



**Islam as a Universal Ethical Consciousness: An Analysis of Muhammad Asad’s Interpretation of *al-Islām***

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**Abstract:** This article explores Muhammad Asad’s interpretation of *al-Islām* through a critical analysis of his exegetical work *The Message of the Qur’an*. The study aims to examine how Asad departs from traditional interpretations by redefining *al-Islām* not as a rigid ideological construct but as a moral and spiritual disposition grounded in surrender to God. The research employs a descriptive-analytical method using linguistic-semantic analysis and historical-contextual approaches. Methodologically, the study focuses on Asad’s interpretation of key Qur’anic terms such as *Islam*, *Muslim*, and *salām*, analyzing their semantic fields and ethical implications. The results demonstrate that Asad views Islam as a universal path grounded in moral responsibility, extending beyond confessional boundaries. He contrasts with classical scholars like Ibn Kathir and Fakhruddin Razi by emphasizing ethical universality over exclusivist dogma. The findings suggest that Asad’s inclusive approach contributes to religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, and the redefinition of Muslim identity in multicultural societies. His interpretation reclaims the Qur’an’s original moral intent, offering a framework that integrates Islamic teachings with contemporary values. Ultimately, the study concludes that Asad’s hermeneutics position Islam as a dynamic ethical system capable of addressing modern social realities while remaining faithful to its spiritual core.

**Keywords:** Muhammad Asad, *al-Islām*, semantic exegesis, religious pluralism, Muslim identity

**INTRODUCTION**

The conceptualization of *al-Islām* has long been at the heart of theological debates and exegetical interpretations within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Traditionally, the term has been associated with submission to the will of God, embodied through the Five Pillars—faith,



prayer, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage—which form the structural and spiritual foundation of Muslim life (Uddin et al., 2022). However, this normative understanding, largely institutionalized within mainstream Islamic discourse, has undergone critical reassessment, particularly in light of modern hermeneutical approaches that emphasize linguistic, moral, and contextual analysis.

Historically, *al-Islām* has been interpreted in various ways, depending on the social, political, and cultural milieu in which Muslim scholars operated. During the Islamic Golden Age, intellectuals like Al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd enriched the understanding of Islam by engaging with philosophy, ethics, and jurisprudence. Their works expanded *al-Islām* beyond its ritualistic dimensions, articulating it as a comprehensive system of governance, epistemology, and civilization (Yücesoy, 2007). As the Islamic world expanded across continents, the interaction between faith and culture further diversified interpretations, creating room for syncretic forms that integrated local traditions without compromising foundational values.

The modern period introduced new dynamics, with Islamic modernism emerging as a critical force in redefining the relationship between Islam and modernity. Figures such as Muhammad Abduh and Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani advocated for a rationalist and reformist reinterpretation of Islam to align with contemporary values, including democracy, civil rights, and scientific progress (Uddin et al., 2022; Adam, 2023). Their works spurred a movement that challenged rigid theological formulations and called for dynamic readings of the Qur'an that would resonate with the evolving needs of modern Muslim societies. These developments set the stage for deeper inquiries into the semantic and philosophical meanings of *al-Islām* beyond confessional boundaries.

It is within this evolving landscape that Muhammad Asad's contributions gain substantial significance. Asad, born Leopold Weiss, brought a unique perspective to Islamic scholarship due to his background as a Jewish intellectual who embraced Islam after extensive travels in the Middle East. His magnum opus, *The Message of the Qur'an*, reflects his integrative methodology that combines linguistic rigor, moral sensibility, and contextual awareness. Asad argues that the Qur'an cannot be properly understood if interpreted solely through the lens of post-classical institutional dogma, or what he refers to as "*ashru ma qabla al-khilaf*." Instead, he advocates returning to the semantic roots and original usage of key terms during the time of revelation (Ahmad & Amir, 2016; Kusnadi & Zulkarnain, 2018).

The research problem addressed in this study lies at the intersection of language, ideology, and theology: should the term *al-Islām* be interpreted ideologically—as referring specifically to the institutionalized religion associated with Prophet Muhammad—or generically, as a universal disposition of submission to God found across different prophetic traditions? This question arises from the observable disjunction between exclusivist readings common in classical tafsir literature and the inclusive vision proposed by scholars like Asad, who emphasize the Qur'an's message of universality.

Within traditional exegesis, particularly among classical scholars such as Ibn Kathir and Fakhruddin al-Razi, *al-Islām* is often equated with the final revealed religion, exclusive to the followers of Muhammad (al-Rāzī, nd; Ibn Kathīr, 2011). This ideological interpretation defines the term as a boundary marker that differentiates Muslims from other religious groups. It is a reading grounded in a theological exclusivism that regards Islam as the only valid path to salvation, often with little room for interfaith engagement or ethical commonality with other Abrahamic traditions (Zulyadain et al., 2022; Wara et al., 2024). By contrast, Asad's approach seeks to revive the semantic and moral dimensions of *al-Islām*, suggesting it refers to a state of

being that transcends institutional boundaries and denominational claims (Ahmad & Amir, 2016; Abdullah & Salleh, 2018).

This study is particularly concerned with the implications of such a semantic shift. If *al-Islām* is understood generically as self-surrender to God—a state shared by all sincere seekers of truth across time and traditions—then the term becomes a theological bridge rather than a wall. Asad’s interpretation of Qur’anic verses such as QS 3:19 (“Truly, the religion before God is self-surrender”) and QS 3:67 (“Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but one who had surrendered to God”) reflects his insistence that Islam, in its most essential form, is not tied to institutional identity but to a universal ethos of submission and obedience to the Divine (Asad, 2016).

Several scholars have highlighted the growing relevance of this universalist interpretation in light of contemporary interreligious and multicultural realities. The pluralistic turn in Islamic hermeneutics has seen Muslim scholars like Mahmud Shaltūt and Muhammad Arkoun engage in critical reassessment of exclusivist paradigms. They advocate for interpretive models that recognize the diversity of human experience and the moral convergence among religious traditions (Fanani, 2023; Hidayatulloh, 2024). This has resulted in a more nuanced understanding of *al-Islām* as a dynamic and living concept that interacts with evolving cultural, political, and ethical frameworks.

Moreover, Asad’s hermeneutics are particularly compelling in the Indonesian context, where Islamic teachings have historically been indigenized and localized. Here, Islam thrives not through dogmatic rigidity but through its adaptability to diverse cultural landscapes (Miftahuddin, 2023; Fuadi et al., 2024). The implications of Asad’s approach are profound in plural societies such as Indonesia, where Islam coexists with numerous ethnicities and belief systems, and where understanding *al-Islām* as a moral posture rather than a legal-political identity can foster societal harmony.

In this context, the goal of this study is to conduct a critical examination of Muhammad Asad’s interpretation of *al-Islām* and assess the hermeneutical tools he employs in contrast with classical tafsir methodologies. This inquiry situates Asad’s views within the broader discourse of Quranic interpretation, theology, and modern Islamic thought. By emphasizing the linguistic-semantic, moral, and contextual dimensions of his exegesis, this paper aims to evaluate whether Asad’s approach successfully repositions *al-Islām* from an exclusive ideology to an inclusive spiritual paradigm.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to bridge classical and contemporary scholarship through a focused analysis of one key term—*al-Islām*—and its interpretative trajectory. While prior studies have addressed Asad’s general tafsir methodology, few have conducted a targeted analysis of how his interpretation of *al-Islām* challenges prevailing ideological narratives and offers an alternative framework rooted in ethical universality. The scope of this study, therefore, extends beyond theological semantics; it explores the socio-religious impact of inclusive interpretations in fostering interfaith dialogue and redefining Muslim identity in a globalized world.

This study contributes to the ongoing effort to reinterpret foundational Islamic concepts in ways that resonate with the moral, intellectual, and spiritual demands of the modern era. As Muslims navigate the tensions between authenticity and relevance, between ideology and universality, the work of scholars like Muhammad Asad offers a pathway toward a more compassionate, reasoned, and inclusive understanding of the Islamic tradition.

## METHOD

The methodological foundation of this study lies in the descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on Muhammad Asad's interpretation of the term *al-Islām* within the framework of modern Quranic hermeneutics. His tafsir, *The Message of the Qur'an*, reflects a synthesis of linguistic rigor, rational inquiry, and historical-contextual awareness. Asad does not merely translate Qur'anic verses; he explores the deep semantic layers of the Arabic language, revealing meanings rooted in the historical and ethical universe of the Qur'anic revelation. This method emphasizes that words in the Qur'an carry not only lexical significance but also conceptual depth, necessitating a return to their semantic origins at the time of revelation rather than their later ideological institutionalizations.

Asad's approach is grounded in a semantic-linguistic analysis that seeks to unlock the essential meanings embedded in Qur'anic vocabulary. His emphasis on the root *s-l-m*, for instance, interprets *al-Islām* as "self-surrender to God" rather than as a rigidly defined institutional religion. This reading draws from the synchronic and diachronic layers of Arabic usage and considers how the Qur'an employed language that was accessible and meaningful to its first audience. Such semantic sensitivity parallels scholarly positions which argue that Quranic interpretation requires attentiveness to the rhetorical and grammatical constructs that give words their resonance within specific contexts (Chukhanov & Kairbekov, 2024; Wajdi et al., 2023).

Asad also incorporates historical-contextual methods by anchoring his interpretations in the socio-historical background of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). He argues that understanding the Qur'an demands a reflection on its ethical goals and cultural frameworks. In interpreting verses such as QS 3:19 and QS 3:67, he suggests that the term *Islam* should be seen as a universal orientation towards God, exemplified by Abraham's faith and submission long before the emergence of formal religious categories. This approach aligns with current scholarly perspectives that call for integrating historical and semantic insights to bridge textual meaning with contemporary relevance (Abduraimovich, 2025; Sulaiman, 2020).

Rather than depending solely on theological dogma, Asad's method invites a rational engagement with the Qur'an, encouraging readers to trace meanings through lexical precision, moral reasoning, and historical consciousness. His resistance to exclusivist interpretations echoes the ethos of modern tafsir movements that promote pluralism and universality, challenging ideological fixations that marginalize alternative readings. By reading the Qur'an as a living text with dynamic ethical and spiritual insights, Asad's methodology enables a more inclusive and humanistic understanding of *al-Islām* that speaks across temporal and cultural divides.

In examining Asad's tafsir, this study analyzes relevant verses and compares them to interpretations in classical tafsir literature to highlight methodological divergence. The interpretative process combines textual analysis with theoretical reflection to demonstrate how Asad's hermeneutics not only reinterpret religious terminology but also reshape our conception of Islam as a universal path of submission to the Divine.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Semantic and Historical Dimensions of *al-Islām*

The semantic scope of the term *al-Islām* has experienced a dynamic evolution across different historical phases, each influenced by its own socio-religious and linguistic contexts.

In its earliest usage during the pre-Islamic period, the root word *s-l-m*, from which *Islam* is derived, conveyed meanings associated with peace (*salām*), safety, and submission. In pre-Islamic Arabia, this concept lacked theological precision and was often interpreted through cultural idioms tied to tribal honor, sacrificial rituals, or general submission to superior tribal authority. Asad draws attention to the absence of theological absolutism in this period, noting that although the root word carried values of peace and surrender, it was not yet bound to a monotheistic framework. The linguistic connection between *salām* and the Hebrew *shalom* underscores a shared Semitic heritage, both linguistically and ethically, wherein submission to divine will was conceptually linked with harmony, justice, and moral order (AL-ahdal et al., 2021; Matawang, 2024).

As the Qur'anic revelation unfolded during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime, *al-Islām* began to be redefined with increasing theological weight. The Qur'an elevated the term from cultural metaphor to divine imperative, signifying not only submission but total alignment with God's guidance as codified in the sacred text. Verses such as QS 3:19 ("Truly, the religion with God is Islam") illustrate how Islam came to be understood as a comprehensive way of life encompassing spiritual belief, ethical behavior, and community law. Asad resists reading such verses through an exclusivist lens. Instead, he interprets "Islam" as generic *self-surrender to God*, applicable to all sincere believers, including those before the Prophet Muhammad, such as Abraham (QS 3:67), whom the Qur'an identifies as *hanīf* and *muslim* without ethnic or legal qualifiers (Asad, 2016).

This transformation during the prophetic era marked a decisive shift: *al-Islām* was no longer an abstract posture but a lived religious identity, systematized through the Prophet's practices and the formation of the *Ummah*. Islam as understood during this time became inseparable from values such as justice, compassion, and social ethics. The Prophet's establishment of the Medina Constitution institutionalized Islamic values in a pluralistic setting, showing how *al-Islām* could function both theologically and politically. The distinction between *Islam* (submission) and *Iman* (faith) was nuanced through prophetic teaching, where outward submission aligned with inward conviction—a dichotomy that would be further systematized in later theological developments (Sarnoto et al., 2021; Zabidi et al., 2023).

Following the Prophet's death, the expansion of Islam into diverse regions prompted scholars to revisit and elaborate the meanings of *al-Islām*. Theological schools emerged, and the term increasingly carried confessional and institutional weight, often used to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims. Nevertheless, thinkers such as Muhammad Asad critique this development as a narrowing of the Qur'an's original universal intent. For Asad, the post-prophetic institutionalization of Islam obscured its semantic depth by overemphasizing legalist and sectarian boundaries. Instead, he reclaims *al-Islām* as a moral-spiritual principle rooted in individual devotion to God rather than group identity (Asad, 2016).

Modern scholarship echoes this concern by reengaging the linguistic and historical roots of *al-Islām*. By highlighting its shared origins with terms like *shalom*, scholars argue that peace and submission constitute not only religious ideals but also ethical frameworks for community-building and justice (Chukhanov & Kairbekov, 2024; Hidayatulloh, 2024). This etymological and theological continuity across faiths has become the basis for interfaith efforts to construct shared values in an increasingly polarized world. Interpreting *al-Islām* in this broader semantic register fosters inclusivity and mutual understanding, reaffirming the Qur'an's ethical aspirations for humanity at large.

Asad's semantic-historical reconstruction invites a return to the Qur'an's original linguistic universe, where terms like *Islam* and *Muslim* signify devotion and integrity, not

merely institutional affiliation. His hermeneutic approach—grounded in etymology, history, and moral clarity—repositions *al-Islām* as a timeless principle of surrender to divine will, shared across prophetic traditions and transcending religious exclusivism. In doing so, he restores to the term a sense of universality and theological openness crucial for engaging with the ethical demands of contemporary plural societies.

### Muhammad Asad's Methodology in Interpreting Religious Terminologies

Muhammad Asad presents a hermeneutical framework that departs significantly from mainstream interpretations by grounding his exegesis in linguistic semantics, ethical rationalism, and contextual awareness. His reading of key religious terms—particularly *al-Islām*, *Muslim*, and *salām*—reflects a paradigm shift from formalist or ideological renderings toward a more inclusive, ethical, and universal conception of Islam. This methodological transformation is grounded in his conviction that the Qur'an is a living, dynamic text whose relevance must be continuously rediscovered through renewed engagement with its language and context (Asad, 2016; Hassan, 2019).

In *The Message of the Qur'an*, Asad emphasizes the semantic vitality of Qur'anic Arabic, recognizing it not as a static code but as a rich linguistic reservoir that demands rigorous interpretation. He applies this perspective systematically to the term *al-Islām*, which he defines not as a sectarian or political identity but as a spiritual and moral condition of surrender to God. This surrender (*taslīm*) is seen not merely as a ritual declaration but as a consistent orientation of the self toward divine truth and justice. Asad explains that the etymological root of *Islam*—*s-l-m*—anchors the term in meanings such as peace, harmony, and wholeness, offering a conceptual framework in which submission to God entails ethical equilibrium, not institutional conformity (AL-ahdal et al., 2021).

This linguistic reading allows Asad to reconstruct the term *Muslim* beyond its sociopolitical codification. He interprets a Muslim as “one who surrenders himself unto God,” which he explains through verses like QS 3:67, where Abraham is described as *hanīfan musliman*, implying not a member of a historical religion, but a seeker of truth in full devotion. Here, Asad highlights that *Muslim* is a moral identity rooted in ethical intention and spiritual disposition, not merely external affiliation. This renders Islam not an inherited religious identity but a conscious moral choice, one available to all sincere seekers regardless of time or tradition (Asad, 2016; Abdullah & Salleh, 2018).

A core feature of Asad's methodology is his insistence on **contextual interpretation**. He argues that the meaning of any verse is deeply embedded in the circumstances of its revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and that ethical messages must be assessed in relation to the historical and social milieu that shaped their articulation. This stands in contrast to the literalist or atomistic readings that treat verses as isolated injunctions. Asad's exegetical choices reflect his belief that Qur'anic ethics cannot be extracted from historical context without risking distortion of their intended spirit (Duderija, 2015). For instance, in interpreting QS 5:3—“This day I have perfected your religion for you”—Asad refrains from framing the verse as signaling closure to evolving interpretation. Instead, he sees it as the culmination of divine moral vision, not the end of religious inquiry or intellectual flexibility.

This moral contextualism further extends to Asad's reading of *salām*, which he interprets not simply as a greeting or as the absence of conflict, but as a metaphysical and social imperative. *Salām*, derived from the same root as *Islam*, becomes a multi-dimensional concept representing internal spiritual peace, communal harmony, and alignment with divine justice.

Through this ethical lens, *salām* becomes a symbol of the Qur'an's overarching aim: to cultivate individuals and communities grounded in mercy, justice, and dignity (Hassan, 2019). In Asad's view, to live as a Muslim is to participate in this ethical framework, contributing to a world shaped by compassion and equilibrium.

Asad's universalist orientation is evident in his treatment of terms that are often interpreted exclusively within Muslim doctrinal boundaries. He interprets *al-Islām* as a trans-historical value system shared across prophetic traditions, arguing that the Qur'an recognizes prior communities—such as those of Moses and Jesus—as bearing the same message of submission to God's will. In his commentary on QS 3:19, Asad challenges exclusivist readings that claim Islam as the only acceptable religion. Instead, he emphasizes that what is meant is a universal submission (*islām*) to God's moral law, and that all true believers—regardless of their historical tradition—are united by this principle. This exegetical stance, rooted in both linguistic analysis and ethical reasoning, significantly broadens the horizon of Islamic theology and opens space for interfaith solidarity (Asad, 2016; Fanani, 2023).

Crucially, Asad's interpretive methodology does not reject classical tafsir but selectively integrates its insights while rejecting what he perceives as dogmatic accretions. He frequently refers to philological authorities and draws from early linguistic lexicons to substantiate his readings. However, he departs from classical approaches when they seem to confine Qur'anic terms within ideological boundaries shaped by historical sectarianism or legalism. For example, while earlier exegetes might treat *Islam* primarily as a formal identity, Asad recovers its semantic field to demonstrate that it speaks to a universal human orientation toward God, accessible to all who act righteously and believe in justice (Kusnadi & Zulkarnain, 2018).

This approach positions Asad as a transitional figure within modern Islamic thought, where scholars increasingly emphasize dynamic engagement with the Qur'an in response to contemporary moral dilemmas. He is situated alongside reformist voices such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, who also called for reason-based readings of Islamic texts. Yet Asad distinguishes himself by fusing this rationalism with a meticulous linguistic inquiry that grounds his interpretations in the architecture of the Arabic language itself, rather than relying solely on sociopolitical reform narratives (Hassan, 2019; Abdullah & Salleh, 2018).

His contribution is particularly relevant to issues of ethical pluralism, human rights, and interfaith dialogue, where religious identity is often weaponized to delineate in-group versus out-group dynamics. By advocating a definition of *al-Islām* that is ethical rather than exclusivist, Asad counters sectarianism and affirms the possibility of shared moral ground between Islam and other traditions. His reading of terms like *Muslim* and *salām* provides the semantic and theological scaffolding for this pluralism, offering a deeply Qur'anic basis for inclusive discourse.

What makes Asad's hermeneutics especially compelling is its applicability to contemporary debates around the place of religion in public life. His methodology provides tools for engaging with modern ethical challenges—such as gender justice, economic equity, and environmental stewardship—through a Qur'anic lens that is both faithful to the text and responsive to changing human conditions. By locating meaning at the intersection of language, context, and morality, Asad opens a pathway for an interpretive Islam that is both rooted and relevant.

Asad's interpretive methodology reclaims the Qur'an as a universal message of moral awakening. It enables believers to engage with scripture not merely as recipients of legal commands, but as moral agents called to embody justice, compassion, and intellectual

humility. In this way, his work offers a theological and semantic reorientation that preserves the depth of Islamic tradition while making it a living force for contemporary ethical life.

### Comparison with Classical and Ideological Tafsir

The interpretation of *al-Islām* has historically been shaped by classical scholars who viewed it through a normative and confessional lens. Ibn Kathir, one of the most prominent medieval exegetes, framed *al-Islām* as the complete submission to Allah through both creed and ritual. His tafsir consistently positions Islam as a comprehensive system of faith and practice, beginning with the *shahada* (declaration of faith) and extending through acts of worship (*ibadah*), legal observance (*shariah*), and ethical behavior. In his commentary on verses such as QS 3:19 and QS 5:3, Ibn Kathir emphasizes the doctrinal finality of Islam as the ultimate and exclusive path to divine truth. His approach often reflects a theological system that privileges exclusivity as a marker of religious authenticity (Ibn Kathīr, 2011; Khan & Bibi, 2020).

Fakhruddin al-Razi, another towering figure in classical Islamic theology, added philosophical sophistication to this framework. While also affirming Islam as a comprehensive way of life, Razi delved deeply into the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of submission to God. He argued that true belief is inseparable from action, and that Islam encompasses both the outer forms of devotion and the inner cultivation of moral excellence. Despite this ethical depth, Razi, like many classical scholars, interpreted *al-Islām* within a paradigm that accentuated theological boundaries and maintained Islam's exclusivity as the divinely ordained path for salvation (al-Razī, nd; Ihsan & Sabarudin, 2023).

In contrast, Muhammad Asad's approach departs markedly from this exclusive framework. As a modern interpreter, Asad redefines *al-Islām* as a generically inclusive orientation of the human soul toward divine truth. Rather than limiting Islam to a specific religious identity rooted in historical institutionalization, Asad views it as a moral and spiritual state of surrender that transcends doctrinal divisions. In *The Message of the Qur'an*, he interprets terms like *Islam* and *Muslim* as universal concepts—states of being characterized by conscious submission to God and moral accountability. Asad's reading of QS 3:67, which portrays Abraham as a *hanīf* and *Muslim*, serves as a key textual anchor for this vision: Islam, for Asad, is not exclusive to the community founded by Prophet Muhammad but represents a perennial ethical posture toward the divine (Asad, 2016).

This inclusive hermeneutic aligns with Asad's broader theological stance that the Qur'an's message is addressed to all of humanity. His understanding of *al-Islām* is firmly embedded in an ethical framework that prioritizes justice, compassion, and universal dignity. He interprets peace (*salām*) not merely as the absence of violence but as a metaphysical and communal aspiration—one that reflects the Qur'an's demand for social equilibrium and moral responsibility. This interpretation mirrors the broader goals of the Qur'an, as Asad sees them: to promote harmony, uphold human dignity, and transcend sectarian confines in favor of shared human values (Hassan, 2019; Abdullah & Salleh, 2018).

The divergence between Asad and classical scholars is not solely exegetical but also ideological. Classical interpretations often reflect the sociopolitical realities of their time—contexts in which the delineation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities was crucial for legal and political governance. Asad, however, operates within a modern, globalized landscape in which religion is increasingly interpreted through the lens of ethical pluralism and intercultural engagement. For Asad, Islam is less about juridical identity and more about



ethical consciousness—a position that allows for a critical and adaptive reading of the text (Rohman, 2022).

This hermeneutical contrast has significant implications for contemporary Islamic discourse. Interpreting *al-Islām* ideologically—as a fixed, exclusive category—may contribute to sectarianism and interreligious division. It can reinforce a rigid orthodoxy that is resistant to reform and hostile to internal critique. As noted in the original manuscript, Asad critiques the theological rigidity that developed after the Prophet's time, arguing that later institutional interpretations have confined the Qur'an's language into narrow dogmatic molds. He emphasizes the need to return to the Qur'an's original semantic landscape, where terms were fluid, context-sensitive, and morally driven.

Conversely, Asad's non-ideological, universalist interpretation allows for a more open and dialogical engagement with other faith traditions. By reclaiming *al-Islām* as a condition of the soul—rather than a rigid identity marker—Asad invites Muslims to see themselves as part of a broader ethical tradition shared by all who surrender to God's will, regardless of formal religious affiliation. This position resonates strongly with modern pluralist values and offers a theological basis for interfaith cooperation, social justice, and human rights (Muttaqin, 2019; Abdullah & Salleh, 2018).

While Asad's method has been criticized by some as overly modernist or philosophically liberal, it provides an essential corrective to the exclusivist tendencies found in parts of the classical tradition. His insistence on reading the Qur'an through the dual lenses of language and ethics encourages Muslims to engage with their scripture in ways that are both faithful to its origins and responsive to contemporary moral challenges. Asad's interpretative model therefore not only contributes to the ongoing evolution of Islamic hermeneutics but also offers a framework for rearticulating Islamic identity in an age of global interconnection.

While classical tafsir—exemplified by Ibn Kathir and Fakhruddin Razi—has established foundational insights into Islamic doctrine, Muhammad Asad's contribution lies in expanding the interpretive horizon. He retrieves *al-Islām* from the confines of ideological exclusivism and repositions it as a moral compass, relevant across eras, cultures, and religious boundaries. This methodological shift underscores the Qur'an's role not just as a text for Muslims, but as a universal guide toward justice, peace, and divine alignment for all of humanity.

### **Implications for Religious Pluralism and Contemporary Islamic Thought**

Muhammad Asad's inclusive interpretation of *al-Islām* offers a vital reorientation of Islamic discourse, particularly in relation to interfaith engagement and the dynamics of religious identity in pluralistic societies. Departing from traditional frameworks that often cast Islam as a closed system of belief tied to rigid dogmas, Asad proposes a vision of Islam as a universal ethical system rooted in moral responsibility, peace, and submission to God. His approach, as reflected in *The Message of the Qur'an*, underscores the foundational Qur'anic values of justice, compassion, and human dignity as universally relevant, transcending religious boundaries and cultural affiliations.

Asad's reading of key concepts such as *Islam*, *Muslim*, and *salām* extends beyond narrow theological constructs, offering interpretive possibilities that are aligned with interfaith solidarity and shared ethical commitments. By framing Islam as a moral trajectory rather than a sectarian identity, Asad provides theological space for Muslims to find common ground with adherents of other faiths. This is particularly evident in his discussion of Qur'anic figures such as Abraham, who is identified not by institutional affiliation but by his ethical monotheism

and surrender to God (QS 3:67). In Asad's interpretation, Abraham becomes a unifying figure across the Abrahamic faiths, symbolizing the ethical essence of *al-Islām* (Asad, 2016).

This framework opens the door for pluralistic theology by emphasizing universal values rather than exclusive doctrines. Asad affirms that the core message of the Qur'an is inherently inclusive, promoting a moral order that can be embraced by all people of conscience. His understanding of *salām* (peace), for instance, illustrates Islam's alignment with the broader aspirations of humanity—peace with oneself, with others, and with the divine. This semantic and ethical vision mirrors teachings found in other religious traditions, such as Christianity's emphasis on love and Judaism's covenantal justice, thus facilitating interreligious dialogue grounded in mutual respect (Abdullah & Hassan, 2021; Lestari et al., 2023).

In pluralistic societies, such as Indonesia or the West, Asad's framework allows Muslims to articulate their identity in ways that are both faithful to Islam and responsive to multicultural realities. Instead of viewing Muslim identity as a rigid theological enclosure, Asad offers a vision of faith that is morally adaptive and civically engaged. This is especially significant in secular contexts, where religious identities are frequently marginalized or misunderstood. Asad's interpretation enables Muslims to participate fully in public life—through interfaith initiatives, social activism, or civic leadership—without compromising the spiritual integrity of their faith (Şahin, 2022; Alkouatli et al., 2023).

This adaptability does not suggest dilution but rather contextual strength. Asad affirms that Muslims can remain authentically rooted in Qur'anic principles while engaging the world around them in constructive and cooperative ways. His reading of verses like QS 5:48, which acknowledges the diversity of religious paths as part of divine wisdom, supports a vision of Islam that embraces coexistence, not conflict. He frames Islamic ethical teachings—such as equity, mercy, and truthfulness—as values that extend across religious lines and serve as foundations for collaborative action in confronting global challenges like poverty, discrimination, and violence (Lestari et al., 2023; Şahin, 2022).

Moreover, Asad's vision fosters a reinterpretation of Muslim identity as inherently dialogical and relational. Rather than cultivating isolationist or oppositional postures, his interpretive model encourages Muslims to see themselves as ethical agents within a broader human community. This paradigm shift allows Muslims to define their role in society not merely in terms of religious obligation but in terms of moral leadership—serving the public good while upholding their theological convictions. In this sense, Islam, as Asad defines it, becomes a public ethic that contributes to social harmony and pluralistic integration (Şahin, 2018; Lewis & Kashyap, 2013).

The ideological implications of Asad's inclusive interpretation are profound. By reimagining Islam as an ethical system that resonates with universal values, he challenges the notion that religion is inherently exclusionary or incompatible with modern secular governance. His approach disrupts binary thinking that pits Islam against liberal democracy or pluralism, instead suggesting that Islamic values can be allies in the pursuit of justice, human rights, and civic virtue. This interpretive stance reclaims Islam's public relevance and asserts its capacity to enrich—not disrupt—societal cohesion (Maram et al., 2023; Rohman, 2022; Ida, 2018).

Such an approach also offers a theological foundation for interreligious cooperation. Asad's methodology legitimizes partnerships between Muslims and other faith communities in addressing common societal concerns, such as education, poverty alleviation, ecological responsibility, and peacebuilding. Through this ethical lens, the Qur'an is not only a spiritual guide for Muslims but also a resource for interfaith collaboration in the pursuit of global good.

This recontextualization allows Islamic teachings to operate as moral capital in secular democracies and global institutions without losing their religious authenticity (Alkouatli et al., 2023; Şahin, 2022).

In essence, Asad's inclusive interpretation invites a theological posture that affirms both Islamic uniqueness and human universality. His work challenges Muslims to inhabit their faith in ways that are intellectually honest, ethically robust, and socially transformative. As religious diversity becomes an increasingly prominent feature of modern life, such a vision is not only desirable but necessary. It empowers Muslims to move beyond defensive identity politics and contribute proactively to the ethical and spiritual fabric of their societies.

Muhammad Asad's hermeneutics of inclusion provide a compelling response to the complexities of religious identity in a globalized, pluralistic world. His approach revitalizes Islamic theology by anchoring it in the Qur'an's moral core and expanding its relevance through engagement with shared human values. By framing Islam as a universal path of peace, justice, and compassion, Asad enables Muslims to live their faith authentically while building bridges across the world's diverse religious landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined Muhammad Asad's interpretation of the term *al-Islām*, highlighting a significant departure from classical, ideologically exclusive readings. By employing a linguistically grounded and morally oriented hermeneutic, Asad reconstructs *al-Islām* not as a rigid institutional label, but as a universal state of surrender to God. His semantic engagement with Qur'anic vocabulary—particularly the terms *Islam*, *Muslim*, and *salām*—reveals a vision of Islam that transcends confessional boundaries and embraces a broader, inclusive humanistic ethic.

In his exegetical approach, Asad places particular emphasis on linguistic *ijtihād* and contextual interpretation. His understanding of *al-Islām* is deeply rooted in philological analysis and is directed toward extracting meanings that reflect the Qur'an's universal moral spirit. As a contemporary Muslim intellectual, Asad's hermeneutics are characterized by a distinctive orientation toward the contextuality of Qur'anic language, consistently aiming to capture the ethical ideals embedded within the text. This methodology allows him to offer a generic and inclusive understanding of *al-Islām*, one that resonates with the Qur'anic ethos and appeals to the moral consciousness of a global audience.

Asad's interpretation notably diverges from traditional exegeses offered by classical scholars such as Ibn Kathir and Fakhruddin al-Razi, who often framed *al-Islām* within a narrowly doctrinal and jurisprudential framework. In contrast, Asad's interpretive paradigm is acutely responsive to contemporary ethical concerns. His inclusive reading aligns Islam with values shared across religious traditions, thereby promoting interfaith dialogue, social justice, and peaceful coexistence. By positioning Islam as a dynamic moral force rather than a fixed legal identity, Asad revitalizes its relevance within pluralistic societies and secular contexts alike.

The implications of this reading are profound: Islam is no longer confined to a singular theological identity but emerges as a universal ethical framework accessible to all sincere seekers of truth and moral integrity. Asad's hermeneutics invite a rethinking of Muslim identity and Qur'anic interpretation in ways that affirm both fidelity to the sacred text and engagement with modern realities. His vision of Islam—rooted in linguistic precision, contextual awareness, and Qur'anic morality—positions it as a bridge to shared human values,

contributing meaningfully to the construction of a more inclusive, ethical, and harmonious global order.

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