

FLEXIBILITY AND UNCERTAINTY: Ambiguity in Pre-Modern Islamic Law in Dialogue with Modern European Culture

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Abstract

This article deals with the concept of ambiguity in pre-modern Islamic theology and law, highlighting its role in supporting flexibility and adaptation in various social and political contexts. By referring to the works of scholars such as Anver Emon, Wael Hallaq, and Thomas Bauer, this article shows that ambiguity is not a sign of weakness, but rather an intellectual strategy that allows Muslim societies to face the complexity of diverse social realities. Through an analysis of classical Islamic thought, this article reveals how uncertainty and probabilistic decision making became an integral part of the development of Islamic law and theology. This article argues that the pre-modern Islamic world, particularly in the Sunni tradition, adopted a dynamic policy of ambiguity, which promoted social cohesion and inclusiveness. This article also highlights how the concept of ambiguity in the Sunnis' tradition can contribute to dialogue between Islamic moral traditions and modern European moral culture, by paving the way for deeper understanding and closer cooperation in today's multicultural and pluralistic societies.

[Artikel ini mengkaji konsep ambiguitas dalam teologi dan hukum Islam pra-modern, menyoroti perannya dalam mendukung fleksibilitas dan adaptasi dalam berbagai konteks sosial serta politik. Dengan mengacu pada karya sarjana seperti Anver Emon, Wael Hallaq, dan Thomas Bauer, artikel ini berargumen bahwa



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ambiguitas bukanlah tanda kelemahan, melainkan sebuah strategi intelektual yang memungkinkan masyarakat Muslim menghadapi kompleksitas realitas sosial yang beragam. Melalui analisis pemikiran Islam klasik, artikel ini mengungkap bagaimana ketidakpastian dan pengambilan keputusan yang bersifat probabilistik menjadi bagian integral dalam perkembangan hukum dan teologi Islam. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa dunia Islam pra-modern, khususnya tradisi Sunni, mengadopsi kebijakan ambiguitas yang dinamis, yang mendorong kohesi sosial dan inklusivitas. Artikel ini juga menyoroti bagaimana konsep ambiguitas dalam tradisi Sunni dapat berkontribusi pada dialog antara tradisi moral Islam dan budaya moral Eropa modern, dengan membuka jalan bagi pemahaman yang lebih dalam dan kerjasama yang lebih erat dalam masyarakat multikultural dan pluralistik saat ini.]

Keywords: *Ambiguity, Islamic Theology, Islamic Law*

Introduction

The study of ambiguity in Islamic law and theology has received increasing attention in recent decades, especially in an effort to understand how pre-modern Islamic traditions responded to diverse socio-political complexities. Several previous studies, such as those by Asma Afsaruddin and Talal Asad, have highlighted the internal dynamics in Islamic thought that allow for flexibility and adaptation in different contexts. However, these studies often focus on specific aspects, such as the relationship between Islamic law and political authority, without paying adequate attention to the concept of ambiguity as a broader intellectual strategy. This study fills this gap by exploring how ambiguity, especially in the Sunni tradition, functions as a tool for navigating social and theological uncertainties, and how this concept can contribute to cross-cultural dialogue with modern moral traditions in Europe. In doing so, this study offers a new perspective that broadens the academic discourse on the relationship between pre-modern Islamic law and contemporary socio-political challenges.

Western scholarship has highlighted a new dimension in Islamic theology and law, namely the adoption of uncertainty and probabilistic positions by alumni of traditional madrasas and classical Muslim thought.¹ This discovery piqued scholars' interest in understanding the framework of pre-modern Islamic thought, which apparently adopted a culture of ambiguity as a response to the complexity and diversity of social and political life.² Anver Emon, Wael Hallaq, and Thomas Bauer are among the scholars who stand out in describing pre-modern Islam as a "culture of ambiguity." Anver Emon, in his works, explores how Islamic law often accommodates local uncertainties and variations, allowing for flexibility and adaptation to various contexts.³ Wael Hallaq, on the other hand, highlights how the Islamic legal tradition developed principles that enable probabilistic decision making, which often reflects dynamic social realities rather than rigid and deterministic rules.⁴

Thomas Bauer emphasizes that before the era of modernization, the Muslim world developed with a dynamic but socially cohesive policy of ambiguity. According to Bauer, ambiguity is not a sign of weakness or uncertainty, but rather an intellectual and social strategy that allows Muslim societies to live harmoniously in diversity.⁵ Ambiguity in this context includes flexibility in the interpretation of sacred texts, acceptance of a variety of theological views, and the ability to navigate the moral and ethical complexities of everyday life. Bauer argues that this concept of ambiguity is at the heart of Sunnism and can offer a more fluid and interesting dialogue with modern European moral culture. Sunnism, as

¹ Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

² Mònica Colominas Aparicio, "A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam, Written by Bauer, Thomas," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 54, no. 3–4 (2023): 460–63.

³ Anver M Emon, *Islamic Natural Law Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁵ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*.

the majority tradition in Islam, is often seen as the guardian of orthodoxy. However, Bauer points out that in practice, Sunnism also accommodates a variety of different views and practices, making it more inclusive and adaptive.⁶

Before the era of modernization, the Muslim world not only developed by adopting a dynamic policy of ambiguity but also demonstrated extraordinary social cohesion.⁷ Pre-modern Muslim societies, through the madrasa system and other religious institutions, taught the importance of understanding uncertainty as part of everyday life.⁸ This differs from modern approaches which often demand absolute certainty and clarity. Additionally, the view that the pre-modern Muslim world adopted a culture of ambiguity also challenges dominant narratives that often depict Islamic history as monolithic and unchanging.⁹ This approach opens up space for a more complex and nuanced understanding of how Islamic law and theology developed and adapted in various historical and geographical contexts. It also provides a foundation for a richer dialogue between Islamic traditions and modern European moral culture, which often seeks ways to navigate uncertainty and ambiguity in an ever-changing secular context.

In today's global context, where intercultural and interreligious dialogue is increasingly important,¹⁰ understanding how pre-modern Islamic traditions managed ambiguity and uncertainty can provide valuable insights.¹¹ This is not only relevant for academic studies but

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸ Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, "Introduction: Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies. A Critical Overview," *Speaking for Islam*, 2014, 1–14.

⁹ Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (Verso Books, 2009).

¹⁰ Abroo Aman Andrabi, "Interfaith Dialogue: Its Need, Importance and Merits in The Contemporary World," *International Journal of Academic Studies* 2, no. 3 (2020): 264–71.

¹¹ Oliver Scharbrodt, *Muhammad 'Abdub: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

also has practical implications for social and political policy, especially in increasingly diverse and complex societies.¹² Thus, an examination of the adoption of uncertainty and probabilistic positions in classical Islamic thought not only adds richness to our understanding of Islamic intellectual history but also opens up opportunities for more inclusive and productive dialogue with other moral and ethical traditions in the modern world.¹³ This article will outline how pre-modern Islamic legal and theological thought accommodates ambiguity and uncertainty in diverse social and political contexts, and how the concept of ambiguity in the Sunnism tradition can contribute to the dialogue between Islamic moral traditions and modern European moral culture.

Bauer's research shows that the pre-modern Muslim world had a dynamic policy of ambiguity.¹⁴ Other scholars, such as Anver Emon and Wael Hallaq, also support this view, identifying the Islamic tradition as a culture that values ambiguity.¹⁵ In contrast, traditional Orientalist scholarship often fails to grasp this dimension, viewing the post-formation Muslim canon as static and unchanging, similar to early misunderstandings of Jewish law in Europe.¹⁶ This view is at odds with traditional orientalist approaches which often depict the post-formation Muslim canon as static and unchanging. This view is similar to early misunderstandings of Jewish law in Europe, where Jewish law was seen as a rigid canon unable to adapt to social change.¹⁷ Further research shows that, just as Jewish law apparently has internal dynamics and the ability to adapt, Islamic traditions also have great flexibility and diversity.

¹² Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*.

¹³ Asef Bayat, *Islam and Democracy: What Is the Real Question?* vol. 8 (Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*.

¹⁵ Emon, *Islamic Natural Law Theories*; Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*.

¹⁶ Frank Griffel, "Contradictions and Lots of Ambiguity: Two New Perspectives on Premodern (and Postclassical) Islamic Societies," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1–21.

¹⁷ Hanina Ben-Menachem, *Judicial Deviation in Talmudic Law* (Routledge, 2021).

In this context, Anver Emon highlights how flexibility in Islamic law allows adaptation to various local and temporal situations.¹⁸ This shows that Islamic law is not monolithic but is the result of a dynamic interpretation process. Likewise, Wael Hallaq emphasizes that the principles in Islamic law allow for probabilistic decision making, reflecting complex and changing social realities.¹⁹ James W. Jones highlights that ambiguity in religion has positive and negative sides. On the one hand, ambiguity can encourage flexibility, tolerance, and spiritual deepening. On the other hand, ambiguity can also cause confusion, conflict and potential radicalization.²⁰ These views suggest that the pre-modern Muslim world adopted a policy of ambiguity as a way to navigate the complexities of social and political life. This challenges narratives that depict Islamic history as monolithic and unchanging, and opens up space for a more complex and nuanced understanding of how Islamic law and theology developed and adapted in various historical and geographical contexts.

This article is structured in several parts to provide a comprehensive understanding of ambiguity in Islamic theology and law. Starting with an introduction explaining the background and relevance of the study of ambiguity in Islamic thought, the article then elaborates on the concept of ambiguity in Islamic law and theology in the second part. The third part will analyze how ambiguity affects social cohesion in historical contexts, while the fourth part will explore the contemporary implications of ambiguity in intercultural dialogue.

Finally, the article will present a discussion of how the concept of ambiguity in the Sunni tradition can make an important contribution to the dialogue between the Islamic moral tradition and modern European moral culture. In doing so, the article aims to identify and explore the ways in which ambiguity functions as a strategy that enables Muslim societies to

¹⁸ Emon, *Islamic Natural Law Theories*.

¹⁹ Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*.

²⁰ James W Jones, *Terror and Transformation: The Ambiguity of Religion in Psychoanalytic Perspective* (Routledge, 2014).

navigate the social and political complexities faced in the modern world.

Ambiguity in Islamic Tradition

The pre-modern Islamic tradition, as described by Thomas Bauer, was a culture that embraced ambiguity.²¹ This is in contrast to modernization which often demands certainty and uniformity. Bauer suggests that before the era of modernization, the Muslim world developed with a dynamic but socially cohesive policy of ambiguity.²² This is demonstrated through the various interpretations of law and theology accepted in Islamic societies, which reflect flexibility and adaptability in the face of social and political change. Narratives in the Qur'an that use fluid tenses and emphasize oral tradition offer a dynamic and embodied model of subjectivity.²³ This approach is in sharp contrast to the Western mindset which tends to be static and linear.²⁴ In the Islamic tradition, the interpretation and application of law is not final and fixed, but is always open to reinterpretation according to the context of time and place.²⁵ This allows for diversity in religious and legal practices to suit different social conditions.

A concrete example of this ambiguity can be seen in the concept of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), where there are various schools of thought that provide different interpretations of Islamic laws.²⁶ This approach shows that there is no single interpretation that is absolutely correct,

²¹ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Tareq Moqbel, "As Time Grows Older, the Qur'an Grows Younger": The Ethical Function of Ambiguity in Qur'anic Narratives," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021): 259–87.

²⁴ Katharina Hunfeld, "The Coloniality of Time in the Global Justice Debate: De-Centring Western Linear Temporality," *Journal of Global Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 100–117.

²⁵ Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shari'ah as Philosophy of Islamic Law* (International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 2022).

²⁶ Tehseen Thaver, *Beyond Sectarianism: Ambiguity, Hermeneutics, and the Formations of Religious Identity in Islam* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024); Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*.

but rather that there is room for discussion and differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*).²⁷ Thus, the ambiguity in the Islamic tradition allows for flexibility and innovation in facing various social and political challenges.

Ambiguity in Islamic Law

Islamic law or sharia, is often understood as a strict and inflexible legal system.²⁸ However, research shows that pre-modern Islamic law actually accommodated a significant degree of ambiguity, allowing for adaptation to a wide range of social and political conditions. Anver Emon emphasizes that *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) is the result of human interpretation of sacred texts, which inherently carries an element of uncertainty.²⁹ For example, in some legal cases, *fuqaha* (legal experts) often provide various opinions (*ikhtilaf*) that reflect a diversity of views and interpretations. A clear example of ambiguity in Islamic law is the concept of *ijtihad*, namely the intellectual effort to interpret sacred texts in order to answer legal questions that arise.³⁰ *Ijtihad* shows that Islamic law is not static, but continues to develop according to the needs of society. In addition, the concept of *maslahah* (public benefit) allows for the adjustment of laws for the good of society, which often requires probabilistic judgment and flexible decision making.³¹

In-depth research into classical texts and the works of contemporary scholars shows that Islamic legal thought is not monolithic, but dynamic

²⁷ Humaira Jahangir and Shahzadi Pakeeza, “The Historical Context of Disagreements among Different Schools of Thought and Proofs of Taqlid in the Light of Islamic Etiquettes of Disagreement: Ikhtilaf,” *Al-Wifaq* 4, no. 2 (2021): 13–28.

²⁸ Nahda Shehada, “Flexibility versus Rigidity in the Practice of Islamic Family Law,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 32, no. 1 (2009): 28–46.

²⁹ Emon, *Islamic Natural Law Theories*.

³⁰ Maryam Qasim, Mohammad Nadeem, and Shazia Ibrahim, “Social Changes, Importance and Need of Ijtihad: An Analytical Study,” *Journal of Social Sciences Review* 3, no. 1 (2023): 940–48.

³¹ Asma Afsaruddin and Mehrzad Boroujerdi, “Maslahah as a Political Concept,” *Mirror for the Muslim Prince: Islam and the Theory of Statecraft*, 2013, 16–44.

and adaptive.³² For example, in different social contexts, *fugaha* may give different fatwas even though they refer to the same text, indicating that the interpretation of Islamic law is strongly influenced by the context of time and place.³³ In addition, the application of concepts such as *istihsan* (legal preference) and *urf* (local custom) also shows flexibility in Islamic law. *Istihsan* allows for legal adjustments based on more socially beneficial preferences, while *urf* recognizes local practices as part of legal considerations.³⁴ Thus, Islamic law is able to adapt to various social situations and conditions, showing a high level of ambiguity and adaptability.

This ambiguity is not only a theoretical problem but also a practical one. In everyday life, Islamic judges (*qadi*) often have to make decisions that take into account the specific context of the case at hand.³⁵ This shows that Islamic legal practice recognizes and accepts uncertainty as part of the law enforcement process. Thus, the concept of ambiguity in Islamic law reflects not only flexibility in interpretation, but also the law's ability to adapt to complex and changing social realities.

Ambiguity in Islamic Theology

In Islamic theology, ambiguity also plays an important role. Theological thinking in Islam, especially in the Sunni tradition, shows tolerance for various different views. Thomas Bauer notes that the Sunni tradition tends to accommodate a variety of different theological views, reflecting the intellectual and spiritual diversity within Islam.³⁶ This is

³² Abbas Amanat, *Shari'a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context* (Stanford University Press, 2007).

³³ Zulfikar Ali Shah, *Ifta' and Fatwa in the Muslim World and the West* (IIIT, 2014).

³⁴ Saim Kayadibi, *Istihsan: The Doctrine of Juristic Preference in Islamic Law* (The Other Press, 2019); Hossein Andalib, Ali Akbar Mohammadzadeh, and Akbari Seyed Mahdi, "Study and Analysis of the Functions of Al-Urf in Understanding and Inferring the Religious Rules," *Kom: Časopis Za Religijske Nauke* 10, no. 2 (2021): 77–93.

³⁵ Nahda Shehada, "Muslim Judges at the Road of Intersection," *Hamma* 18, no. 2–3 (2020): 143–61.

³⁶ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*.

reflected in various schools of thought such as Asy'ariyah, Maturidiyah, and Salafiyah, which, although different in some doctrinal aspects, remain within the framework of Sunni Islam. One important example of ambiguity in Islamic theology is the debate regarding the attributes of Allah.³⁷ Muslim theologians debate whether Allah's attributes should be understood literally or metaphorically.³⁸ This approach shows that there is no one definitive answer that is accepted by all parties, but rather that there is room for various interpretations. This debate not only reflects theological ambiguity, but also shows the flexibility and ability of Islamic theology to deal with theological complexity without sacrificing faith.

This theological ambiguity is also seen in the concepts of *qada'* and *qadar* (destiny and God's provisions). Some scholars argue that everything has been determined by Allah absolutely, while others believe that humans have freedom in determining their actions.³⁹ This debate shows that there is room for various understandings and interpretations, which in turn enrich Islamic theological discourse. In addition, differences of opinion between Asy'ariyah and Maturidiyah in understanding the relationship between reason and revelation also reflect the theological ambiguity in Islam.⁴⁰ The Ash'ariyah school tends to emphasize the supremacy of revelation over reason, while the Maturidiyah recognizes the role of reason in understanding revelation. These differences show that in Islamic theology, there is room for a variety of different approaches to understanding sacred texts.

³⁷ Safaruk Zaman Chowdhury, "God, Gluts and Gaps: Examining an Islamic Traditionalist Case for a Contradictory Theology," *History and Philosophy of Logic* 42, no. 1 (2021): 17–43.

³⁸ Umar Muhammad Noor and Hasbiyallah Hasbiyallah, "Ash'arite Traditionist-Theologians and Reading Ambiguous Hadiths on Divine Attributes," *Religious Inquiries* 12, no. 34–219 : (2023) 2.

³⁹ Laura Menin, "'Destiny Is Written by God': Islamic Predestination, Responsibility, and Transcendence in Central Morocco," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26, no. 3 (2020): 515–32.

⁴⁰ Noor and Hasbiyallah, "Ash'arite Traditionist-Theologians and Reading Ambiguous Hadiths on Divine Attributes."

Theological ambiguity in Islam is not only limited to conceptual debates, but is also visible in spiritual and mystical practices. In Sufism (Islamic mysticism), spiritual experiences are often expressed through ambiguous and symbolic language, allowing for multiple interpretations. Sufis such as Ibn Arabi and Rumi used metaphors and symbols to describe their mystical experiences, which often went beyond rational and literal understanding.⁴¹ Ambiguity in Islamic theology also allows for more open dialogue with other religious and philosophical traditions. A tolerant approach to various theological views opens up space for a constructive exchange of ideas between Islam and other intellectual traditions.⁴² This is important in the context of an increasingly complex and pluralistic modern world, where intercultural and interreligious dialogue is becoming increasingly relevant.

The Social and Political Impact of Ambiguity

Ambiguity in Islamic law and theology is not merely a theoretical phenomenon, but rather an epistemological strategy that plays a crucial role in maintaining the flexibility and adaptability of the Islamic tradition amidst pre-modern socio-political complexity. Rather than being seen as a weakness, this ambiguity actually strengthens the capacity of Islamic law and theology to respond to the various conditions and needs of diverse societies. As Bauer argues, the pre-modern Muslim world relied on a dynamic policy of ambiguity to maintain social cohesion, a strategy that allowed Islamic societies to remain inclusive without sacrificing theological and juridical plurality. Thus, the concept of ambiguity in Islam should be understood as a fundamental element that bridges the gap between normative theological doctrine and dynamic social reality,

⁴¹ Syafaatun Almirzanah, "Sufism as a Collection of Rich Resources for Interpreting Tradition: The Case of Ibn Al-ʿArabī," *Journal of the Socio-Political Thought of Islam* 1, no. 121–78 : (2020) 2.

⁴² M Aris Rofiqi and Mochamad Ziaul Haq, "Islamic Approaches in Multicultural and Interfaith Dialogue," *Integritas Terbuka: Peace and Interfaith Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 47–58.

making it relevant not only in the past but also in the increasingly complex modern socio-political context.

Ambiguities in Islamic law and theology are not only relevant in an intellectual context, but also have significant social and political impacts. The pre-modern Muslim world, as depicted by Thomas Bauer, thrived on a dynamic policy of ambiguity that enabled social cohesion and political stability. In a diverse society, ambiguity allows various groups to coexist harmoniously without imposing a single view.⁴³ Ambiguity in Islamic law, for example, allows for flexibility and adaptation in dealing with various social and political conditions. The system of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) not only accommodates various opinions (*ikhtilaf*) among scholars, but also allows *ijtihad* (intellectual effort) to interpret sacred texts in response to legal questions that arise.⁴⁴ This ability to adapt and adapt to society's needs shows how ambiguity can contribute to social stability and harmony.

In a modern context, an understanding of this ambiguity can become the basis for dialogue between Islamic traditions and European moral culture. Modern European moral culture, which is often secular and pluralist, could benefit from an Islamic approach that accommodates ambiguity.⁴⁵ This could pave the way for a more inclusive and respectful dialogue between the two traditions. A tolerant approach to ambiguity also allows for better integration in a multicultural society.⁴⁶ For example, in Europe which is currently experiencing significant demographic and cultural changes, recognition of the value of ambiguity in Islamic traditions could help reduce tensions between majority and minority

⁴³ Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*.

⁴⁴ Ron Shaham, "Rethinking Islamic Legal Modernism: The Teaching of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi," in *Rethinking Islamic Legal Modernism* (Brill, 2018).

⁴⁵ Abdullah Sahin, "The Contribution of Religions to the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies: An Islamic Perspective," in *Public Theology, Religious Diversity, and Interreligious Learning* (Routledge, 2018), 27–39.

⁴⁶ Jean-Marc Dewaele and Li Wei, "Is Multilingualism Linked to a Higher Tolerance of Ambiguity?," *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 16, no. 1 (2013): 231–40.

groups. In this context, ambiguity is not only an intellectual concept, but also a practical tool for creating a more harmonious and inclusive society.

Ambiguity also plays an important role in politics. In many pre-modern Muslim states, ambiguity in the interpretation of law and theology allowed rulers to manage diversity without giving rise to conflict.⁴⁷ This creates space for compromise and consensus, which are essential for political stability. On the other hand, attempts to impose a single, rigid interpretation often give rise to tension and conflict.⁴⁸ In the modern world, an ambiguity approach in Islamic law and theology can also offer solutions to contemporary political challenges. For example, in the context of sharia law in modern Muslim countries, recognition of ambiguity can help create a legal system that is more flexible and responsive to society's needs.⁴⁹ This can reduce tensions between religious law and state law, as well as between tradition and modernity. Moreover, in a global context, ambiguity in Islamic traditions can contribute to more constructive interreligious and intercultural dialogue.⁵⁰ An approach that respects diverse views and interpretations can build bridges between different religious and cultural traditions, facilitating better understanding and cooperation at the international level.

Ambiguity in Islamic law and theology therefore offers a critical perspective on modern approaches that are often caught in a dichotomy between legalistic strictness and practical flexibility. In the context of

⁴⁷ Prakash Shah, *Legal Pluralism in Conflict: Coping with Cultural Diversity in Law* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2016); Terrence W Tilley et al., *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005).

⁴⁸ Shehada, "Flexibility versus Rigidity in the Practice of Islamic Family Law"; Logan A Yelderman, "Cognitive Rigidity Explains the Relationship between Religious Fundamentalism and Insanity Defence Attitudes," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21, no. 7 (2018): 686–97.

⁴⁹ Scharbrodt, *Muhammad 'Abdub: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity*.

⁵⁰ Mar Griera, "Governing Religious Diversity Through Interreligious Initiatives: Affinities, Ambiguities and Tensions BT - Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue," ed. Anna Körs, Wolfram Weisse, and Jean-Paul Willaime (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 89–102.

modern Muslim countries, recognizing the value of ambiguity can reduce the tension between religious law and state law, between tradition and modernity. It also creates space for broader compromise in facing the challenges of contemporary pluralism. Furthermore, in a global context, ambiguity can serve as a foundation for building a more constructive dialogue between different religious and cultural traditions. By approaching differences flexibly and appreciating multiple interpretations, we not only enrich interfaith discourse but also strengthen the basis for more harmonious and inclusive international cooperation. Ambiguity, in this case, is not a weakness but a strength that contributes to social stability and political cohesion in increasingly pluralistic societies.

Challenges of Modernization and Secularization

Modernization and secularization have been two transformational forces that have redefined the social and political landscape in Europe. In this context, thinkers such as Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, and Charles Taylor have provided in-depth analyses of how modernity and secularization create tensions between instrumental rationality and traditional values. Weber, for example, speaks of the “disenchantment of the world,” in which religious values lose their authority under the dominance of scientific rationality. Habermas, on the other hand, argues that the secular public sphere should remain open to religious contributions, provided that these religious values are translated into a rational language that is acceptable to all. In this context, the processes of modernization and secularization not only change social structures but also require a renegotiation between religious traditions and modern values that prioritize individual freedom. Thus, the tension between the religious values brought by migrant populations and European secularity cannot be separated from the historical dynamics of this modernization, which creates new challenges in the pursuit of harmonious social integration.

Europe is currently experiencing significant demographic and cultural transformations, including falling birth rates among non-migrant populations and a shift away from self-reproduction. The sexual revolution of the 1960s brought about major changes in views regarding sexuality and the family, which in turn affected birth rates.⁵¹ The decline in procreative desires that emerged after this era is often associated with Augustine's ideal of desireless procreation, albeit in an inverted context.⁵² These changes are leading to a situation where Europe's population is aging, while labor requirements and social dynamics continue to evolve. Amid these changes, the influx of migrants from traditional, religious cultures adds a contrasting dynamic.⁵³ This migration not only brought a new workforce, but also brought different cultural and religious values, which often conflicted with secular norms in Europe.

In this context, challenges of integration and coexistence arise between an increasingly secular native population and a religious migrant population. Migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, which tend to have high levels of religiosity, bring new dynamics that challenge existing social and cultural structures in Europe.⁵⁴ For example, differences in family values, views on gender roles, and religious practices can create tensions between migrant communities and native populations. Furthermore, modernization and secularization in Europe have led to a

⁵¹ Michael M Uzomah and Titi Christiana Falana, "Sex, Feminism and Sexual Revolution," *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)* 1, no. 3 (2020): 10–28; Randall Collins, "Sexual Revolutions and the Future of the Family," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 48, no. 1 (2023): 226–39.

⁵² Mark J Boone, *Reason, Authority, and the Healing of Desire in the Writings of Augustine* (Lexington Books, 2020); Richard B Miller, "Augustine, Moral Luck, and the Ethics of Regret and Shame," *The Journal of Religion* 100, no. 3 (2020): 361–85.

⁵³ Marcin Gońda, Marta Pachocka, and Karolina Podgórska, "Measuring the Cultural Dimension of Migrant Integration and Integration Policy in the European Context: Dilemmas and Discussions," *International Migration* 59, no. 1 (2021): 241–62.

⁵⁴ Ahmed Al-Shahi and Richard I Lawless, *Middle East and North African Immigrants in Europe* (Routledge London, 2005); Niels Spierings, "The Multidimensional Impact of Islamic Religiosity on Ethno-Religious Social Tolerance in the Middle East and North Africa," *Social Forces* 97, no. 4 (2019): 1693–1730.

significant shift in values. Secularization, with its emphasis on rationality and individual freedom, often conflicts with the traditional values held dear by migrant communities.⁵⁵ As a result, the integration process does not only involve economic and social aspects, but also includes deeper dimensions of cultural and religious values.

One of the main challenges is how to create a space where these various value systems can dialogue and interact constructively. Europe must find ways to accommodate these differences without sacrificing the basic principles of secularism and democracy. This requires a more inclusive and dialogical approach, where the values of both parties can be recognized and respected. Additionally, it is important to pay attention to the impact of existing immigration and integration policies.⁵⁶ Policies that are too harsh or exclusionary can exacerbate tensions and reinforce negative stereotypes. In contrast, policies that are inclusive and support harmonious integration can help reduce tensions and build more coherent societies.

Demographic transformations also affect labor markets and social welfare systems in Europe. An aging population requires a young workforce to shore up pension systems and health services.⁵⁷ Migration can help meet these needs, but only if migrants can be effectively integrated into society and the economy. On the other hand, these changes also challenged the cultural and national identities of many European

⁵⁵ Jon Horgen Friberg and Erika Braanen Sterri, “Decline, Revival, Change? Religious Adaptations among Muslim and Non-Muslim Immigrant Origin Youth in Norway,” *International Migration Review* 55, no. 3 (2021): 718–45; Tuğba Gurcel Akdemir, “Different Theoretical Perspectives to Secularization and the Impact of Migration on Future Religiosity of Europe,” *Alternatif Politika* 14, no. 2 (2022): 263–88.

⁵⁶ Stacey A Shaw, “Refugees and Migrants,” in *Human Rights and Social Justice* (Routledge, 2022), 278–99.

⁵⁷ Jolanta Aidukaite, Sven Hort, and Mare Ainsaar, “Current Trends in Social Welfare Policies toward the Older People in the Baltic and Nordic Countries: An Explorative Study,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 53, no. 2 (2022): 147–67; Stipica Mudrazija and Jacqueline L Angel, “Population Aging and Public Policy,” in *International Handbook of Population Policies* (Springer, 2022), 551–70.

countries. Fears of losing national and cultural identity are often exploited by populist and nationalist groups, who use anti-immigrant rhetoric to gain political support.⁵⁸ This adds a layer of complexity to integration efforts and reinforces polarization in society.

To address these challenges, scholars such as José Casanova and Olivier Roy have stressed the importance of understanding secularization not as a linear process that automatically reduces the role of religion, but as a phenomenon that produces different forms of relationships between religion and politics in different contexts. Casanova, in particular, shows that religion still has a significant role in the modern public sphere, especially in the face of the challenges of multiculturalism.⁵⁹

Thus, a policy approach that focuses solely on secularization without considering the role and significance of religion in the identities of migrant communities is likely to exacerbate social tensions. Instead, a more inclusive approach is needed that recognizes that secularization and religiosity can dynamically coexist. In this context, accommodating differences in values and identities through ongoing dialogue and integration policies based on respect for plurality can help create more stable and coherent societies, without sacrificing the basic principles of democracy and secularism.

Intercultural Dialogue

Intercultural dialogue is a crucial element in the integration process in modern multicultural societies, especially in Europe, where secularization has created a value gap between the native population and

⁵⁸ Abdul Noury and Gerard Roland, "Identity Politics and Populism in Europe," *Annual Review of Political Science* 23 (2020): 421–39; Yuval Feinstein and Bart Bonikowski, "Nationalist Narratives and Anti-Immigrant Attitudes: Exceptionalism and Collective Victimhood in Contemporary Israel," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 3 (2021): 741–61; Mei Shi, "An Exploration of the Reasons Why Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe Are Anti-Immigration: The Case of Italy," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 15 (2023): 128–33.

⁵⁹ José Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

the more religious migrant communities. According to Habermas' theory of the public sphere, intercultural dialogue should be understood as an important mechanism for maintaining social cohesion amid fundamental differences in moral and religious values. Habermas emphasizes that secular societies must be willing to open up space for religious expression, provided that these values can be articulated in a rational language that is acceptable to the whole society. In this context, the challenge for Europe is not only how to accept differences in values, but also how to allow Muslim communities to express their values without negating the principles of secularism and democracy. Intercultural dialogue, then, cannot be seen as an additional discourse, but as an important foundation for maintaining harmony in societies that are increasingly pluralistic and divided by differences in cultural and religious identities.

With increasing religiosity among Middle Eastern and North African youth, as shown in the Arab Youth Survey in Michael Robbins research, there is a sharp contrast to the tension between self and other in Europe.⁶⁰ On the one hand, there is increasing secularization and decreasing religiosity among native Europeans, while on the other hand, there is a religious awakening among youth in the Arab world. Several predictions suggest the future of an increasingly Muslim Europe, seeing the potential for integration of Islamic values in an increasingly secular European society.⁶¹ However, there are pressing questions about how this integration process will occur and the extent of mutual influence between these two cultures. In this context, intercultural dialogue becomes very important, where traditional Islamic values can interact with modern European moral culture.

Intercultural dialogue is not only about communication between two different groups, but also includes the process of understanding and

⁶⁰ Michael Robbins, "Political Parties and Citizens in The Mena Region," in *Politics without Parties* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2023), 6–27.

⁶¹ Klas Grinell, "Integration of Islam in Europe: Categorical Remarks," *European Review* 28, no. 3 (2020): 378–88.

accepting different values. In the European context, where secularization has become deeply entrenched, the main challenge is how European society can accept and integrate the religious values brought by Muslim migrants without sacrificing the principles of secularism and democracy.⁶² Intercultural dialogue can open up opportunities for the enrichment of moral and ethical values on both sides. For example, Islam's approach to family, social solidarity, and collective responsibility could offer valuable new perspectives for increasingly individualistic European societies. In contrast, the principles of human rights, gender equality and religious freedom upheld in Europe can have a positive influence on Muslim societies that often face challenges in these areas.

To facilitate effective intercultural dialogue, holistic and inclusive strategies are needed. First, it is important to create safe and open spaces for dialogue where both parties can talk and listen without prejudice. Educational institutions, community centers and non-governmental organizations can play an important role in creating platforms for this kind of dialogue.⁶³ Second, promoting cultural and religious literacy among the general public is key. Understanding the history, values, and cultural practices of other groups can reduce stereotypes and prejudices that often act as barriers to constructive dialogue. Education and training programs that emphasize the importance of pluralism and tolerance can help build better understanding between different communities.⁶⁴ Third, it is important to involve community leaders and religious figures

⁶² Tariq Modood, "Secularism: Political Secularism and Post-Immigration Ethno-Religious Communities," in *Contested Concepts in Migration Studies* (Routledge, 2021), 214–26; Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Liberal-secular Power and the Traps of Muslim Integration in Western Europe," *The British Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 3 (2022): 607–22.

⁶³ Saleem Amjad and Djuric Milovanovic Aleksandra, "The Role of Interreligious Dialogue and Outreach in Building Trust and Strengthening Social Inclusion in Europe: The Case of Network for Dialogue," in *Religion, Religious Groups and Migration* (Transnational Press London, 2023), 123–42.

⁶⁴ Carlos Alberto Torres and Massimiliano Tarozzi, "Multiculturalism in the World System: Towards a Social Justice Model of Inter/Multicultural Education," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 18, no. 1 (2020): 7–18.

in this dialogue. They have significant influence and can be a bridge between their community and wider society.⁶⁵ Through dialogue led by these influential figures, messages of tolerance and respect can be more effectively conveyed and received.

Successful intercultural dialogue can bring great benefits to both parties. On the one hand, European societies could gain new insight into different values and practices, which could enrich their social and cultural lives.⁶⁶ On the other hand, Muslim communities can feel acceptance and recognition of their identity, which can increase their sense of inclusion and participation in community life.⁶⁷ In addition, intercultural dialogue can also contribute to social and political stability. By reducing tensions and conflict between different communities, dialogue can help create a more harmonious and cohesive society. In the long term, this can strengthen the foundations of democracy and promote peace and security at local and national levels.

In the long term, the success of intercultural dialogue depends on the willingness of all parties to redefine their collective identity within a more inclusive framework. Thinkers such as Charles Taylor have highlighted the importance of recognition in cross-cultural dialogue—whereby societies are required not only to accept the presence of the “other,” but also to recognize the validity of different values as part of a multicultural reality. Therefore, in addition to reducing tensions,

⁶⁵ Danilo Giglito, Luigina Cioffi, and Wolfgang Bosswick, “Building a Bridge: Opportunities and Challenges for Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Intersection of Institutions, Civic Society, and Migrant Communities,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28, no. 1 (2022): 74–91.

⁶⁶ Amjad Naveed and Cong Wang, “Can Attitudes toward Immigrant Explain Social Integration in Europe? EU versus Non-EU Migrant,” *Social Indicators Research* 153, no. 1 (2021): 345–83.

⁶⁷ Saltanat Liebert, Mona H Siddiqui, and Carolin Goerzig, “Integration of Muslim Immigrants in Europe and North America: A Transatlantic Comparison,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2020): 196–216; Daniel Stockemer and Shona Moreau, “Muslim Immigrants’ Sense of Identity and Belonging in the Western World: A Comprehensive Review,” *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no. 1 (2021): 223–37.

this dialogue can be a means of enriching collective experience, where European societies can integrate the values of social solidarity and collective responsibility brought by the Islamic tradition, while Muslim communities can internalize the principles of human rights and freedoms upheld in Europe. Intercultural dialogue thus serves not only as a tool for achieving social stability, but also as a medium that allows for the creation of a more inclusive and dynamic common identity amidst diversity.

Western Perspectives on Islam

The Western view of Islam is often based on homogenous and static assumptions, viewing the Islamic world as a monolithic entity without considering its internal diversity and complex dynamics. Talal Asad sharply criticizes this approach, emphasizing that such an understanding fails to capture the intellectual and cultural diversity of the Islamic tradition. Asad's thinking is in line with the analysis of Anver Emon, who in his work on Islamic law highlights the flexibility of Islamic law in the face of social and political uncertainty. Wael Hallaq also adds an important dimension by showing that Islamic law is not only built on rigid principles, but also involves a probabilistic decision-making process, allowing for adaptation to changing conditions. Thomas Bauer further asserts that ambiguity in the Islamic tradition is not a sign of weakness, but rather a strategy that allows this tradition to survive in the face of social diversity and complexity. By referring to the thinking of these three scholars, we can understand that the representation of Islam in the Western framework often simplifies complex elements in the Islamic tradition, which is actually full of intellectual ambiguity and legal flexibility.

Talal Asad criticizes Western perspectives that often separate the Islamic world as a homogeneous, independent collective agent.⁶⁸ This perspective ignores the diversity and internal dynamics within the Islamic tradition, which is actually very rich and varied. Asad emphasized the need

⁶⁸ Talal Asad, "Autobiographical Reflections on Anthropology and Religion," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 11, no. 1 (2020): 1–7.

for deeper and more comprehensive academic exploration to understand the complexity of the Islamic world. The shift from Christian theology to religious studies and from traditional Orientalism to normative Muslim perspectives challenged dominant Eurocentric historiography.⁶⁹ This historiography tends to view Islam through a Western lens that is often reductive and simplistic. Instead, by adopting a more inclusive perspective and appreciating the internal dynamics of Islam, academics can develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of Islamic traditions. These discussions opened up space for Islamic traditions to recognize value ambiguity as an intellectual and spiritual force. This approach emphasizes the importance of seeing Islamic traditions as dynamic and flexible entities, capable of adapting to changes in time and place. Thus, this perspective can contribute to a more constructive and respectful dialogue between Islamic traditions and modern European moral culture.

Thus, to understand Islam more comprehensively, scholars must move beyond the reductive frameworks that often dominate orientalist scholarship and Euro-centric historiography. The thinking of Emon, Hallaq, and Bauer provides important insights into how ambiguity and flexibility in Islamic legal and theological traditions have enabled Muslim societies to accommodate local diversity without sacrificing social cohesion. Here, Western approaches that tend to seek absolute clarity and certainty in law and religion need to be revised with a more inclusive and dynamic view, as suggested by Asad. Recognizing ambiguity as an intellectual strength can strengthen the dialogue between Islamic moral tradition and modern European moral culture, and offer a more flexible model for addressing the challenges of global pluralism. In this context, it is important for scholars and policymakers to avoid dangerous simplifications and instead adopt approaches that appreciate the complexity and adaptability of the Islamic tradition, thereby creating

⁶⁹ Giovanni Maltese, "Islam Is Not a 'Religion'—Global Religious History and Early Twentieth-Century Debates in British Malaya," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 33, no. 3–4 (2021): 345–80.

a deeper and more constructive understanding.

Conclusion

This article concludes that the ambiguity in pre-modern Islamic theology and law was a deliberate and strategic approach that allowed for flexibility and adaptation in responding to complex social and political conditions. The Sunni tradition of Islam, in particular, has accommodated ambiguity and uncertainty through mechanisms of probabilistic thinking and dynamic interpretation. This approach allows Islamic societies to maintain social cohesion and inclusiveness despite diverse and often conflicting views. In diverse social and political contexts, ambiguity provides room for varying interpretations of law and theology, allowing society to adapt religious rules to local situations and the needs of the times. This shows that Islamic law is not rigid and static, but instead, has the ability to adapt to changes and new challenges.

Furthermore, the concept of ambiguity in the Sunnist tradition can make an important contribution to the dialogue between Islamic moral traditions and modern European moral culture. By recognizing and appreciating the moral complexities and uncertainties that exist in both traditions, this dialogue can pave the way for deeper understanding and closer cooperation. Ambiguity as an intellectual strategy allows both cultures to seek common ground in shared values, while still respecting existing differences. These findings emphasize the importance of reviewing pre-modern Islamic thought to provide insight into current discussions regarding moral and religious complexity. By understanding how these traditions adapt to uncertainty, we can find new ways to address the social and political challenges facing the modern world. Ambiguity, in this case, is not a weakness, but a strength that can facilitate dialogue, inclusivity and adaptation in multicultural and pluralistic societies.

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