



# TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES IN NEW MEDIA: A STUDY OF THE CARIUSTADZ.ID PLATFORM AS AN ALTERNATIVE CYBER FATWA AND *DA'WAH* MEDIA AMONG THE MIDDLE-CLASS URBAN MUSLIMS

*Arif Zamhari, Muhamad Ibtissam Han, Zulkifli*

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengkaji perkembangan terkini otoritas keagamaan kalangan kelas menengah Muslim perkotaan. Hal ini dilatarbelakangi oleh munculnya otoritas keagamaan baru di Indonesia pasca runtuhnya Orde Baru dan respons santri tradisional yang melibatkan penggunaan teknologi media baru. Dengan pendekatan fenomenologis, penelitian ini berfokus pada platform Cariustadz.id sebagai media fatwa siber dan dakwah Islam alternatif yang dikembangkan oleh PSQ (Pusat Studi Qur'an). Platform itu untuk merespons kegiatan pengajian yang sedang tren di kalangan Muslim perkotaan, yang mayoritas pesertanya adalah kelompok transnasional termasuk Salafi dan Jamaah Tabligh. Cariustadz.id berperan aktif dalam menampung aspirasi mereka dengan berbagai fasilitas dan kemudahan akses melalui aplikasi teknologi informasi. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa wacana Islam mode yang ditawarkan oleh platform Cariustadz.id bukanlah mainstream, melainkan kegiatan keagamaan alternatif bagi Muslim perkotaan kelas menengah. Selain itu, Cariustadz.id merupakan media baru yang digunakan otoritas keagamaan tradisional untuk berkompetisi dengan otoritas keagamaan baru di bidang fatwa keagamaan dan wacana keislaman di Indonesia. Studi ini signifikan menunjukkan bahwa fatwa siber dan dakwah Islam dalam bentuk media baru dapat digunakan sebagai kontranarasi bagi otoritas agama tradisional dalam menghadapi menjamurnya apa yang disebut gerakan dakwah otoritas keagamaan baru dan gerakan dakwah Salafi dan radikal di media baru.

**Kata kunci:** Otoritas Keagamaan Tradisional; Media Baru; Fatwa Siber; Muslim Perkotaan

**Abstract:** This study examines the recent developments of religious authorities among middle-class urban Muslims. It is constructed due to the emergence of new religious authorities in Indonesia after the collapse of the New Order and the response of traditional santri involving the use of new media technology. With a phenomenological approach, the study focuses on the Cariustadz.id platform as a Cyber Fatwa and Islamic preaching media developed by Pusat Studi Qur'an/PSQ (Center for Qur'an Studies) to respond to the trending pengajian (sermon) activities among urban Muslims, the majority of whom are transnational groups including Salafi and Jamaah Tabligh. The Cariustadz.id platform has actively played a part in accommodating their aspirations with various facilities and easy access through an information technology-based application (a new media). As a result, the study argues that the moderate Islam discourse offered by the Cariustadz.id platform is not a mainstream but an alternative to religious activities for middle-class urban Muslims. In addition, Cariustadz.id is a new media used for traditional religious authority to compete with new religious authority in religious fatwa and Islamic discourse in Indonesia. This study is significant to show that Cyber Fatwa and Islamic preaching in the form of new media can be used as a counter narrative for traditional religious authorities in dealing with the proliferation of the so called new religious authorities *da'wah* movement and Salafi and radical preaching movement in new media.

**Keywords:** Traditional Religious Authority; New Media; Cyber fatwa; Urban Muslims

## Introduction

The collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 has led to extraordinary, yet never-before-imaginable, freedom of expression, political participation and social transformation (Noorhaidi Hasan, 2008: 2). Such a democratic atmosphere and freedom of expression, in turn, has brought new religious preachers to show up. Unlike the old religious preachers and ulama, they seem and are considered to have less competence in Islamic studies (lay preachers) (Hamdani, 2020: 269; Kailani & Sunarwoto, 2019: 183). Consequently, their presence and less knowledge of Islam often causes controversy. This is what happened to a young preacher named Evie Effendie who said in his sermon that Prophet Muhammad was once misguided before becoming a prophet (Han, 2019: 68).

The collapse of the authoritarian New Order regime has also triggered the previously restricted ideologies to rise (Hamdani, 2020: 17; N. Hasan, 2008: 31). Besides prominently encouraging exposing more Islamic symbols, the authoritarian rule to democratic transition has given birth to identity politics in the national political landscape. According to Noorhaidi Hasan, this condition has a paradoxical impression. On the one hand, democracy is growing, but on the other, identity politics in the public sphere leads to religious intolerance (Hasan, 2019). The conservative groups' increase in discrimination is suggested who use new media to mobilize Muslim masses (Hamayotsu, 2013).

In addition, the fall of the New Order regime has also triggered the proliferation of Salafi movements da'wah and radical da'wah movements which succeeded in promoting exclusivist current of Islamic activism in the form of various da'wa activities openly on campuses and mosques located both in urban and rural areas. As a result of the proliferation, enclosed territories used as concentration places of the Da'wah members grow rapidly. The growth of these enclosed territories leads to the establishment of mosques, Islamic schools, and *majlis taklim* under the banner of the movements (Hasan, 2007). Like in the real world, these da'wah movements are also increasingly rampant in the virtual world in the form of da'wah website, cyber fatwa, social media and Youtube channels. The content of their da'wah in the online media is presented in the form of propaganda to hate their opponent groups that are ideologically different such as Indonesian government, the West, and

other Islamic sects which are different with their ideologies and interest. Hatred speeches against their opponents can be easily seen on their online media. As a result, this propaganda has triggered to the increase of religious radicalism in Indonesia as well as in the Muslim world showing up their resistance to the Western world and Chinese government, including all parties supporting their interests such as the government of Indonesia and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Hidayatullah, 2017).

In response to these trends, the Ministry of Religious Affairs issued a list of approved *Da'i* (a person who engages in *da'wah*) to anticipate and resolve issues and concerns about any incompetent preachers who have the potential to reduce the quality of religious understanding for Indonesian Muslims (Hamdani, 2020: 269). Unfortunately, of the 200 names, many popular preachers are not listed. The unlisted includes Abdullah Gymnastiar, Abdul Somad, and Dedeh Rosyidah (Mamah Dedeh) (Okezone, 2018). This has become a controversy and a trending talk on social media. To this end, the Ministry of Religious affairs appointed *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Ulama Council) to carry out a standardization process for preachers starting September 2019 (Gunawan, t.t.)

The effort made by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Indonesian Ulama Council in standardizing Islamic preacher is nothing new. Several months earlier in 2019, the same effort was made by a private institution, *Pusat Studi Qur'an/PSQ* (Center for Qur'an Studies), that launched the Cariustadz.id platform. Like the government, the platform attempts to standardize the preachers both in terms of their qualifications and the teaching they are promoting, moderate Islam, as stated on its initial page in the website, "Cariustadz.id helps connect the *ummah* with friendly and competent preachers throughout Indonesia, for merciful and peaceful Islam." In addition, the Cariustadz.id platform also provides cyber fatwa media that fulfills the need of middle-class urban Muslim and challenges fatwa shopping, a tendency of urban Muslims to seek and choose religious opinions (fatwa) that suit their interest in the Internet. This article argues that apart from traditional fatwa institutions such as MUI, Muhammadiyah and NU, cyber fatwa issued by Cariustadz.id has become a new media for Indonesian traditional religious authorities to challenge the emergence of conservative and extreme interpretation Islam and fatwa shopping trend among Indonesian middle class urban Muslim.

Several studies on the emergence of new religious authorities in urban areas have been conducted. A study by Oki Setiana Dewi, for example, critically illustrates the sermon activities among celebrities and their religious tendencies, which are divided into transnational religious groups: *Salafi* and *Jamaah Tabligh* (Dewi, 2020). Taking the middle-class urban Muslims as study samples, Yanwar Pribadi examined the relationship among communal piety, commodification of religion, Islamic populism and Islamism in religious sermon (Norshahril Saat & Burhani, 2020). Instead of observing the sermon material and the preachers, his writing focuses on the extent of the religious expression, practice and thinking among middle-class urban Muslims as the members of the sermon activity. In the same way, this study examines the religious authorities constructed on the practice of sermon activity among the middle-class urban Muslims. However, the two previous studies only describe the dominance of new *santri* with transnational ideologies, such as *Salafi* and *Jamaah Tabligh* as new religious authorities. In contrast, this study offers the latest development on the Cariustadz.id platform as cyber fatwa and Islamic preaching media which promotes moderate Islam discourses representing the traditional religious authorities of old *santri*. In addition, it is also a continuation of reinforcing the religious authorities of old *santri*, something Zamhari calls it as fighting back (Zamhari & Mustofa, 2020) or what Akmaliah says reclaiming religious authorities (Akmaliah, 2020).

In this case, the Cariustadz.id platform is used as a new media to maintain and protect the religious authorities of traditional *santri* from the onslaught of transnational ideologies which often discredit their religious practices and display religious radicalism. Further, this study attempts to answer the following questions: how does the traditional religious authority through the Cariustadz.id platform accommodate the aspirations of middle-class urban Muslims? How does the platform issue its cyber fatwa and nominate the prospective preachers to meet the discourse it is developing?

To answer the above questions, this study used a qualitative approach applying a phenomenological method through three data collection techniques, namely observation, interviews and documentation. In the observation technique, the authors virtually followed a series of activities held by the Cariustadz.id Platform, both independently and in

collaboration with other parties. The authors also conducted interviews with several parties, including the platform manager, the preachers who join the platform and the users, both in-person and virtually. Regarding the documentation, the authors recorded personal and public documents uploaded by the Cariustadz.id platform and the public on their social media respectively.

### **Fragmentation of Religious Authorities**

Before exploring the fragmentation of religious authorities, understanding the general concept of religious authorities in Islam is necessary. As a start, we can quote big questions posed by Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, “*Who has the right to speak in the name of Islam?*” and “*Who should a Muslim ask for guidance when he needs one?*” (Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006: 1). According to them, the concept of religious authorities is difficult to define. Referring to Weber’s view, authority is a person’s ability to give orders and enforce obedience without violence. Here, he distinguishes authority and power, although both are interrelated and often difficult to distinguish. There are at least three important points to underline. First, religious authorities in Islam derive from two sacred texts, the Qur’an and the Hadith. Both texts have the same position as the other texts in general. It requires a sharp mind to explore their meanings and apply their directions in changing circumstances. In the meantime, in interpreting the Qur’an, various opinions, methods and backgrounds of interpretation show up and give rise to multiple interpretations which in turn lead to multiple religious authorities. Second, Islam does not own an institution that functions like a church or a priest ordination as in the Christian religious tradition. It only has those referred to as *ulama* (a plural form of ‘*alim*, a person who has religious knowledge) and Islamic educational institutions, including Islamic schools or madrasas. Third, the study of religious authorities is inseparable from the role of the rulers and their relationship with the *ulama* (Krämer and Schmidtke, 2006: 1–14); (Zulkifli, 2018); (Zulkifli, 2013)

Many social scholars point out that the development of information technology, print and digital information technology, and mass education in Islam has led to a fragmentation of religious authorities. Various online Islamic literature resources and the increasing ability of the Muslim

community to access them easily cause the primary sources of religious literature and ulama to be no longer the only options (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004; Turner, 2007). Such more democratic form of religious practice, in which religious knowledge is accessible to religious elites or ulama enables new participants to produce new discourses (Kailani & Sunarwoto, 2019 ; 182; Turner, 2007: 117–134). The shift in the authorities means that there has been no more a single religious authority in the hands of the old santri group, but it has been fragmented and gives birth to new authorities. These new authorities are built on their ability to mix the Islamic spirits—although sometimes without the sufficient educational background in Islamic knowledge—with the secular values that are in line with the aspirations of modern urban society (Howell, 2013; Hoesterey, 2008; Watson, 2005; Rudnycky, 2009).

However, according to Kailani and Sunarwoto, the thesis on the fragmentation and collapse of traditional religious authorities is not proven. The presence of new media has indeed caused such fragmentation, but it has not diminished the important role of traditional religious authorities (Kailani & Sunarwoto, 2019: 182–183). This is in line with what Muhammad Qosim Zaman mentions that their authorities will survive by adapting to the changing times (Zaman, 2002: 2). In this regard, with their traditional religious authorities, the ulama initiate creative adaptations by utilizing technology as an instrument to produce, reproduce and disseminate their religious discourse to a wider range of society.

The traditional ulama have continued to exist in the urban Muslim community long before the widespread use of new media as a means of expressing Islamic identity. Their presence in urban areas even came when Indonesia was under the New Order regime. Julia Howell's writing proves how old academics and scholars have played an important role in introducing Sufism teachings to the middle-class urban Muslim community. Many authoritative ulama were involved in scientific and Islamic activities at the time. Their religious movement, known as urban Sufism, was extremely popular and attracted a lot of interest from middle-class urban Muslims. Many Islamic study courses and sermon activities for middle-class urban groups were held in star hotels and offered serious Sufism themes (Howell, 2001). Although these

religious activities may decrease in number along with the emergence of various new media and the opening of the Indonesian political climate that allows the development of transnational religious movements, the role of traditional religious authority among the middle-class urbanites never diminishes. Some groups of traditional ulama have adopted new media in order to fulfil the religious needs of the changing urban Muslim community.

### **Traditional Religious Authorities and Cyber Fatwa**

Fatwa has an important role in the social life of Muslims throughout the history of Islam. It is not exaggerated to say that the development of fatwa in Islamic laws has reflected the development of intellectualism and politics when the fatwa is issued. (Hooker, 2007: 1). This can be understood because according to its definition, fatwa is a formal answer to 'difficult' problems, the answer which is not found in the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth about existing problems from the perspective of Islamic law (Jauhari & Ghoni, 2020). In the process, fatwa is produced by the method of legal conclusion (*istinbāt*) conducted by authoritative religious scholars, ulama, *mufti* or *mujtahid* based on arguments deriving from authoritative Islamic sources (Kassem, 2014; Zuhaili, 1986). Since fatwa is issued as response of fatwa petitioner (*mustafī*) individually or collectively, it presents different issues and topics according to the interest of fatwa petitioner. Therefore, in this sense, fatwa can be used as a tools to understand the reality of Islam in various contexts (Nico J. G. Kaptein & Laffan, 2005). Fatwa can also be considered as a melting pot between theory of law and social practices. In this sense, therefore, fatwa has diverse functions. Caeiro summarizes four functions of fatwa including fatwa as legal tools; as social instrument; as political discourses; and as doctrinal-reform devices. In addition, fatwa functions to stabilize Muslim society by 'providing formal administrative organization and informal networks for running social affairs (Caeiro, 2006).

The rapid growth of the Internet has a significant influence on Muslims' religiosity dynamics across the globe. Many Muslims who live in the majority and minority contexts rely on the Internet as the main source to find information about news and communication about Islam (Iqbal & Zulkifli, 2016). One of the important information sources provided by the Internet is the information of religious edicts (fatwa). In



the last two decades, websites that provided the so-called online fatwa, e-fatwa or cyber fatwa proliferated to fulfill Muslim need for responsive and quick answers of contemporary religious issues they face. According to the theological stream of the religious authorities who support and establish the cyber fatwa, these cyber fatwas have their theological nature. Bunt identifies these cyber fatwas and categorizes them into two main theological streams: Sunni Cyber Fatwa and Shi'ah Cyber Fatwa. Blunt adds Sufi Cyber Fatwa as one of kinds of cyber fatwa available in the Internet other than the two theological streams (Bunt, 2003). Most websites provide cyber fatwa in the form of questions and answer format under the guidance of Imam or religious expert team. Other websites provide fatwa facilities based on particular topics involving health matters, faith, ritual, politic, economy and family matters (Hosen, 2008; Black & Hosen, 2009).

In the Indonesian context, it is no doubt that those who take advantage of cyber fatwa facilities are mainly the Indonesian urban Muslim middle class. In contrast, rural Muslims do not use cyber fatwa much because they do not have enough access to the Internet. If they have questions on religious matters, they can ask directly to local ulama to issue fatwa for answering their religious questions. Urban Muslims access the cyber fatwa because they need religious information that is instant, fresh, practical, and easily accessible. Moreover, they are interested in using cyber fatwa because of the anonymous nature of the Internet. With this nature, they can freely ask religious questions without fear of their privacy being revealed (Illar, 2010).

With the proliferation of websites providing cyber fatwas, users or fatwa petitioners (*mustafti*) have many opportunities to get answers in the form of fatwas that they have requested. Their question may get diverse answers from a cyber *mufti*. Because of its non-binding nature, fatwa opinions have given petitioners options to find the second opinion from different cyber *mufti* with ease. Variations of fatwa opinion can lead a *mustafti* (fatwa petitioner) to do fatwa shopping in finding fatwa that suits their need. A fatwa shopping usually happens if fatwa inquirers choose an easier opinion. On the one hand, the variation in the opinion of the ulama on legal issues being asked by *mustafti* provides options for them. The differences of fatwa opinion will broaden the petitioners' horizons and can achieve the wisdom from those differences. They understand

that in the case of a fatwa there is a provision that an *ijtihad* can stand side by side with another *ijtihad*. In other words, the result of a mufti's *ijtihad* on one case does not erase the results of other *ijtihad*. On the other hand, many Muslims also insist that only one fatwa on particular issue is true, while other fatwa are wrong (Hosen, 2008). This can lead *mustafti* to find a fatwa that they consider an absolute truth while rejecting other fatwa opinions that conflict their interest. This, in turn, can bring a negative impact on several things. For instance, as a response to Cartoon of the Prophet, a terrorist bomber in Germany perpetuated his action based on a fatwa in the Internet used as a legitimacy for his action (Illar, 2010).

In conventional fatwa institutions, the authority of a mufti becomes an absolute requirement for persons or institution which issue a fatwa. Most legal theory scholars limit the practice of issuing fatwas to those who have specialized in the study of Qur'an and hadith and classical Islamic law (*fiqh*) (Zuhaili, 1986). Therefore, a mufti must possess high religious scientific qualifications and ethical behavior. For instance, a mufti must 'adult, a Muslim, a jurist, trusted, reliable, free of sinful traits and character defects, the sound of mind, firm in thought, correct in behavior and alert (Hosen, 2008). The proliferation of website that provides cyber fatwa has also raised the same issue of religious authority. One of the important issues in the emergence of cyber fatwa is the issue surrounding religious authorities that issue this fatwa. Whether or not the results of the fatwa on the website are legally guaranteed? Are there any religious authorities that fulfill the requirements of *mufti* behind the the opening of online and cyber fatwa? As mentioned earlier, the proliferation of cyber fatwas has allowed wide opportunities for the emergence of a new religious authority with different fatwa opinions. However, because more and more new religious authorities issue fatwas on the internet, assurance is minimal and creates information anarchy.

Turner argues that the development of information technology and media has changed the social condition by which political and religious authority are produced. He points out that the development of the digital world through new media will damage the traditional authority based on oral transmission and print based of learning. Moreover, the abundance of information flow is based on mastering the interpretation of religious sources based on printed documents. Their positions will be replaced by

popular leaders whose fatwas are sometimes more heard in the form of new media. A person like Usama bin Laden is more likely to be listened to compared to traditional religious authority, although he does not have the religious authority of being a *mufti*. In Indonesia, figures like Abu Bakar Baasyir are more likely to be heard of his fatwas. Turner points out that the Internet makes everybody a mufti (Turner, 2007).

Unlike Turner, this article argues that most Indonesian traditional Muslim religious authorities have realized that the Internet is a form of new media that can not only to express their religious point of views but also to reach out wider audience. Along with new religious authorities, they begin to use the Internet as a new media to convey the message of moderate Islam and to issue more inclusive religious fatwa. Recently, Indonesian websites began to provide cyber fatwa or online fatwa supported and cared for by some figures of traditional religious authority background or a team of experts with an old *santri* background. In addition, apart from special forums held to issue their fatwa, prominent Indonesian Muslim organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama begin to use the Internet to provide cyber fatwa and issue their fatwa based on the questions of fatwa petitioners (*mustafti*). For instance, Nahdlatul Ulama provides *bahsul masail* section on its official website (nu.or.id) used as a cyber fatwa platform to issue its religious fatwa based on the questions of fatwa petitioners. Moreover, Muhammadiyah has its official website called muhamadiyah.or.id that provides cyber fatwa under *Hukum Islam* section for those who want to find information about Islamic discourse. Unlike Nahdlatul Ulama that provides cyber fatwa based on the questions of the fatwa petitioners, Muhammadiyah provides cyber fatwa in the form of a searchable data base discussing different matters under different topics including theology, *mu'āmalah* and *ibadah*. In the past, these two organizations disseminated their fatwa through paper base distribution methods. Nahdlatul Ulama, for instance, compiles all fatwa issued between 1926 to 2015 under the title *Solusi Problematika Aktual Hukum Islam Keputusan Muktamar, Munas dan Konbes Nahdlatul Ulama* (Rulings of the Legal Experts Based on the Congres of NU; *Ahkam al Fuqaha Fi Muqarrat Mu'tamarat Nahdlatul Ulama*). However, this book is not circulated widely, but now it can be found at the online bookstore. Muhammadiyah also publish its fatwa under the title *Himpunan Putusan Majelis Tarjih* (The Compilation of

Tarjih Decision). This compilation is usually distributed only at event of organization and Islamic schools. Unfortunately, this book still needs revision to simplify the language used and beautify its layout.

In addition to Indonesian Muslim organizations, more and more Indonesian traditional prominent Muslim scholars with old *santri* background begin to use new media to convey the message of moderate and inclusive Islam and give a lecture on Islamic learning tradition as taking place in traditional *pesantren*. In order to obtain a wider audience, they no longer use conventional teaching means and method to convey similar subjects as they have implemented in their *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). They use Youtube channel and Facebook live facilities to share their expertise on Islamic courses ranging from *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr* to *tasawuf* (Sufism). One example of this new trend is Ngaji Ihya Ulumudin YouTube channel initiated by Ulil Abshar Abdalla, who was known as proponent of Islam Liberal. This YouTube channel presents the instructional teaching on Ihya Ululummuddin, a well-known Sufi book written by Imam al-Ghazali (d.1111). Of course, Ulil Abshar presents the book's content using a language that general audiences can easily understand. Moreover, there are many other examples of how Indonesian traditional religious authorities use new media to challenge rampant exclusive understanding of Islam in the Internet and fill new media with their moderate understanding of Islam (*wasatiyah Islam*). For instance, Kyai Mustafa Bisri, Kyai Bahauddin Nursalim known as Gus Baha, and other Muslim scholars (ulama) also use a new media such as youtube channel to teach regularly classical books (*kitab kuning*) on Sufism, Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), prophet biography, and Islamic ethic. Both Muslim scholars are the head of *pesantren* in Java (known as kyai) who regularly teach these books to their students at *pesantren*. Students of Indonesian *pesantren* have been familiar with these books. It is clear here that instead of disappearing because of the introduction of new media and the emergence of new religious authority, the position of traditional religious authority becomes strong using new media as their means of shaping Islam and challenging exclusive understanding of Islam in Indonesia. In other words, with their authorities, the traditional religious authority initiates creative adaptations by utilizing technology as an instrument to produce, reproduce and disseminate their religious discourse to a wider range of society.

## An Overview of *Pusat Studi Qur'an* and the *Cariustadz.id* Platform

*Cariustadz.id* is a dawah platform initiated by Assegaf Hamzah & Partners (AHP) and *Pusat Studi Qur'an/PSQ* (Center for Qur'an Studies) under the auspices of Da'wah Lentera Hati Indonesia Foundation. (*Cari Ustadz | Aplikasi Terlengkap Untuk Mencari Ustadz*, t.t.) Muhammad Quraish Shihab founded Center for Qur'an Studies itself on September 18, 2004. The emergence of rampant acts of terrorism and the rise of radicalism brought by some religious groups were behind the establishment of this center (Fadal, 2020: 59). In the meantime, the presence of the *Cariustadz.id* platform is to meet the needs of urban communities, especially in finding preachers who are qualified, competent and suit their needs and giving them access to get the right religious teaching in the midst of information storm in the digital age. As stated by the CEO of *Cariustadz.id*, Agus Rahmanto, the presence of *Cariustadz.id* is driven by the concern about the increasing number of preachers who spread anger and hatred instead of hospitality. In line with the objectives of the Center for Qur'an Studies establishment, the platform aims at connecting people with competent preachers who promote moderate Islam understanding. To support its mission, the Center recruits no less than 322 preachers who have joined since June 2020, most of whom are the Center for Qur'an Studies cadre alumni.

Regarding the cadre alumni, the Center for Qur'an Studies has set five programs; 1) its collaboration with several Qur'an study institutions through scientific activities including seminars, *halaqah* (religious gathering) and training, 2) Study of Interpretation Program, in term of *Pendidikan Kader Mufasir/PKM* (*Mufasir* Cadre Education), *PPT/Pendidikan Pasca Tahfidz* (Post-Tahfidz Education) and *Daurah Bidayatul Mufassir*, 3) Friday preachers assistance at Bellagio Mall, Kuningan, Jakarta, 4) Interpretation Study gathering held at Bayt Qur'an Islamic Boarding School, Pondok Cabe, South Tangerang, and 5) the "Living Qur'an" program as a periodic program focusing on Qur'an learning curriculum for school-age children (Fadal, 2020: 59–64).

The *Cariustadz.id* platform works like a search portal. By entering the [www.cariustadz.id](http://www.cariustadz.id) website page, a user will find two search categories, by type of activity and location of the activity. In the type of activity bar, four options are available: (1) family study including *aqeeqah*, weddings, *tasyakuran* (thanksgiving), and regular sermon; (2) group

studies including corporate/government institutions, organizations, group sermon, *Rukun Tetangga-Rukun Warga* (Neighborhood and Ward); (3) Personal Guidance including personal/family private guidance to get more understanding of Islam; (4) Friday and Islamic Holiday sermons including Friday prayer, Eid Fitri/Eid Adha, *tasyakuran* (thanksgiving), weddings, and ceremonial events. Regarding the location of the activity, the Cariustadz.id can only cover Jakarta areas and other satellite cities, including Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi.

### **Preacher Qualifications and Moderate Islam Discourse**

In recruiting preachers, the Cariustadz.id platform has arranged three selection techniques; First, those who are directly invited or requested by the platform to join, most of whom are famous figures in the Islamic academic world and among society such as Prof. Dr. Nasarudin Umar, Prof. Dr. Ahmad Thib Raya and Dr. Hamdani Anwar. In addition, the request for the preachers to join is also based on the recommendations from several institutions that work with the platform including *Lembaga Dakwah Nahdlatul Ulama/LDNU* (NU Dawah Institute), the World Organization for Al-Azhar Graduates (Al Azhar Cairo Alumni Association) and *Perguruan Tinggi Ilmu Al-Qur'an/PTIQ* (College of Qur'an Sciences) Jakarta. The second selection technique is almost similar to the first one. The only difference is that this technique is based on the recommendation from the preachers who have already joined.

The third technique is recruitment registration. Here, a prospective preacher who wishes to join the Cariustadz.id platform must meet several criteria including (1) ability to read Qur'an properly and correctly; (2) ability to understand the yellow books; (3) holding undergraduate or equivalent education either from a domestic or foreign educational institution; (4) an alumni from a traditional or modern Islamic boarding school for at least 3 years; and (5) having no tendency or bias to a certain political party. This clearly shows that the Cariustadz.id platform has strengthened its legitimacy and solidified its position as part of the traditional religious authorities by carefully selecting and taking the educational background of the prospective preachers and institution partners into account. This totally contradicts with the new authorities that do not even question the educational background of the preachers.

Evie Effendie, for example, is accepted by Muslim youths in Bandung due to his background as a former motorbike gang member (Han, 2019). The criteria of Cariustadz' preachers are different compared to the criteria made by Indonesia Ulama Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*) on The Guidance of Islamic Preaching for Islamic Preaching Commission Throughout Indonesia. Unlike Cariustadz, the Islamic Preaching Commission of MUI does not require Muslim preachers to understand Islamic classical books (*kitab kuning*) as a part of competencies that is necessary for Muslim preachers. The Chapter IV of the guidance on The Integrity and Competency of Muslim Preachers stipulates that:

'Dakwah activists and Muslim preachers in the community must fulfill criteria and competencies as Muslim preacher (*dai*) in his or her dakwah mission. 1. Integrity and quality of Muslim preachers (*dai*) at least include as follows:...c. the competency of knowledge: Especially for Muslim preachers (*dai muballigh*), they have to have preacher competency in the normative, applicative, and practical knowledge aspects such as mastering of the propositions of Qur'an and Prophet tradition in term of reading (*tilawatan*), understanding (*fahman*), and daily practices (*tatbikan*)...' (Dakwah, 2017)

Apart from the qualifications of the prospective preachers, the Cariustadz.id platform also focuses on the discourse or material to deliver. To this end, it provides them education and training in term of the cadre program at the Center for Qur'an Studies. They are given an understanding of moderate Islam by interpreting the Qur'an based on the rules and contextualization that is in line with the Indonesian contexts. Some of the programs that have been implemented so far include: (1) *Pendidikan Kader Mufasir/PKM* (*Mufasir* Cadre Education), (2) *PPT/Pendidikan Pasca Tahfidz* (Post-Tahfidz Education) and (3) *Daurah Bidayatul Mufassir*. The *Mufasir* Cadre Education, for example, is a regeneration program for those who have already got a basic understanding of interpretation study. Most of them are the hafiz of the Holy Qur'an and lecturers. For this reason, the alumni of this program are required to promote the values of moderate Islam to their respective communities (Fadal, 2020, 64–65). This program has produced about 240 *mufasir* cadres from all over Indonesia. In the meantime, the Post-Tahfidz Program is a regeneration program intended for the Hafiz of the Holy Qur'an to have expertise in Qur'an and Islamic studies. The participants are also provided with the entrepreneurial skills they need

when they return to society. Until now, this program has produced about 549 graduates. Lastly, the *Daurah Bidayatul Mufasssir* program is beginner *mufasssir* training for higher education students majoring in Islamic and Qur'an studies. There have been around 1132 alumni of this program so far.

A discourse on moderate Islam or what is often referred to as *Islam Wasathiyah*, is inseparable from the discourse developed by the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU). The discourse includes four basic concepts; *tawasut* (moderate), *tawāzun* (equivalent), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerant) and *i'tidāl* (standing up for the truth and justice). (Ibrahim dkk., 2019: 13) These moderation values become the Cariustadz.id platform commitment, to always promoting them to all Muslims in Indonesia.

The information about the religious education background in each preacher's profile is one of the reasons users choose the Cariustadz.id platform as a media to find preachers in their environment. A Cariustadz.id platform user, Dimas, as a mosque administrator in Bintaro area, South Tangerang, admittedly said:

'Our mosque regularly conducts a *pengajian* (sermon) activity. As we do not know which one fits and has knowledge and expertise that can be accounted for, I finally decided to find one on Cariustadz.id platform. The concept offered by the platform, in my opinion, is like Gojek application. Information about where they studied and alike is available. This is very important due the emergence of many preachers who do not have religious education background. I once searched on the internet to find a preacher, but it was not clear which institution he was under to support. In contrast, the Cariustadz.id platform is clearly under the Center for Qur'an Studies (Dimas, komunikasi pribadi, t.t.)'

## **New Media and the Aspirations of the Middle-Class Urban Muslims**

Besides preparing programs for the preachers, the Cariustadz.id platform also create a program for the people. The program is classified into two categories, basic and advanced programs. In the basic program, for example, the platform offers a website that can display the preachers' profile in detail. This is taken to educate people to be always critical and selective in choosing a preacher. In addition, it also offers several curricula for structured Islamic learning, such as Islam for Beginners curriculum, pre-marriage and marriage curriculum, curriculum for



*muallaf* (converts), and curriculum for children and adolescents. The advanced program consists of Regular Private/Corporate Study, Chat/ Consultation, and Video Contents on several platforms.

The curricula offered by the platform, *Islam for Beginner* for example, shows that the market segmentation is middle-class urban Muslims who really need to know Islam. The Salafi group targets the same segmentation in the way the majority of the members of Qur'an learners are those who have never experienced formal religious education such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) although they are highly educated (holding undergraduate degree to say the least) (Pribadi, 2020: 223). The pre-marriage and marriage curriculum has something to do with the trends among Muslim youth today, where pre-marriage seminars and the #IndonesiaTanpaPacaran movement are run by Islamist groups in Indonesia.

Figure 2. Cariustadz.id Poster - *Paket Pengajian Online: Islam for Beginner*



The concept of this sermon is held at homes where the preachers come to. It is similar to what happened to the Salafi community. Such sermon activity is exclusively attended by dozens of participants and mostly takes place in the participants' houses in turn, (Pribadi, 2020: 214) while the host provides facilities such as a whiteboard and a loudspeaker and serve the food and beverages (Dewi, 2020). The

concept the platform offers is more advanced due to the ease of access through its digital platform. In other words, the participants can choose any preachers according to their criteria and needs.

Further, the platform users are also offered a more detailed search filter besides type of activity and location of the activity bars. More options including gender, age range, and video content (whether the preachers have it or not) are available. This reminds us of the search filter feature in e-Commerce that can help buyers find the items they are looking for specifically. The video content feature owned by the preachers is similar to product review videos, where potential buyers can watch them, read the reviews and decide to buy the product. Here, the platform attempts to accommodate the aspirations of middle-class urban Muslims, who have already been accustomed to e-Commerce, by offering search convenience to find preachers who can meet their needs. This is what the today's society mostly complains about. It seems difficult to find preachers as stated by Ali Nurdin, one of the platform initiators:

“... the society mostly complains about their difficulty to find competent religious persons/preachers to attend the regular religious events they are holding. That is one of the reasons the Cariustadz.id platform is offered, to connect them with the preachers as if the Center for Qur'an Studies were a kitchen where different types of halal (competent) food and *thayyiban*/healthy (moderate) menus were prepared and the Cariustadz.id platform were the restaurant ready to help and serve them to the people.”

### **Strengthening Traditional Religious Authority Through Cyber fatwa: the Case of Cariustadz.id**

In contrast to rural Muslims who can directly consult local religious experts regarding their religious questions, urban middle-class Muslims rely greatly on their religious answers from websites that provide cyber fatwas. They do shopping fatwas by seeking fatwas on the Internet to get answers that suit their interests. The founders of Cariustadz.id understand this changing religious behavior of the urban middle class Muslims. In response to this change, the founders provide a special cyber fatwa platform so that the urban middle class Muslim can get answers to religious issues that become their daily questions. Founders of this platform point out that the presence of this Cariustadz is to provide friendly Muslim preachers as well as moderate and inclusive religious

cyber fatwas in response to rampant hate speech and intolerant fatwas in cyberspace.

In addition to the search and profile features where the information about preachers can be found, the Cariustadz.id platform also offers cyber fatwa in the form of question and answer called *Tanya Ustadz* (Ask Preachers) feature. This feature is used to accommodate and answer any questions from the users regarding religious issues. This feature is located at the bottom right corner. After a click, a pop up window will appear displaying name, phone number, email address and question boxes. The question will be linked to the application owned by certain preachers to answer it. Not all preachers are assigned to answer the question of petitioners. Several preachers are chosen to respond the question based on the expertise of the preachers. They often discuss the question among them and find the best answer. In turn, the answer will be posted on the Cariustadz.id page. It is clear here that the process of formulating the fatwa in the platform is carried out collectively rather than individually. Likewise, the formulation of fatwa in Indonesian Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama , Muhammadiyah, PERSIS and The Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia) is carried out through the process of consultation, discussion and collective reasoning.

Questions asked by individual inquirer (*mustafti*) are related to diverse topics including questions on Islamic jurisprudence, theology, Qur'anic exegesis, sufism, Islamic ethic, and contemporary issues that have no precedence in the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition. Most of the questions are associated with old and contemporary *fiqh*. For instance, fatwa petitioner asks whether or not non-Muslim are allowed to enter mosque. In responding this questions, Cariustadz issues the fatwa arguing that non-Muslims are allowed to enter mosque since the Prophet Muhammad allowed many non-Muslim to enter mosque as long as they are able to keep the cleanness and the holiness of the mosque. To support his answer, Quraish Shihab quotes several prominent Qur'anic interpreters (*mufassir*) and Muhammad Sayyid Thanthawiy, the president of Al-Azhar University. This fatwa shows how traditional religious authorities who support this cyber fatwa promote an inclusive understanding of Islam. Another fatwa petitioner (*mustafti*) asks how Islam views the celebration of the Valentine Day and whether or not

it is legal for Muslim to celebrate it. The team of cyber fatwa answer the question saying that the celebration of the Valentine Day is not legalized by Islam since this tradition derive from Christian tradition. The Valentine Day was initially to celebrate St. Valentine killed by Roman King in 270 AD. because of his teaching on sincerity, bravery, and resignation. It is clear that the question is asked by typical urban Muslim who may see the celebration of Valentine Day among teenagers in urban areas. Each question asked to Cariustadz.id is answered either by a prominent Muslim scholars and experts such as Quraish Shihab or the team of Center for Qur'an Studies (PSQ). Quraish Shihab has been known as leading Indonesian Qur'anic interpreter (*mufassir*) who has a high quality of traditional religious authority. With his academic competency, he certainly deserves to fulfill the requirements of being a mufti. His team in the Centre for Qur'an Studies also has credibility and deep Islamic knowledge and academic competencies since it consists of graduates of Al-Azhar University with Islamic studies background and leading Islamic pesantren in Indonesia. As a result, by looking at Muslim scholars who support the cyber fatwa platform, the quality of assurance of fatwa is guaranteed. In other words, the content quality of cyber fatwa issued by Cariustadz.id is credible because of the competence of mufti who support the cyber fatwa platform. In addition, a close examination of fatwas issued by Cariustadz.id reveals that this cyber fatwa platform still strictly follows the orthodox tenets of Islamic jurisprudence.

This kind of question-and-answer feature plays a significant role especially for urban Muslims who often face contemporary issues that did not exist before, but need answers based on an Islamic perspective. The quick response to the question on the *Tanya Ustadz* feature is different from several fatwas issued by the fatwa authorities in several Islamic mass organizations that take a long time to respond to any questions posed by Muslims. Such quick response in answering their questions concerning religious issues, both *aqidah* (faith) and *mu'amalah* (transactions) is essential especially in today's era. Nadirsyah Hosen mentions online published-fatwas is a lot easier to disseminate than the paper-based fatwa which is often used by mainstream Islamic organizations including *Nahdatul Ulama*, *Muhammadiyah* and Ulama Indonesian Council (Hosen, 2008). In addition, the *Bahitsul Masail*, *Tarjih Council* and *Mudzakaroh* Council at Nahdatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah,

and Ulama Indonesian Council respectively require a long process. However, these organizations recently have initiated creative adaptations by utilizing technology as an instrument to produce, reproduce and disseminate their fatwa to a wider range of society.

## Conclusions

The fragmentation of religious authorities in Indonesia due to the democratic atmosphere, development of communication and information technology, and the proliferation of mass education have posed challenges to traditionalist *Nahdlatul Ulama* and modernist *Muhammadiyah*. There emerged new religious authorities without being trained in the religious education system and the absence of classical religious books as authoritative sources of knowledge but relying on their ability to accommodate the aspirations of their audience, particularly the middle-class urban Muslims. Consequently, besides the plain literalist styles of religious understanding, new discourses that contradict the principle of *tawasut* (moderate), *tawāzun* (equivalent), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerant) and *i'tidāl* (standing up for the truth and justice) have dominated. This has encouraged the traditional religious authority (old santri) to take the initiatives to solve the problems. While accommodating the aspirations of middle-class urban Muslims with new media, the traditional religious authority offers an answer by providing authoritative Islamic preachers and cyber fatwa through the Internet. Adopting new media means that the traditional ulama attempt to maintain and extend their religious authority among new audiences, namely the middle class Muslim urbanites. Thus, within the dynamic religious fields and rapid social changes, the traditional ulama never lose their position and role because they are custodians of change or adaptive agents adopting new forms of globalization products while engaging in transformative programs.

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**Arif Zamhari<sup>1</sup>, Muhamad Ibtissam Han<sup>2</sup>, Zulkifli<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,3</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta

<sup>2</sup>Institut PTIQ Jakarta

E-mail: <sup>1</sup>arif.zamhari@uinjkt.ac.id, <sup>2</sup>mibtissamhan@ptiq.ac.id, <sup>3</sup>zulkifli@uinjkt.ac.id