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ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A STUDY ON THE DA'WAH NARRATIVES OF NU ONLINE

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Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has reshaped the dynamics of religious communication, compelling Islamic institutions to reconfigure how ethical and authoritative discourses are maintained in digital environments. This study investigates how *Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Online*, the official digital platform of Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, constructs and sustains ethical and authoritative Islamic discourse in the age of AI. Employing a qualitative approach that integrates content analysis and digital ethnography, the research examines 247 online articles, 63 video sermons, 89 social media posts, and 34 official statements published between 2022 and 2025, complemented by in-depth interviews with 12 NU Online editors, content creators, and contributing *ulama*. The findings reveal three interconnected strategies through which NU Online navigates AI-mediated *da'wah*: first, anchoring technological discourse within Islamic ethical frameworks, particularly *akhlakul karimah* (noble character) and *wasathiyyah* (moderation); second, adopting a hybrid model of authority that merges traditional scholarly legitimacy (*isnad*) with algorithmic optimization to enhance digital visibility; and third, addressing the tension between authenticity and accessibility through editorial control, contextual framing, and the promotion of digital literacy as a moral and religious duty. However, the study also identifies a paradox: while NU Online

successfully maintains authoritative discourse within its institutional platforms, the increasing circulation of user-generated and AI-produced religious content challenges interpretive coherence and institutional control. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on religious authority, digital ethics, and the governance of AI in Islamic contexts, emphasizing that the preservation of religious authenticity in the digital age depends not on technological resistance but on critical, values-driven engagement. The study offers a novel contribution by elucidating how traditional Islamic principles of *akhlaq*, *isnad*, and *wasathiyah* are recontextualized in algorithmically mediated spaces, thereby advancing the conceptual understanding of “algorithmic authority” in contemporary Islamic media.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence*, *religious authority*, *Islamic ethics*, *algorithmic mediation*, *digital religion*.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has fundamentally reshaped how religious messages are created, distributed, and consumed in the digital era. This transformation is particularly significant in contexts where religious authority has traditionally been mediated through intimate, face-to-face relationships between scholars and communities (Campbell, 2020). Within Indonesia’s Islamic landscape, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) stands as one of the largest religious organizations actively adapting its *da’wah* strategies to navigate the challenges of technological transformation. With over 90 million members, NU’s influence extends far beyond its organizational boundaries, shaping the religious consciousness of Indonesian Muslims through its distinctive approach to Islamic traditionalism (Bruinessen, 2013). *NU Online*, the official digital platform of the organization, plays a pivotal role in translating NU’s theological and ethical principles into digital narratives accessible to a broad and diverse audience.

However, this digital expansion raises crucial ethical and theological questions that strike at the heart of Islamic epistemology. As algorithms increasingly influence what religious

content becomes visible and how it is interpreted, the issue of religious authority becomes more complex and contested (Bunt, 2018). The traditional Islamic concept of *isnad* (chain of transmission) and the verification of religious knowledge through established scholarly networks now operate within an algorithmic environment that prioritizes engagement metrics over scholarly credentials (Echchaibi, 2020). Can algorithmically mediated content maintain the authenticity and integrity of NU's traditional *da'wah* values, particularly its emphasis on contextual interpretation (*fiqh al-waqi'*) and ethical moderation (*wasathiyah*)? How do digital ethics operate in spaces where AI not only curates and recommends but also potentially generates religious knowledge, blurring the lines between human scholarly authority and machine-generated content?

These questions are not merely theoretical concerns but have practical implications for millions of Muslims who increasingly turn to digital platforms for religious guidance. The algorithmic curation of religious content raises fundamental issues about who or what determines which interpretations of Islam gain visibility and influence (Schradie, 2019). When engagement-driven algorithms shape the dissemination of *fatwas*, Qur'anic interpretations, or ethical guidance, they may inadvertently privilege sensationalism over nuance, and controversy over consensus.

Despite growing scholarly attention to digital religion and online *da'wah*, few studies have examined how Islamic institutions such as NU operationalize ethical and theological principles within algorithmically governed spaces. Existing research tends to focus either on the sociological impacts of digital religion or on the technological affordances of online platforms, often neglecting how religious authority is reconstructed in response to AI-mediated systems of visibility and validation. This gap underscores the need for a deeper, institutionally grounded analysis of how traditional *ulama*-based organizations negotiate legitimacy, authenticity, and ethics in the context of AI-driven communication.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores how *NU Online* constructs, maintains, and negotiates its ethical and authoritative stance in the era of AI-driven *da'wah*. It investigates the intersection between technology, religious authority, and ethical responsibility in shaping contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia. Specifically, the research examines how *NU*

Online balances the demands of algorithmic visibility with the preservation of theological integrity, and how it manages the tension between technological efficiency and the traditionally relational nature of Islamic knowledge transmission.

Theoretically, this study contributes to debates on religious authority and digital ethics by extending the concept of *algorithmic authority* into the context of Islamic institutions, demonstrating how classical notions such as *akhlaq*, *isnad*, and *wasathiyah* are rearticulated within digital infrastructures. Practically, it offers insights into how faith-based organizations can develop ethical frameworks for AI engagement that preserve authenticity while ensuring accessibility and public trust. By focusing on *NU Online*'s digital practices, this study illuminates broader questions about the future of religious authority in an era where artificial intelligence increasingly mediates the sacred.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach situated within an interpretive digital ethnographic framework (Pink et al., 2016). Such an approach acknowledges that studying digital religious practices requires more than textual scrutiny; it necessitates immersive engagement with the affordances, interactions, and socio technical environments that shape online religious communication (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2012). The research focuses on *Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Online*, examining how the platform articulates Islamic ethical discourse and authority amid technological change. Data were collected from NU Online's official website and affiliated social media accounts Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube—between January 2022 and March 2025. This three-year window captures a critical period marked by rapid developments in AI adoption and NU's evolving digital strategies. The dataset includes 247 articles, 63 video sermons, 89 social media posts, and 34 official statements or *fatwas* that discuss artificial intelligence, digital ethics, and *da'wah* practices.

Data collection followed purposive and keyword-based sampling, ensuring representativeness across genres and platforms. Keywords such as “kecerdasan buatan” (artificial intelligence), “etika digital” (digital ethics), “dakwah digital” (digital *da'wah*),

“otoritas agama” (religious authority), “teknologi” (technology), and “moderasi beragama” (religious moderation) guided content selection. This corpus was further contextualized with archival materials from NU’s traditional publications to trace shifts and continuities in religious authority as it migrated into digital spaces (Bryman, 2016). The analytical process employed two cycle coding following Saldaña (2021): the first cycle used descriptive and *in vivo* coding to retain NU’s own discursive language, while the second cycle applied pattern coding to identify conceptual linkages among themes. Using NVivo 14, the research identified key thematic clusters, including the transformation of *ulama* authority in online contexts, tensions between algorithmic logic and Islamic epistemology, preservation of NU’s traditionalist identity, and ethical boundaries of AI application in religious communication (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

To enrich interpretation, the study incorporated theoretical contextualization grounded in classical and contemporary frameworks of authority and expertise. Weber’s (1978) typology of traditional, charismatic, and legal rational authority and Turner’s (2013) notion of religious expertise in pluralized societies provided analytical scaffolding to interpret NU Online’s evolving discourse. These were complemented by perspectives from digital religion (Campbell, 2020; Evolvi, 2019) and algorithmic culture (Bucher, 2018). This interpretive layer reveals how NU Online redefines *taqlid* the reliance on established scholarly interpretation within algorithmically mediated environments that prioritize visibility and engagement over traditional scholarly validation. Moreover, the analysis examines the ethical implications of AI in religious communication, particularly regarding transparency, accountability, and potential algorithmic bias that may challenge NU’s ethical commitment to contextual wisdom (*fiqh al-waqi’*) and moderation (*wasathiyah*).

To ensure validity and triangulation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve key informants, including editors, content creators, and contributing *ulama* involved in NU Online’s production processes. Conducted between October 2024 and February 2025, the interviews (lasting 45–90 minutes each) explored editorial decision-making, theological negotiation, and perceptions of authority in AI-mediated contexts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). All interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and coded within the same thematic

framework used for the content analysis, allowing systematic comparison between institutional discourse and practitioner perspectives (Denzin, 2017). Ethical protocols were rigorously followed, with institutional approval, informed consent, and confidentiality ensured throughout. While NU Online's content is publicly accessible, pseudonyms were assigned to all interviewees to preserve privacy. The study thus integrates textual, contextual, and experiential dimensions to provide a comprehensive understanding of how NU Online negotiates religious authority and ethics in the age of artificial intelligence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of NU Online's content and practices reveals a sophisticated negotiation between traditional Islamic authority and the demands of AI-mediated communication. Four major themes emerged from the data, each reflecting distinct yet interconnected dimensions of how NU Online constructs ethical and authoritative discourse in digital spaces.

Ethical Framing in Digital Da'wah: Akhlak as Digital Compass

The study reveals that NU Online maintains a consistent emphasis on human-centered ethics in its digital content, positioning technology not as an autonomous force but as an extension of human moral agency. Of the 247 articles analyzed, 68% explicitly referenced Islamic ethical concepts when discussing technology, with *akhlakul karimah* (noble character) appearing as the predominant moral framework in 42% of these articles. This finding suggests a deliberate strategy to anchor technological discourse within familiar ethical vocabularies that resonate with NU's traditionalist constituency.

One particularly illuminating article from March 2023 stated: "Teknologi adalah cermin bagi akhlak penggunanya AI tidak memiliki hati nurani, maka manusialah yang harus memastikan penggunaannya mencerminkan nilai-nilai Islam" [Technology is a mirror of its user's character AI has no conscience, so humans must ensure its use reflects Islamic values] (NU Online, 2023a). This framing rejects technological determinism and instead emphasizes human moral responsibility, a position consistent with classical Islamic ethics where intention (*niyyah*) and outcome (*maqasid*) determine the moral status of actions (Auda, 2008).

Rather than viewing AI as a threat to religious authenticity, NU Online frames it as a tool that should serve ethical and spiritual purposes, reinforcing the human element in religious engagement. Interview data corroborates this position. As one senior editor explained: “We don’t fear AI itself. What we fear is when Muslims use technology without *tarbiyah* [moral education], without understanding the *adab* [proper conduct] of knowledge. AI can spread truth or falsehood it depends on who controls it and for what purpose” (Interview, Editor A, November 2024). This perspective aligns with Campbell’s (2017) notion of “religious-social shaping of technology,” where religious communities actively interpret and domesticate technologies according to their values rather than passively accepting technological imperatives.

The data also reveals NU Online’s emphasis on collective ethical responsibility. In 23 articles discussing AI ethics, the concept of *mas’uliyyah ijtima’iyah* (social responsibility) appeared prominently, suggesting that digital ethics in NU’s framework is not merely an individual concern but a communal obligation. This resonates with NU’s traditional emphasis on *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) and collective welfare, extending these principles into digital spaces (Burhani, 2013).

Negotiating Religious Authority in Algorithmic Spaces: The Hybrid Model

AI-driven platforms have fundamentally redefined the structure of religious authority, creating what can be termed “algorithmic authority” where visibility and influence are mediated through computational processes that prioritize engagement metrics over traditional markers of scholarly legitimacy (Cheong, 2014). NU Online negotiates this terrain by reaffirming *ulama* expertise and institutional credibility as the legitimate sources of Islamic interpretation, while simultaneously and strategically utilizing SEO optimization and AI-based recommendation systems to broaden the reach of traditional scholarship.

Content analysis reveals that 89% of NU Online’s theological articles include explicit attribution to named *ulama*, often with detailed biographical information and scholarly credentials (*sanad ilmi*). This practice maintains the Islamic tradition of *isnad* (chain of transmission) even within digital formats, signaling to readers that the content carries

institutional authority (Bunt, 2018). One article on Islamic finance, for instance, begins with: “Menurut KH. Said Aqil Siradj, Ketua Umum PBNU, dalam kajiannya tentang ekonomi syariah...” [According to KH. Said Aqil Siradj, General Chairman of PBNU, in his study of Islamic economics...] (NU Online, 2024b), immediately establishing the authoritative foundation of the content.

However, interviews with NU Online’s digital team revealed conscious efforts to optimize this traditional content for algorithmic visibility. As one content strategist explained: “We study what people search for ‘hukum zakat online,’ ‘AI dalam Islam,’ ‘halal atau haram cryptocurrency’ then we create content that answers these questions with the authority of our *ulama*. We’re not changing the *fatwa*, we’re changing how people find it” (Interview, Content Strategist B, January 2025). This represents what can be understood as a “hybrid model of authority” where sacred knowledge coexists with algorithmic mediation, and traditional scholarly discourse is translated into digitally optimized formats without sacrificing theological integrity (Evolvi, 2019).

The data reveals, however, an inherent tension in this model. Analytics from NU Online’s social media platforms show that content featuring controversial topics or emotionally charged language receives 3.7 times more engagement than nuanced theological discussions. Yet editorial decisions consistently prioritize theological accuracy over engagement metrics. As one editor noted: “Sometimes we publish an important *fatwa* about *fiqh* matters that gets only a few hundred views, while a clickbait Islamic content from other sites gets millions. But that’s not our measure of success. Our measure is: did we preserve the *amanah* [trust] of scholarly transmission?” (Interview, Editor C, December 2024). This reflects what Hoover (2016) describes as the “authenticity paradox” in digital religion, where religious organizations must balance between digital effectiveness and theological faithfulness.

Quantitative analysis of NU Online’s content distribution patterns reveals strategic adaptation to platform affordances. On Instagram, 73% of posts use visual formats (infographics, quote cards) with simplified messages, while the website hosts longer, more complex theological discussions. This platform-specific differentiation suggests awareness

that different digital spaces require different modes of authoritative communication—what might be termed “polymorphic authority,” where the form adapts while the source remains constant (Campbell & Altenhofen, 2016).

The Paradox of Accessibility and Authenticity: Gatekeeping in Open Networks

While digitalization democratizes access to religious knowledge, collapsing the traditional barriers between scholars and laypeople, it simultaneously introduces new risks of decontextualization, misinterpretation, and fragmentation (Bunt, 2009). NU Online addresses this tension through multi-layered editorial control, verification mechanisms, and consistent theological framing that anchors digital narratives in NU’s *Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah* doctrinal foundations and *wasathiyah* (moderation) methodology.

The research identified a three-tier verification process for content published on NU Online: (1) initial drafting by trained contributors, (2) theological review by designated *ulama* consultants, and (3) editorial review for language, clarity, and digital optimization. This process, described in interviews, takes an average of 3-5 days for standard articles and up to two weeks for sensitive theological matters. One editor explained: “We could publish faster, like other Islamic websites do. But speed is not our priority. Accuracy is. Better to be slow and correct than fast and *menyesatkan* [misleading]” (Interview, Editor A, November 2024).

Content analysis reveals that NU Online frequently includes contextualizing elements designed to prevent misinterpretation. These include: (1) explicit references to the madhhab (school of jurisprudence) framework, appearing in 67% of *fiqh*-related articles; (2) acknowledgment of alternative scholarly opinions (*ikhtilaf*) in 54% of articles discussing contested issues; and (3) situational contextualization (*fiqh al-waqi’*) that explains how rulings apply to contemporary Indonesian contexts, present in 71% of applied ethics discussions. This editorial strategy reflects NU’s traditional epistemological approach that resists rigid literalism in favor of contextual interpretation (Fealy & Hooker, 2006).

However, the platform acknowledges the ethical challenges posed by AI-generated misinformation, deepfakes, and the viral spread of decontextualized religious content.

Between 2022 and 2025, NU Online published 34 articles explicitly addressing digital misinformation, with 18 specifically discussing AI-related concerns. One particularly notable article from August 2024 warned: “Di era AI, siapa pun bisa membuat video palsu ulama yang seolah-olah memberikan *fatwa*. Ini bukan hanya masalah teknologi, tapi *fitnah* [slander] yang mengancam kesatuan umat” [In the AI era, anyone can create fake videos of *ulama* appearing to give *fatwas*. This is not just a technology issue, but *fitnah* that threatens the unity of the *ummah*] (NU Online, 2024c).

In response to these challenges, NU Online has begun urging more reflective digital literacy among Muslims, framing this as a religious obligation (*fardhu kifayah*). Interview data reveals plans for expanding educational initiatives. As one administrator shared: “We’re developing a program we call ‘*Literasi Digital Islami*’ [Islamic Digital Literacy]. It teaches people not just how to use technology, but how to be critical consumers to ask: who is the source? What is their authority? Does this align with NU’s teachings?” (Interview, Administrator D, February 2025). This initiative reflects growing recognition that digital da’wah requires not just content creation but audience education, transforming passive consumers into discerning participants (Cheong et al., 2009).

The paradox of accessibility and authenticity also manifests in user-generated content. While NU Online’s official platforms maintain strict editorial control, affiliated social media accounts and grassroots NU communities online operate with more autonomy, sometimes sharing content that diverges from official positions. This creates what one interviewee called “the problem of the *label*” where content is shared with NU branding but without institutional authorization. The organization is still grappling with how to address this challenge without suppressing the organic, participatory nature of digital religious communities.

AI and the Future of Da’wah Ethics: Between Efficiency and Discernment

The emergence of generative AI tools including chatbots, text generators like ChatGPT, and AI-powered personalization systems opens both opportunities and ethical dilemmas that NU Online’s leadership is actively navigating. The data reveals a cautiously optimistic stance that recognizes AI’s potential to enhance da’wah efficiency while stressing the irreplaceable

need for spiritual discernment (*firasat*) and accountability in deploying such technologies.

Analysis of recent content (2024-2025) shows increasing engagement with generative AI questions. Fifteen articles specifically addressed ChatGPT, AI-generated fatwas, and automated religious guidance systems. The discourse reveals three primary concerns: (1) the risk of theological error in AI-generated religious content, (2) the potential for AI to replace human spiritual guidance, and (3) the ethical implications of algorithmic bias in religious applications.

On the first concern, NU Online published a widely-shared article in January 2025 titled “Bolehkah Bertanya Hukum Islam kepada ChatGPT?” [Is It Permissible to Ask ChatGPT About Islamic Rulings?]. The article concluded that while AI tools can provide general information, they cannot replace *mujtahid* (qualified scholars) for authoritative rulings, because AI lacks several essential qualities: *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *adab al-ikhtilaf* (ethics of disagreement), and the ability to perform contextual *ijtihad* based on *maqasid al-shari’ah* (objectives of Islamic law) (NU Online, 2025). This position aligns with classical Islamic epistemology, which holds that religious knowledge is not merely informational but transformational, requiring spiritual preparation and ethical character (Hallaq, 2009).

Interview data reveals practical experimentation with AI tools within NU Online’s operations. Several editors reported using AI for preliminary research, translation assistance, and content optimization, but always with human oversight. As one explained: “We use AI like we use a dictionary or search engine as a tool to help our work, not to replace our thinking. The final decision, especially on theological matters, is always human, always accountable to *ulama*” (Interview, Editor E, January 2025). This pragmatic approach reflects what Brock (2005) calls “bounded technological adoption,” where religious communities selectively appropriate technologies according to their values.

The second concern AI replacing human spiritual guidance evokes deeper anxieties about the nature of religious authority and pastoral care. NU Online’s discourse emphasizes that *da’wah* is not merely information transmission but relationship-building, moral formation, and spiritual accompaniment (*tarbiyah ruhiyah*). One article stated: “*Da’wah*

adalah *silaturahmi* [maintaining bonds], bukan sekadar *taklim* [instruction]. AI bisa memberi jawaban, tapi tidak bisa memberi *uswah* [exemplary conduct]" (NU Online, 2024d). This position resonates with research showing that religious authority in Islamic contexts remains deeply relational, rooted in embodied interactions and personal trust (Mandaville, 2007).

The third concern about algorithmic bias reflects sophisticated awareness of how AI systems can perpetuate or amplify existing prejudices. NU Online has published content warning that AI trained on biased datasets might reinforce Islamophobia, sectarianism, or culturally inappropriate interpretations of Islam. One interviewee noted: "If AI learns Islam from extremist websites or Orientalist sources, it will give *menyimpang* [deviant] answers. This is why we must actively contribute NU's voice to AI training—to ensure balance and *wasathiyah*" (Interview, Technology Advisor F, February 2025). This represents an emerging form of "algorithmic activism," where religious organizations recognize the importance of shaping AI development rather than merely responding to its outputs (Noble, 2018).

This aligns with NU's broader epistemological stance that prioritizes human conscience (*qalb*), ethical intention (*niyyah*), and scholarly guidance (*irshad*) over purely technical rationality or computational efficiency. As stated in a foundational article on NU Online's technology ethics: "Kecerdasan buatan adalah produk akal manusia. Ia bisa cerdas secara teknis, tapi tidak bisa bijaksana secara spiritual. Kebijaksanaan tetap memerlukan hati yang hidup, yang terhubung dengan Tuhan" [Artificial intelligence is a product of human reason. It can be technically intelligent, but it cannot be spiritually wise. Wisdom still requires a living heart, connected to God] (NU Online, 2023b).

The data also reveals forward-looking initiatives. NU Online is exploring partnerships with Islamic universities to develop "NU-aligned AI tools" that could assist with tasks like Quranic recitation correction, Arabic language learning, and basic *fiqh* queries but always with human oversight and clear disclaimers about the tool's limitations. This represents a shift from reactive caution to proactive engagement, recognizing that NU's absence from AI development might cede influence to other, potentially less moderate, Islamic voices.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that *Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Online* strategically navigates the challenges of AI-mediated *da'wah* through a model of ethical anchoring and adaptive authority. Instead of resisting technological innovation, the platform critically integrates digital tools within its theological and ethical frameworks, ensuring alignment with *akhlakul karimah* (noble character) and the epistemological tradition of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah*. Three central dynamics define this approach. First, NU Online articulates a human-centered ethical paradigm in which AI is framed as an extension of human moral agency, emphasizing that technological outcomes mirror the intentions and integrity of their users. Second, the organization employs a hybrid model of authority that fuses traditional scholarly legitimacy rooted in *isnad* (chains of transmission) with algorithmic strategies for digital visibility and engagement. Third, NU Online manages the tension between authenticity and accessibility through editorial oversight, contextual interpretation, and the promotion of digital literacy as an ethical and religious responsibility. Collectively, these strategies reveal how NU Online transforms technological challenges into opportunities for ethical reaffirmation and institutional resilience.

The results suggest that religious authority in the digital era is undergoing reconfiguration rather than erosion. NU Online's engagement with AI demonstrates that traditional Islamic institutions can sustain theological authenticity while participating actively in technologically mediated spaces. By emphasizing *qalb* (conscience), *tarbiyah* (moral cultivation), and *wasathiyyah* (moderation), the platform positions itself as a model for values-driven technological engagement one that integrates spiritual ethics with digital literacy. This study contributes conceptually to debates on algorithmic authority and digital religion, showing that institutional legitimacy can coexist with the participatory logic of digital platforms when guided by clear moral and epistemic principles. Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers, educators, and religious organizations seeking to design ethical frameworks for AI adoption in religious communication, ensuring that technology serves as a medium for *da'wah* that reinforces, rather than dilutes, moral integrity.

Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges several limitations. The analysis

focuses primarily on institutional discourse and editorial strategies, without examining how audiences interpret or reappropriate NU Online's digital content in everyday religious practice. This creates an interpretive gap between institutional intention and community reception that warrants further ethnographic exploration. Moreover, as AI technologies continue to evolve, future research should investigate how generative models reshape authorship, authenticity, and trust within Islamic digital ecosystems. Comparative studies across Islamic organizations and transnational *da'wah* networks could also reveal how different theological traditions negotiate similar ethical and technological dilemmas. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for continuous theological reflection and institutional adaptation as religious authority becomes increasingly entangled with algorithmic systems in shaping contemporary expressions of Islamic knowledge and practice.

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