

## Theology of Pluralism in Indonesia: Inclusive and Exclusive Islam in Dialogue

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### Abstract

Indonesia's religious plurality makes the relationship between Islamic theology and public coexistence a significant scholarly and civic concern. This article addresses a gap in Indonesian pluralism scholarship by comparatively examining how inclusive and exclusive Islamic theological orientations are configured, mediated, and linked to public coexistence within one analytical framework. Using a structured qualitative review of a final corpus of 31 scholarly and policy-relevant sources, published mainly between 2016 and 2025 and supplemented by foundational theoretical texts, the study analyzes recurring differences in truth claims, scriptural reasoning, attitudes toward local culture, and public ethics. The reviewed literature suggests that inclusive orientations are more frequently associated with contextual interpretation, dialogical engagement, and civic accommodation, whereas exclusive orientations are more often linked to literalist reasoning, sharper symbolic boundary-making, and greater discomfort with religious difference. Rather than proposing a universal model, the article offers a bounded contextual theology of pluralism for Indonesia by selectively relating Hick's pluralist insight to Islam Wasathiyah, Islam Nusantara, and inclusive citizenship. Because the study is interpretive and literature-based, its conclusions are presented as analytical tendencies and policy-relevant possibilities rather than as direct empirical measurement of Indonesian Muslim attitudes or outcomes.

### KEYWORDS

inclusive Islam; exclusive Islam; theology of pluralism; interfaith dialogue; islam wasathiyah.

### Introduction

Indonesia is frequently described as one of the most important sites for observing how Islam, democracy, and social diversity intersect. As the country with the world's largest Muslim population and an exceptionally plural social fabric, Indonesia provides a compelling setting for examining how theological orientations influence public ethics, interreligious relations, and national cohesion. The central issue is not merely doctrinal; it concerns how Muslims interpret revelation in relation to difference, citizenship, and the presence of religious others in a shared national space. Recent scholarship likewise positions Indonesia as a key laboratory for examining the relationship among pluralism, religiosity, education, and civic participation (Aijaz, 2014; Kawangung, 2019; Masuda & Yudhistira, 2020; Moaddel & Karabenick, 2018; Mondesir, 2023).

Within this landscape, two broad orientations continue to shape debate. Exclusive Islam is generally associated with singular truth claims, literalist hermeneutics, suspicion toward theological difference, and a tendency to divide the social world into rigid categories of insiders and outsiders. Inclusive Islam, by contrast, affirms the possibility of truth, virtue, and cooperation beyond one's own communal boundaries; it favors contextual interpretation, dialogical engagement, and a broader conception of Islamic ethics oriented toward the common good. In contemporary Indonesia, this tension has practical consequences for public discourse, education, interfaith encounters, and responses to radicalism.

The discussion also belongs to a wider history of religious thought. Comparative theology shows that the struggle between exclusivism and inclusivism is not unique to

Islam. Christian theology, for example, moved in significant ways from the rigid formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* toward more dialogical postures associated with the Second Vatican Council and later theological reflection. This historical comparison is useful because it reminds us that theological traditions are not fixed structures; they evolve in response to new social realities, moral challenges, and intercultural encounters. This wider trajectory is important for the present study because pluralist and inclusivist arguments have developed across several theological lineages, including Christian comparative theology and interreligious reflection (Khan et al., 2020; Rahner, 1966; Second Vatican Council, 1965; Wagay, 2022).

Theoretically, this article takes John Hick's pluralist proposal as a heuristic point of departure rather than as a framework to be adopted wholesale. Hick's idea that religious traditions can be understood as historically conditioned responses to the same transcendent reality provides a useful lens for rethinking diversity, especially in relation to absolutist truth claims. At the same time, the Indonesian case requires refinement beyond Hick's universal abstraction because Indonesian Muslim discourse is articulated through Qur'anic ethics, historical religious organizations, and the constitutional realities of a plural nation-state. Inclusive Islamic thought in Indonesia has therefore been mediated through concepts such as *Islam Wasathiyah* and *Islam Nusantara*, which stress moderation, justice, social balance, accommodation of local culture, and constructive coexistence within a constitutional national framework. In Indonesian scholarship, this contextual mediation has been explored through debates on civil Islam, public religion, *Islam Nusantara*, and moderate Islam (Ansor, 2016; Hefner, 2000; Hick, 1989; Inayatillah et al., 2022; Khoiri, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Luthfi, 2016; Mubarak & Rustam, 2018; Naim & Qomar, 2021).

Existing studies on Indonesian pluralism have made important contributions to the discussion of religious moderation, civil Islam, *Islam Nusantara*, interfaith dialogue, and inclusive citizenship. However, these studies have often examined those themes separately, institutionally, or normatively, and have not consistently compared inclusive and exclusive Islamic theology within one analytical frame while also clarifying how a global pluralist theory such as Hick's can be selectively adapted to Indonesian Muslim discourse (Ali, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Mubarak & Rustam, 2018; Nasir & Rijal, 2021).

This article is guided by three questions: (1) how are inclusive and exclusive Islamic theological orientations represented in Indonesian scholarship; (2) what recurring differences appear in their approaches to truth, scripture, local culture, and civic coexistence; and (3) to what extent can Hick's pluralist insight be contextually adapted to Indonesian Muslim discourse? Its contribution is conceptual and contextual rather than causal: it proposes a bounded model of contextual theology of pluralism that brings together contextual scriptural reasoning, ethical recognition of religious others, accommodation of local culture, and commitment to inclusive citizenship

## Methods

### Research Type

This study used a structured qualitative literature-review design with a comparative-historical orientation. Rather than collecting primary field data, it critically examined a defined corpus of scholarship in order to compare how inclusive and exclusive Islamic theology are conceptualized, contextualized, and connected to public coexistence in Indonesia. The review is interpretive rather than exhaustive, so it aims to produce a transparent and analytically bounded

synthesis rather than a claim of total coverage.

### Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The final analytical corpus consisted of 31 sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, and selected policy-relevant documents discussing religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, *Islam Wasathiyah*, *Islam Nusantara*, moderation, exclusivism, and deradicalization in Indonesia. The review focused primarily on works published between 2016 and 2025 because that period captures the most visible recent developments in Indonesian debates on moderation, pluralism, and public Islam, while seminal works by John Hick, Karl Rahner, and Robert Hefner were retained for theoretical framing. Sources were included when they directly addressed Indonesian Islamic discourse or provided essential conceptual tools for interpreting pluralism; works with limited relevance, duplication of argument, or insufficient scholarly grounding were not prioritized in the final corpus. The corpus was organized through keyword-led searching and citation chaining around the terms "inclusive Islam," "exclusive Islam," "religious pluralism," "interfaith dialogue," "*Islam Wasathiyah*," "*Islam Nusantara*," "religious moderation," and "Indonesia."

### Analytical Procedures

The synthesis proceeded in three stages. First, the selected literature was screened and coded using six theory-guided categories derived from the research questions: truth claims, scriptural interpretation, *ijtihad*, relations with religious others, treatment of local culture, and public orientation. Second, the coded texts were compared to identify dominant, recurring, and selectively reported patterns in the depiction of inclusive and exclusive theology. Third, those patterns were interpreted historically and contextually in relation to Indonesian experiences of religious moderation, interfaith coexistence, and contemporary policy concerns such as deradicalization and social cohesion. The coding frame was deductive in its initial structure but remained open to inductive refinement when hybrid or ambivalent positions emerged during close reading.

### Trustworthiness and Limitations

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across books, journal articles, book chapters, and policy-oriented documents, as well as through repeated comparison between classical theoretical perspectives and contemporary Indonesian scholarship. To reduce interpretive bias, the analysis distinguished as far as possible between claims made directly by the reviewed sources and the author's comparative synthesis of those claims. Nevertheless, the study remains limited by its dependence on secondary sources. Because it does not include interviews, surveys, or ethnographic observation, its conclusions should be read as interpretive tendencies within the literature rather than as direct measurement of social attitudes or institutional outcomes.

## Result and Discussion

### Mapping the Two Theological Orientations

The contrast between exclusive and inclusive Islamic theology presented in this section should be read as an ideal-typical analytical distinction derived from recurring patterns across the reviewed corpus, not as a rigid classification into two fixed and exhaustive camps. Several studies imply hybrid or ambivalent positions in which conservative doctrinal commitments coexist with pragmatic civic cooperation, or inclusive rhetoric is applied selectively across different settings (Ali, 2020; Jati et al., 2022; Nasir & Rijal, 2021). Within this analytical frame, a dominant recurring pattern in conceptual,

**Table 1.** Comparative Characteristics of Exclusive and Inclusive Islamic Theology

Dimension	Exclusive Islam	Inclusive Islam
Truth claim	Singular and absolute; only one interpretation is recognized as valid.	Admits the possibility of truth and virtue beyond one group or single interpretation.
Approach to scripture	Predominantly literalist and text-bound.	Contextual and purposive, attentive to ethical substance and <i>maqasid</i> .
Ijtihad	Tends to narrow reinterpretation and privilege inherited authority.	Encourages renewed reasoning to address changing social realities.
Relation with others	Defensive, oppositional, and often one-directional.	Dialogical, cooperative, and oriented toward mutual learning.
Local culture	Suspicious of local accommodation and religious hybridity.	Accommodative toward local culture when core Islamic principles are preserved.
Public orientation	More likely to favor symbolic or formalistic religious politics.	More likely to support civic ethics, coexistence, and inclusive citizenship.

Source: Synthesized from the reviewed literature.

educational, and media-oriented studies associates exclusive theology with singular truth claims, more literalist scriptural reading, reduced openness to reinterpretation, and a sharper boundary between insiders and outsiders. Inclusive theology, by contrast, is more often described in the literature as emphasizing broader ethical reasoning, contextual interpretation, openness to *ijtihad*, and a willingness to cultivate cooperative relations across communal boundaries (Aijaz, 2014; Kustiawan et al., 2023; Kusuma et al., 2022).

Note: The categories in Table 1 are ideal-typical analytical tendencies synthesized from the reviewed literature; several studies report hybrid or ambivalent positions that do not fit neatly into a rigid binary.

#### Inclusive Islam as a Contextual Indonesian Mediation

The Indonesian literature further suggests that inclusive Islam is not simply a generalized ethic of tolerance but a historically mediated mode of being Muslim in a plural society. Two concepts are especially prominent. *Islam Wasathiyah* frames moderation as a Qur'anic commitment to balance, justice, and avoidance of extremism, while *Islam Nusantara* names a historically grounded pattern of Islam shaped through accommodation, persuasion, and engagement with local cultures. Across the reviewed scholarship, these concepts function less as abstract slogans than as mediating vocabularies through which Indonesian Muslim actors negotiate faithfulness, coexistence, and constitutional belonging. This mediating function is repeatedly emphasized in studies on *Islam Nusantara*, religious moderation, and higher Islamic education in Indonesia (Inayatillah et al., 2022; Kusuma et al., 2022; Mubarok & Rustam, 2018; Nasir & Rijal, 2021; Syafieh & Anzhaikan, 2023; Syamsurijal et al., 2022).

#### Public Significance of the Reviewed Findings

Across the reviewed corpus, the association between inclusive theology and civic coexistence appears as a recurring pattern rather than as a universal rule. Empirical, conceptual, and policy-oriented studies more frequently

connect inclusive discourse with interfaith dialogue, civil coexistence, moderation, and constitutional accommodation, especially when pluralism is framed not as theological surrender but as an ethical commitment to peaceful coexistence. By contrast, exclusive discourse is more often linked in the literature to polarization, symbolic boundary-making, or diminished willingness to recognize the legitimacy of social difference. At the same time, the reviewed studies do not suggest a total absence of overlap, since some actors combine doctrinal exclusivity with pragmatic civic cooperation. These tendencies are reinforced in recent studies on moderation, interfaith engagement, peaceful religious communication, and public policy in Indonesia (Amri et al., 2024; Khasanah et al., 2023; Pajarianto et al., 2022; Rahmah & Aslamiah, 2023; Wagay, 2022; Wajdi et al., 2024).

The findings suggest that the significance of the inclusive-exclusive divide lies less in abstract labeling than in the ways theology is translated into social practice. Exclusive theology is not merely a doctrinal claim about salvation; in the reviewed literature it often shapes the grammar of public interaction by privileging closure over dialogue and certainty over coexistence. This helps explain why exclusive orientations are repeatedly associated with suspicion toward plural citizenship and discomfort with locally embedded forms of Islam. Inclusive theology, by contrast, is more often interpreted as translating doctrinal commitment into an ethics of engagement. It does not necessarily deny the truth of Islam; rather, it reframes faithfulness through justice, humility, and responsibility toward the other. This reading is supported by studies on major Islamic organizations, interreligious dialogue, tolerant theological discourse, and exclusive religious media in Indonesia and the wider Muslim world (Ali, 2020; Jati et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2020; Kustiawan et al., 2023).

In this respect, the Indonesian case adds nuance to John Hick's pluralist framework, but only through selective appropriation. Hick's theory is useful because it decentered absolutist religious claims and opened a broader interpretation of religious diversity. Yet it cannot simply be transferred into Indonesian Muslim discourse, because Hick's philosophical theology did not emerge from Qur'anic revelation, prophetic authority, or the legal-ethical grammar that structures Islamic reasoning. Indonesian Muslim discourse shows that pluralism is rarely adopted in purely philosophical form; it is mediated through Islamic categories such as *tawazun*, *tasamuh*, *itidal*, *maslahat*, and *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, as well as through historically rooted social traditions. A viable theology of pluralism in Indonesia is therefore better understood as a contextual reconstruction in which universal concerns about diversity are translated through local religious language, institutions, and civic experience (Hick, 1989; Khan et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020).

The concepts of *Islam Wasathiyah* and *Islam Nusantara* are especially important because they operationalize inclusivism in recognizably Islamic terms. They provide a vocabulary through which scholars, educators, religious organizations, and policymakers can defend moderation without reducing Islam to secular civility alone. One of this article's central interpretive insights is that inclusive theology becomes more durable when it is anchored simultaneously in scripture, historical experience, and public ethics. That anchoring helps explain why organizations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah* have played an influential role in shaping Indonesian understandings of religious moderation and democratic coexistence (Ali, 2020; Inayatillah et al., 2022; Mubarok & Rustam, 2018).

At the same time, inclusive theology is not without tension or critique. Some Muslim scholars may regard pluralist or inclusivist language as theologically imprecise, overly accommodating, or vulnerable to relativist interpretation. For that reason, the practical implications drawn here should be understood as policy-relevant possibilities suggested by the

reviewed literature rather than as empirically verified outcomes across all Indonesian Muslim settings. The literature indicates, first, that pluralism may be taught not only as a civic norm but also as a theological and ethical competence within Islamic education. Second, deradicalization efforts may be more persuasive when they involve community-based religious actors rather than relying solely on state rhetoric. Third, interfaith dialogue appears more sustainable when it is grounded in shared social problems—poverty, inequality, local conflict, and environmental vulnerability—rather than in abstract appeals to tolerance alone. These possibilities help explain why inclusive theology remains relevant to broader agendas concerning peace, justice, and social inclusion (Jati et al., 2022; Kusmayani, 2023; Wajdi et al., 2024).

At the same time, caution is needed. The present study is interpretive and literature-based, so it cannot determine the exact distribution of exclusive and inclusive attitudes across Indonesian Muslim communities, nor can it establish causal effects on democratic resilience, deradicalization, or social harmony. Future research would benefit from combining theological analysis with interviews, survey data, discourse analysis of sermons and digital media, or comparative case studies of educational and community institutions. Such work would clarify how inclusive theology is enacted, contested, transformed, or resisted in everyday practice.

An additional implication emerging from the reviewed literature concerns the institutional location of inclusive theology. The durability of inclusive discourse appears to depend not only on ideas, but also on the social carriers that reproduce those ideas through curriculum, preaching, organizational guidance, and everyday civic mediation. Studies on Indonesian Muslim organizations, higher education, and interfaith initiatives suggest that inclusive theology becomes more persuasive when it is embedded in pedagogical routines, collective authority, and locally trusted forms of leadership. In this sense, pluralism is sustained less by abstract declaration than by repeated practices of interpretation, dialogue, and public service. This observation helps explain why the Indonesian debate cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between “tolerant” and “intolerant” actors. What matters is whether theological language is institutionally translated into habits of coexistence, and whether religious authority is exercised in ways that widen or narrow the moral imagination of Muslim citizenship.

A related point concerns the contemporary digital sphere. Several strands of scholarship imply that the contest between inclusive and exclusive theology is increasingly shaped by media circulation, popular dakwah, and online symbolic boundary-making. Digital environments can intensify exclusivist messaging because simplified truth claims, emotionally charged identity narratives, and adversarial framings often travel quickly across networked publics. Yet the same environment also allows inclusive actors to articulate moderation, interfaith responsibility, and constitutional ethics to wider audiences. For future research, this means that a contextual theology of pluralism should be

assessed not only in doctrinal texts or formal institutions, but also in digital discourse, youth networks, and vernacular public communication. Such an expansion would deepen the framework proposed in this article by showing how theological orientations are circulated, normalized, contested, and selectively appropriated in everyday Indonesian life. It would also help clarify when inclusive discourse remains merely aspirational and when it becomes socially operative in shaping public trust, democratic reciprocity, and peaceful engagement across difference.

## Conclusion

This literature-based study suggests that inclusive and exclusive Islamic theological orientations are associated with different approaches to truth, scripture, social plurality, and public ethics in Indonesian scholarship. The reviewed sources indicate that inclusive orientations are more frequently linked to contextual reasoning, dialogical engagement, and accommodation within a plural constitutional order, while exclusive orientations are more often linked to literalist reasoning, sharper symbolic boundaries, and discomfort with religious difference. At the same time, the literature also reveals internal variation and hybrid positions, so these contrasts should be read as analytical tendencies rather than fixed social categories.

The article’s bounded contribution is the formulation of a contextual theology of pluralism for Indonesia that selectively relates Hick’s pluralist insight to Islam Wasathiyah, Islam Nusantara, ethical recognition of religious others, accommodation of local culture, and inclusive citizenship. Because this conclusion is derived from secondary literature rather than primary empirical data, it should be read as an interpretive framework open to testing, refinement, or critique. Future studies can extend this argument by examining how such a framework is articulated in sermons, educational institutions, religious organizations, digital discourse, and everyday interfaith practice.

## Author contributions

Ardiansyah and Viki Bayu Mahendra contributed to the conception of the study, literature evaluation, analysis, drafting, revision, and approval of the final manuscript. Ardiansyah served as the corresponding author.

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