi teachings as a whole, but as a result of extreme textualist interpretations, erroneous contextualization, and socio-political factors that contribute to the emergence of hardline religious movements. Thus, it is important to distinguish between Salafism as a normative theology and Salafism as a political movement that is susceptible to deviation.

An analysis of the debate between the purification of theological doctrine and radical-political expressions within the Salafi movement requires an interdisciplinary approach. Below is a study that draws on theories of radicalization, normative theology, and the sociology of extremism, along with citations from the text you provided:

Social Responses and Ideological Implications

The presence of Salafi groups in Indonesia has elicited varied responses from the public and religious institutions. Some members of the public welcome Salafi preaching because it is viewed as more authentic and free from local cultural elements deemed deviant. However, many others reject it, viewing it as disruptive to social harmony and an attack on the Islamic traditions of the Indonesian archipelago.

Institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), NU, and Muhammadiyah also hold diverse stances. The MUI generally maintains a neutral stance but emphasizes the importance of wise preaching. NU strongly criticizes the Salafi approach for attacking traditional religious practices, while Muhammadiyah, though theologically aligned, adopts a more moderate stance in social and political expressions.

This phenomenon demonstrates that Salafism is not a single entity, but rather a broad and dynamic spectrum. Therefore, studies of Salafism must simultaneously consider its historical, ideological, and sociological dimensions. Only through a comprehensive approach can we accurately understand the position of Salafism within the contemporary Islamic landscape.

An analysis of the presence of Salafi groups in Indonesia requires a multidimensional approach—encompassing the sociology of religion, ideology, and social movement theory—to understand the dynamics of acceptance and rejection that occur. The following is a review of this analysis, accompanied by relevant theories and academic citations:

1. Salafism as an Ideological Phenomenon: The Theory of Religious Purification

Salafism can be analyzed through the framework of religious purification, which refers to the effort to restore religion to its “pure” form as understood by the early generations of Islam (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ). This concept aligns with Bruce Lawrence’s theory, which states that fundamentalist movements—including Salafism—respond to modernity by purifying religious teachings and rejecting cultural syncretism (Lawrence, 1995).

“Fundamentalists reject cultural relativism and claim doctrinal purity as the basis of their religious identity.” (Lawrence, *Defenders of God*, 1995)

The implication of this purification is a sharp critique of local religious practices such as visiting graves, tahlilan, or maulid, which the Salafis consider to be innovations. This has sparked resistance from groups that practice traditional Islam.

2. A Sociological Approach: The Theory of Collective Identity

Public response to Salafism is closely linked to the theory of collective identity in the sociology of religion (Castells, 2010). In the Indonesian context, religious communities such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) have long cultivated an “Islam Nusantara” identity that is inclusive, accommodating of local cultures, and emphasizes social harmony.

The emergence of Salafism, which rejects local traditions, is seen as a threat to social cohesion and the local Islamic cultural heritage.

“Religious collective identity is not built solely on doctrine, but also on the historical and symbolic values embedded in culture.” (Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 2010)

3. Political and Power Perspectives: Gramsci’s Theory of Hegemony

The rejection of Salafism by certain institutions, such as NU, can also be interpreted through Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Salafism is seen as attempting to redefine Islamic orthodoxy through a rigid theological approach, thereby challenging the dominant narrative of Nusantara Islam, which has held hegemonic sway.

NU views Salafism not only as theologically distinct but also as a threat to local religious authority.

“Every ideological group strives to seize hegemonic space to define religious and cultural truth.” (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 1971)

4. Theories of Social Movement: Salafi Mobilization and Fragmentation

The diversity of Salafi groups in Indonesia—ranging from quietist (non-political) to jihadist—can be explained through the theory of framing in social movements (Snow & Benford, 1988). Salafi groups are not homogeneous. Some focus on education and non-political da’wah (e.g., Yemeni or Albanian Salafis), while others tend to be exclusive and confrontational.

Salafi ideological framing also influences how society perceives them: as purely preachers, or as a threat of radicalism.

“The success of social movements depends on how they frame issues to attract support or deny the legitimacy of others.” (Snow & Benford, 1988)

5. The Relationship Between State and Religion: The Theory of Post-Islamism

Within institutional contexts such as Muhammadiyah and the MUI, the approach toward Salafism is more moderate. Although Muhammadiyah shares doctrinal similarities (opposition to superstition and innovation), it is not overly aggressive in social and political spheres. This reflects the post-Islamist trend, namely a shift from political expressions of Islam toward a cultural and intellectual Islam (Asef Bayat, 2007).

“Post-Islamism is an effort to reconcile faith and freedom, Islam and pluralism, Sharia law and civil rights.” (Bayat, Making Islam Democratic, 2007)

The Salafist phenomenon in Indonesia cannot be reduced to a single face. It is a spectrum that reflects the dynamics of ideology, identity, and responses to social change. A comprehensive approach that combines theories of religious purification, the sociology of identity, cultural hegemony, social movements, and post-Islamism provides a more complete understanding.

The Expansion of Salafi Da'wah Through Digital Media

Advances in digital technology have opened new avenues for the spread of Salafi ideology. This community leverages social media, YouTube, podcasts, and websites to disseminate da'wah materials, sermons, and religious fatwas. This phenomenon has given rise to a form of virtual da'wah that is highly effective in reaching urban Muslim youth, who tend to be individualistic and tech-savvy.

Through these platforms, messages of doctrinal purification are conveyed with engaging narratives, professional visuals, and powerful rhetoric. Some digital Salafi figures have even become religious influencers with millions of followers. Nevertheless, this online dissemination of da'wah also reinforces ideological exclusivism, as the digital space often functions as an “echo chamber” that amplifies the group's internal biases

An in-depth analysis of the spread of Salafi digital da'wah within the context of communication theory, media, and sociology:

1. Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) – Heidi Campbell

The RSST model explains how religious communities shape the use of technology based on their values and norms. Salafi communities, for example, design digital platforms (YouTube, podcasts, da'wah websites) in accordance with the principle of purifying religious belief, and reject features deemed contrary to their religious interpretations en.wikipedia.org researchgate.net journal-stiayappimakassar.ac.id mdpi.com. This includes how professional formats and visual narratives are constructed to attract urban and tech-savvy audiences.

2. Filter Bubble & Echo Chamber

- Filter bubble: Platform algorithms (YouTube, Instagram) display content that users like, creating an increasingly narrow information environment that aligns with their initial beliefs.
- Echo chamber: Within Salafi digital communities (closed groups, specific channels), narratives of purification are unchallenged—conversely, moderate views are considered misleading.

As a result, confirmation bias and group polarization occur significantly researchgate.net arxiv.org arxiv.org arxiv.org.

3. Algorithmic Radicalization

Recommendation algorithms are steering users toward increasingly extreme content—by leveraging engagement metrics (watch time, likes)—and fueling harsher puritanical rhetoric. This model resembles the digital radicalization pathways found in the context of political extremism.

4. Spiral of Silence

Within digital Salafi groups, members tend to withhold criticism or dissenting views for fear of being “excluded from the circle” and labeled as infidels or heretics. Moderate or inclusive opinions are gradually silenced, which only reinforces the dominant narrative.

5. Two-Step Flow of Communication

Digital Salafi figures—clerics, influencers—serve as opinion leaders. They adapt doctrinal texts into audience-friendly formats (videos, podcasts), allowing the message to reach lay followers in a more personal and emotionally resonant way. This underscores the central role of authoritative figures in spreading digital ideology.

6. Cultivation & Media Resonance

According to cultivation theory, long-term exposure to Salafi digital content leads to a dominant perception of reality: that religious beliefs must always be purified, and traditional practices are considered deviant. Resonance occurs when these digital beliefs align with users’ spiritual experiences—thereby reinforcing the impact of online proselytizing..

Summary: Impact & Challenges

Aspects	Explanations
The Effectiveness of Da'wah	A professional style, powerful rhetoric, and an urban target audience make the message more accessible and easier for the younger generation to absorb.
Ideological exclusivism	Filter bubbles and echo chambers deepen ideological divisions and undermine theological diversity.
Polarization	The spiral of silence and algorithms reinforce mutual suspicion between Salafi and Nusantara Islamic groups.
Centralization of authority	Digital religious influencers have become powerful opinion leaders, diminishing the traditional role of local clerics.

Salafism and Its Relationship with the State

The relationship between Salafis and the state is also not uniform. Some scholarly Salafi variants demonstrate loyalty to state authorities and avoid practical politics. However, the activist and jihadist variants tend to be critical of the government, especially if it is perceived as failing to fully implement Islamic law. Some groups even openly criticize democracy, pluralism, and the modern nation-state system.

In Indonesia, tensions between Salafi groups and the government have surfaced in the context of deradicalization efforts, oversight of da’wah institutions, and monitoring of pesantren and educational institutions perceived as affiliated with extremist ideological networks. This situation underscores the importance of the state’s role in fostering religious moderation without undermining the right to religious expression.

An analysis of the relationship between Salafis and the state in Indonesia, based on the latest theoretical perspectives and research:

1. Salafi Typologies According to Wiktorowicz: Quietists, Politicos, Jihadists

According to Wiktorowicz (2006), there are three variants of Salafism:

- Quietists: apolitical, support national stability, obedient to authority as long as it does not reject Sharia law.
- Politicos (Harakiyah): politically active (even without a party), for example, Wahdah Islamiyah.
- Jihadists: extremist, reject democracy and the modern nation-state, incite violence

2. Ilmiyah / Madkhali–Quietist Variants

- Madkhali is an example of a Salafi variant loyal to the regime: they view Muslim rulers as worthy of obedience, because maintaining stability is more important than formally establishing an Islamic state en.wikipedia.org.
- Many Salafi ilmiyah Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia choose to combine the state curriculum and continue to cooperate with the government (e.g., supporting deradicalization programs, following the national curriculum) .

3. Harakiyah – Social Da'wah Politicians

- Wahdah Islamiyah is a political example. They train cadres, run social programs, and even offer public input on state policies—though not through a formal political party
- This approach aligns with “Godly Nationalism”—Islam serves as the foundation of public morality, and the state is respected as long as it does not conflict with Sharia law

4. Jihadiyah – Open criticism of a secular state

- This faction rejects democracy, pluralism, and Pancasila, and even views the modern nation-state as a polytheistic system.
- Pesantren or institutions deemed extremist are considered vulnerable to government monitoring as part of deradicalization efforts—due to the potential for jihadist ideologies to infiltrate them..

5. The State-Religion Theory: Hegemony and Regulation

- The state employs a hegemonic regulatory strategy: granting recognition to loyal Salafi pesantren while monitoring exclusive or extremist ones, in order to safeguard national security.
- This aligns with the theory of secular state pluralism, which requires “fostering moderation” through selective recognition and oversight (Gramsci—selective hegemony).

6. Implications for Deradicalization Policies

- Dual approach:
 - Cooperation with Salafi scholars and political groups, accompanied by social support and integration.
 - Strict oversight of Islamic boarding schools affiliated with jihadist or radical activist groups—to prevent anti-state propaganda.
- This model reflects a combination of repression and accommodation, optimizing state control over extremist ideologies while preserving space for religious expression.

Contextual Examples:

- Pesantren in Lombok and Central Java that have been integrated into the national curriculum are growing rapidly, yet remain aligned with the state [reddit.com+5researchgate.net+5reddit.com+5](#).
- Institutions within the Wahdah Islamiyah network are active in government dialogues and programs, though they demand the implementation of Sharia law [tandfonline.com+1kyotoreview.org+1](#).
- Conversely, jihadi variants are classified as targets for deradicalization by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the National Intelligence Agency due to their takfiri and anti-Pancasila views.
- The spectrum of Salafi–state relations: ranging from loyal (quietist), critical yet collaborative (politicos), to vehemently rejecting the state (jihadists).
- The state responds with a strategy of selective accommodation and oversight: granting space to pro-institutional groups, but restricting extremist groups.
- Hegemonic theory, religious regulation, and ideological control strategies are relevant for comprehensively understanding these dynamics—safeguarding freedom of expression while preventing national disintegration.

The Role of Women and Education in the Salafi Community

Gender and education are also key concerns in Salafi studies. Within this community, women's roles are often confined to the domestic sphere, although some Salafi communities have also established educational institutions specifically for women. Clothing, lifestyle, and even social relationships are strictly controlled to preserve the “purity” of Islamic identity.

In the field of education, Salafis establish schools and Islamic boarding schools with specialized curricula that emphasize tawhid, Arabic, and the Salafi methodology. This curriculum generally rejects subjects deemed to contain secular, pluralist, or liberal ideas. On the other hand, the ideological rigor of this approach actually attracts some parents who desire a firm and unambiguous religious education.

An analysis of gender and education within the Salafi community, complete with the latest theories and empirical citations from the Indonesian context:

1. Restrictions on Women's Roles & Conservative Gender Theory

Salafis employ theological arguments that assign women to domestic roles—based on a literal interpretation of verses such as Quran 4:34 and traditional Islamic norms—as part of gender traditionalism. This ideology emphasizes male headship and the subordination of women (Burke, 2012) [jurnalfuda.iainkediri.ac.id+10journals.sagepub.com+10blogs.lse.ac.uk+10moraref.kemendiknas.go.id](#).

However, research in Indonesia reveals variations in practice. For instance, fatwas issued by Salafi scholars in Saudi Arabia restrict women's education: limiting it to the elementary level, prioritizing “nature-appropriate” fields (nursing, early childhood education), and encouraging early marriage.

2. Women's-Only Educational Institutions & Negotiating Modernity

In Indonesia, women-only Salafi pesantren are emerging with programs such as tarbiyah al-nisa in Lampung and Metro, as well as the integration of formal curricula, sports extracurriculars, and entrepreneurship [e-journal.metrouniv.ac.id+1repository.uiii.ac.id+1](#).

Mupardila's (2023) empirical research highlights that despite their conservative background, female students negotiate their identities by blending religious knowledge,

modernity, and technology—as active agents within their communities repository.uiii.ac.id.

3. Social Construction Theory & Agency Negotiation

The social constructionist theory (Berger & Luckmann) is applied to pesantren students attending university: they use inclusive knowledge to voice gender-based critiques from within the conservative system jurnal.fuda.iainkediri.ac.id. This demonstrates that “indoctrination” can be countered through critical reflection.

4. Empowerment through the Domestic Economy

A study in Lampung reveals a new reality: Salafi women are leveraging technology and social media to run businesses from home, thereby transforming the domestic sphere into an economic force. This illustrates a typical dynamic of resource mobilization theory: individuals adapt traditional structures to achieve economic empowerment.

5. Negotiating State Law and Manhaj

An ethnographic study in Wirokerten (Yogyakarta) shows that Salafi women are now involved in regulating marriage: they establish marriage management based on “bulugh” and utilize religious authority to actualize their rights, including agreements regarding age and state law

Synthesis: The Complex Dynamics of Gender and Salafism	
Aspects	Description
Traditional Gender Categories	The roles of the household, subordination, and restrictions on public access still dominate.
Special Education Institution	Girls' Islamic boarding schools are growing, offering a comprehensive formal religious curriculum and public activities.
Identity Negotiation	Female students are gaining knowledge on campus and critiquing gender perspectives from within.
Self-Reliance in the Economy	Technology as a tool for entrepreneurship in the domestic market.
Law Firm and Methodology	Women play an active role in marriage based on theological principles.

6. Relevant Social Theory

- Resource Mobilization Theory: explains how women organize capital (knowledge, economic resources, and regulatory frameworks) for empowerment.
- Social Constructionism: female students reconstruct gender values and critiques through higher education.
- Gender-Patriarchal Ideology: Bibaz & Burke demonstrate that gender equality is viewed as a “deviation” from nature based on literal interpretations of religious texts.

The Salafi approach to gender involves a tension between conservative structures and adaptive movements. Although women are generally restricted, there is room for agency through specialized education, the domestic economy, and marriage regulations. Critical interventions, particularly those based on technology and formal education, demonstrate subversive strategies from within. A comprehensive approach—combining social, gender, and religious theories—is necessary to understand this spectrum.

Critical Reflection and Synthesis of Findings

From this overall analysis, it can be concluded that Salafi theology does indeed have a strong and consistent doctrinal foundation regarding the purification of faith. However, in social and political practice, this ideology undergoes shifts in meaning and expression, depending on local contexts and global dynamics. The differences among Salafi variants demonstrate that Salafism is not a monolithic entity, but rather a spectrum of movements that can range from moderate to extreme.

It is important for Islamic studies not to oversimplify Salafism as merely a radical movement. Instead, a critical, contextual, and balanced academic approach is needed to understand the internal nuances within this movement. The findings of this study are also relevant for formulating theologically grounded deradicalization strategies and cultural approaches.

A comprehensive, theory-based final analysis of Salafism in Indonesia:

First, *The Spectrum of Salafism & the Dynamics of Identity*; Tabroni's research (2024) emphasizes that Salafism in Indonesia consists of three main variants—purist, *harakiyah*—and critiques this rigid classification, referring to it as a temporal strategy—rather than a fixed identity—which demonstrates the ideological fluidity of Salafism.

Second, *Purification of Aqidah within a Hermeneutic Framework*; Jaan S. Islam (2024) proposes a hermeneutic perspective: Salafism as an approach prioritizing literal texts without additional interpretation (*qarīna*). This stance reinforces doctrinal foundations, yet in social practice is often marked by strategic compromises such as the hybridization of local culture. (Zahrani & Rubini, 2023)

Third: *Shifts in Meaning within Local Contexts*; A study of glocalization in Jakarta found urban Salafis blending local appearances (e.g., black caps) with modern digital strategies—becoming “transformational” Salafis. This reflects how local contexts shape the expression of “pure theology” into a flexible public narrative.

Fourth: *Digitalization & Discourse Contestation*; Khamdan et al. (2024), through digital discourse analysis, found that online platforms have become a battleground for ideological contestation between Salafi purification narratives and moderate Islamic narratives. Puritan theological messages are processed through strategic framing within the digital space

Fifth *Implications for Deradicalization Strategies*: Research by Mukhlis & Makhya (2024) confirms that a collaborative model between the state and Islamic boarding schools (*Salafiyyah-Aswaja*) is an effective approach to deradicalization—combining control with the reinforcement of moderate discourse in the educational sphere. On the other hand, the mathematical model by Strogatz et al. (2012) demonstrates that moderate interventions (theological counsel) can expand the reach of moderate groups without triggering aggressive backlash arxiv.org.

A critical, contextual, and balanced academic approach to Islam—combining identity theory, hermeneutics, digital media, and ideological policy—is a prerequisite for understanding the complexity of Salafism. This is also relevant for formulating theology- and culture-based deradicalization strategies.

Thus, Salafi theology remains relevant for academic study, both as a reflection on the authenticity of Islamic teachings and as an evolving social phenomenon within the current global and local Islamic contexts..

CONCLUSION

Salafi theology is a complex religious phenomenon, not only from a doctrinal perspective but also in its social, political, digital, and educational dimensions. Key findings indicate that Salafism is not a single, monolithic entity, but rather a broad spectrum of thought and practice, ranging from peace-oriented to extremist tendencies. Salafi theology, in its effort to purify creed through a textualist approach and the rejection of religious innovation (*bid'ah*), has evolved into an ideological foundation for various groups with differing orientations and strategies.

The concept of creedal purification, as the core of Salafi teachings, is a reaction to Islamic practices deemed to have deviated from the Salaf methodology. However, in practice, this purification often gives rise to social exclusivism and the potential for conflict, both within the faith and between Muslims and state institutions. This is exacerbated by the presence of the doctrines of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* and *takfir*, which, if understood in an extreme manner, can serve as triggers for radicalization.

In Indonesia, the spread of Salafi preaching through digital media and educational institutions has further solidified the presence of this ideology. Although some Salafi communities present a peaceful and law-abiding image, their internal dynamics still reveal a diversity of interpretations that can lead to a shift toward fundamentalism. Therefore, it is crucial for academics, policymakers, and religious stakeholders to understand the nuances and complexities of Salafi theology through a holistic approach.

Salafism must be understood not merely as a theological doctrine, but also as an expression of social identity and a response to the dynamics of the times. Through a reflective and critical academic approach, studies on Salafism can make a significant contribution to strengthening the discourse on religious moderation and efforts to prevent radicalization based on a deep understanding of religion. The practical implications of these findings can also be directed toward developing deradicalization models based on contextual cultural and theological approaches. Simpulan harus menyatakan: (1) jawaban dari pertanyaan penelitian; (2) argumentasi utama; (3) pemahaman kritis tentang persoalan utama yang didiskusikan.

Conclusion must states: (1) answers of the research questions, (2) main arguments, and (3) critical comprehension about main issues being discussed.

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