

**ETHICAL HERMENEUTICS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR
RELIGIOUS MODERATION: A STUDY OF *AL-IKLİL FĪ MA'ĀNĪ
AL-TANZĪL* BY KH. MISBAH MUSTOFA**

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Abstract: Religious extremism continues to pose a major challenge in contemporary Islamic societies, particularly in plural contexts where competing interpretations of the Qur'an often generate exclusivism and intolerance. While existing studies on religious moderation largely approach this issue from sociopolitical or policy-oriented perspectives, there remains a significant gap in understanding how moderation is constructed as an ethical-hermeneutical practice within local Qur'anic exegetical traditions. This study aims to analyze how KH. Misbah Mustofa formulates religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) as an ethical hermeneutic in *al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*, and to identify the moral principles and interpretive strategies underlying this framework. Employing a qualitative, library-based methodology, the research utilizes thematic content analysis of selected Qur'anic verses related to justice, balance, tolerance, and human responsibility as *khalifah fī al-ard*. The findings reveal that KH. Misbah conceptualizes moderation not as a political compromise or ideological midpoint, but as a dynamic ethical process that integrates textual interpretation with moral reasoning and social accountability. Anchored in Qur'anic values such as *'adālah* (justice), *ta'ādul* (balance), and *ta'aruf* (mutual recognition), his tafsir presents moderation as a cultivated moral virtue capable of resisting both religious extremism and ethical relativism. This study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by advancing ethical hermeneutics as a robust analytical framework for religious moderation, highlighting the intellectual significance of Indonesian pesantren-based tafsir in global discussions on Islamic ethics, pluralism, and social harmony.

Keywords: Al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl; Ethical Hermeneutics; KH. Misbah Mustofa; Religious Moderation

Introduction

The increasing prevalence of religious extremism in the twenty-first century has emerged as a significant concern among Muslim scholars and social scientists (Mandavilli, 2025; Seeth, 2023). Beyond its social and political ramifications, a deeper anxiety persists regarding modes of interpreting sacred texts that legitimize exclusivism and intolerance (Hutagalung, 2023). In Indonesia, this issue assumes is particularly pressing given the nation's pluralistic identity, where Islam coexists with diverse local traditions and contemporary values (Badrun et al., 2023; Mazya et al., 2024). The challenge extends beyond the rise of radical movements to a broader crisis of interpretation concerning how Muslims engage with the Qur'an as a moral and living text that guides ethical conduct (Fawaid, 2024). While numerous studies approach extremism through

sociological or political frameworks, relatively few address it as a hermeneutical problem rooted in Qur'anic interpretation. This research therefore proceeds from the premise that an intellectual response to extremism must revisit the interpretive foundations through which moderation in Islam is constructed (Aziz, 2023).

The concept of *wasatīyyah* (moderation) occupies a central position in Islamic theology and moral philosophy (Pahrudin et al., 2025a; Romli et al., 2025). Derived from the Qur'anic phrase *ummataṁ wasaṭan* (QS. al-Baqarah (2): 143), it signifies a balanced community grounded in justice (*'adālah*) and equilibrium (*ta'ādul*). Classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī and ar-Rāzī understood moderation as a virtue that avoids both rigidity and negligence (Razi (al), 1981; Thabari (al), 2010). Modern scholars, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Fazlur Rahman, have redefined *wasatīyyah* as an interpretive framework that reconciles textual fidelity with ethical reasoning (Qaradhawi (al), 2006; Rahman, 2009). Despite its normative significance, contemporary interpretations of *wasatīyyah* remains contested. Some perceive it as a political slogan associated with state-sponsored religious moderation (Osborne, 2023), while others conceptualize it as a spiritual-ethical method of engaging the Qur'an (Pahrudin et al., 2025b). These divergent readings highlight the complexity of *wasatīyyah* as both a moral principle and a hermeneutic process.

Within the Indonesian context, discussions of moderation have developed alongside a vibrant tradition of *tafsir* rooted in *pesantren* scholarship (Helmy et al., 2021). The archipelago's exegetical heritage shows how Islamic interpretation interacts dynamically with cultural practices and social realities. Notable works include Nawawi al-Bantani's *Marāḥ Labīd* which reflects classical linguistic rigor, and Bisri Mustofa's *Tafsir al-Ibrīz*, characterized by its incorporation of Javanese didactic expression (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2025). While these works are rich in ethical insights, they rarely elaborate on the hermeneutical methods through which moral reasoning is constructed. This gap renders KH. Misbah Mustofa's *al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* a distinctive and significant contribution. Composed in the late twentieth century, *al-Iklīl* presents a deeply ethical reading of the Qur'an that synthesizes *pesantren* traditionalism with critical social engagement. Misbah's *tafsir* illustrates how moral consciousness emerges through interpretive engagement rather than through rigid doctrinal assertion (Supriyanto, 2017).

Despite its intellectual depth, *al-Iklīl* has received limited scholarly attention compared to other Indonesian *tafsir* works. Existing studies have addressed particular dimensions of the text, such as Ahmad Baidowi & Yuni Ma'rufah did in their article entitled "*Localizing The Qur'an in Javanese Pesantren: A Socio-Cultural Interpretation of Al-Ibrīz and Al-Iklīl*", comparing *al-Iklīl* with *al-Ibrīz* in terms of localizing the Qur'an through a socio-cultural approach (Baidowi & Ma'rufah, 2025); Islah Gusmian & Mustaffa Abdullah, in their article entitled "*Criticism of Social, Political, and Religious Problems in Indonesia: A Study on Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl by Misbah Bin Zainil Mustafa (1917-1994)*", position *al-Iklīl* as a medium for social, political, and religious criticism during the New Order era (Gusmian & Abdullah, 2023); Hambari, in their article entitled "*Toleransi Beragama Dalam Tafsir Ulama Jawa (Telaah Pemikiran KH. Misbah Musthofa dalam Tafsir Al-Iklīl)*", who analyzes religious tolerance in *al-Iklīl* and highlights Misbah's emphasis on pluralism and interfaith harmony (Hambari, 2020); Abror, in their article entitled

“*Lokalitas dan Tekstualitas Tafsir Al-Iklil Fi Ma'ani Al-Tanzil Dalam Masyarakat Tradisional Jawa*”, who examines cultural adaptation in *al-Iklil*, emphasizing the integration of Javanese values to bridge between tradition and modernity (Abror, 2023); and Supriyanto et.al, in their article entitled “*Cultural Integration in Tafsir al-Iklil fi Ma'ani al-Tanzil by Misbah Mustafa within the Context of Javanese Islam*”, who explore socio-political critique in Misbah’s *tafsir*, particularly his ethical assessment of governmental and societal practices (Supriyanto et al., 2024). While these studies illuminate important aspects of *al-Iklil*, they do not sufficiently address how KH. Misbah constructs religious moderation as a coherent ethical system grounded in hermeneutical reasoning. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining *wasatiyyah* as a lived moral principle formed through sustained textual interpretation. In doing so, it broadens the scope of Indonesian *tafsir* studies and situates local scholarship in broader debates on global Islamic ethics.

This research is motivated by both intellectual and contextual urgency. In an increasingly polarized global climate, moderation is often misconceived as mere neutrality between opposing extremes. Misbah Mustofa’s interpretation challenges this reductionist view by redefining moderation as active moral engagement rooted in justice, compassion, and balance. His *tafsir* demonstrates that ethical interpretation is not peripheral to Qur’anic exegesis but to constitutes its very core. Accordingly, the significance of this study extends beyond textual analysis. It revitalizes Indonesia’s local *tafsir* tradition as an intellectual resource capable of addressing contemporary moral crises. By situating Misbah’s ethical hermeneutic within the broader history of Qur’anic interpretation, this study highlights Indonesia’s potential contribution to a global theology of moderation.

Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative and library-based approach using thematic content analysis. The primary data consists of the volumes of *al-Iklil fi Ma'āni al-Tanzīl*, supplemented by secondary literature on *tafsir*, hermeneutics, and Islamic ethics. The analysis proceeds through three stages: identifying Qur’anic verses related to moderation themes (*‘adalah*, *ta’adul*, and *ta’aruf*), examining interpretive strategies that construct moral reasoning, and synthesizing these findings into a conceptual framework of *wasatiyyah*. This integrative process reveals how Misbah operationalizes moderation through ethical reflection grounded in revelation. The study ultimately argues that *al-Iklil fi Ma'āni al-Tanzīl* offers a coherent model of ethical hermeneutics that bridges textual understanding and moral praxis, reaffirming the vitality of Indonesian Qur’anic exegesis within global Islamic scholarship.

KH. Misbah Mustofa and the Ethical Foundation of His Qur’anic Interpretation

KH. Misbah Mustofa’s intellectual formation cannot be separated from the *pesantren* epistemology that shaped his synthesis of *tafsir tahlili* (analytical exegesis) and *adabi ijtima’i* (ethical-social hermeneutics) (Gusmian & Abdullah, 2023). However, his work in *al-Iklil fi Ma'āni al-Tanzīl* does not merely juxtapose these approaches, rather it transforms them into a coherent ethical epistemology. Drawing on Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity, Misbah approaches the Qur’an as a moral narrative that shapes human character through interpretive engagement (Ricoeur, 1992). His analysis of *ummatan wasatan* (QS. al-Baqarah (2): 143) shows that moderation is not simply a descriptive middle position, but a formative ethical principle through which believers construct their

moral selves (Mustofa, 1980). In Misbah's interpretation, the phrase embodies both theological balance and existential responsibility that is a community becomes "moderate" by internalizing divine justice (*'adālah*) within social life. This perspective resonates with Alasdair MacIntyre notion of virtue ethics, the cultivation of moral excellence through a habituated understanding of moral narratives (MacIntyre, Alasdair, 1984).

To clarify how these ethical commitments function systematically within KH. Misbah Mustofa's interpretive framework, it is necessary to elucidate the structural relationship between epistemology, hermeneutics, and moral formation. Consistent with Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, Qur'anic interpretation in Misbah's thought operates as a mediating practice through which believers engage revelation as a moral narrative that gradually shapes their self-understanding (M. Rosidin, 2018; R. Rosidin & Andriani, 2022). At the same time, this interpretive process reflects Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of virtue ethics, in which moral excellence emerges from sustained participation in authoritative traditions and ethically charged narratives rather than from adherence to abstract moral rules alone (Sidqy & Rahman, 2025). Accordingly, Qur'anic tafsīr is understood not merely as a textual exercise but as a tradition-embedded ethical practice that connects meaning, action, and character formation (Supena, 2024). Figure 1 below visually synthesizes this interpretive logic by mapping the sequential movement from *pesantren* epistemology through ethical hermeneutics to the formation of the moral subject, thereby directing the reader to apprehend Qur'anic interpretation as an integrative and formative ethical process rather than a linear exegetical technique.

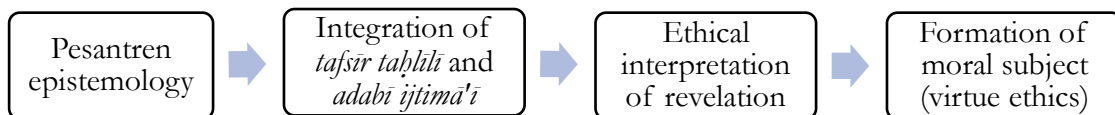


Figure 1. Ethical Epistemology of KH. Misbah Mustofa's Qur'anic Interpretation

The figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework underlying KH. Misbah Mustofa's *tafsīr*, emphasizing an ethical epistemology rooted in the *pesantren* tradition. The process begins with *pesantren* epistemology as the foundation of knowledge, where learning is understood as an ethical and holistic process. This foundation is followed by the integration of *tafsīr taḥlīlī* (analytical exegesis) and *adabī ijtimā'ī* (ethical-social hermeneutics), which combine rigorous textual analysis with sensitivity to ethical values and social realities. The third stage, ethical interpretation of revelation, interprets the Qur'anic meaning through principles of justice, balance, and social responsibility. The final stage, the formation of the moral subject (virtue ethics), highlights how interpretation shapes individual's moral character, aligning their actions with Qur'anic ethical values. This framework underscores that religious moderation functions as an ethical practice, not merely a theological or political stance, and emphasizes ethical self-formation through textual interpretation.

Rather than focusing solely on linguistic analysis, KH. Misbah's *tafsīr* centers ethics as the interpretive core of revelation. In his commentary on *innallāha ya'muru bi al-*

'adli wa al-ihsān (QS. al-Nahl (16): 90), he states that “justice is the perfection of law, while *al-ihsān* is the spirit that animates it,” asserting that legal obedience without compassion becomes “dry as a law without life” (Mustofa, 1980). This interpretation exemplifies Misbah’s ethical-hermeneutical approach in which *'adl* and *al-ihsān* are not just divine commands but as epistemic categories that shape moral reasoning. Here, interpretation is a performative ethical act where the reader does not merely understand the meaning of the verse but engages in its moral actualization. In Ricoeurian terms, Misbah transforms text into action. When interpreted ethically, the Qur’an redefines the moral identity of its reader (Ricoeur, 1981).

In applying this framework, KH. Misbah moves beyond purely theological abstraction by anchoring ethical understanding in social practice. When interpreting *faman ya'mal mithqāla dharratin khayran yarab* (QS. al-Zalzalah (99): 7), he argues that the verse implies “ethical accountability as continuous interpretation,” where a person’s actions reflect their understanding of divine justice (Mustofa, 1980). His hermeneutic aligns with MacIntyre’s idea that virtue is not an isolated act but a practice rooted in a tradition of rational moral inquiry (MacIntyre, Alasdair, 1984). Misbah’s emphasis on *'amal ṣāliḥ* as an interpretive proof of faith suggests that the ethical foundation of tafsir lies in its ability to produce moral agents, not merely knowledge (Ma'arif et al., 2024). Through this approach, *al-Iklil* presents Qur’anic exegesis as a form of ethical education (*tarbiyah akblāqīyyah*), where understanding the Qur’an also involves becoming a morally responsible individual.

Misbah’s exegetical ethics critiques the rigidity of formalist readings and the subjectivity of liberal interpretations. He argues that meaning arises from the dialectic between revelation (*naṣṣ*) and historical human experience (*tārikh al-insān*). This dialectic reflects Ricoeur’s concept of the hermeneutic arc, where distanciation from the text allows for the re-appropriation of its moral intent in new historical contexts (Ricoeur, 1976). For example, his interpretation of *lā tutrikū billāhi shay'an* (QS. al-An'ām [6]: 151) extends beyond theological monotheism to ethical monotheism that resists modern forms of idolatry, such as greed, arrogance, and injustice. Here, idolatry serves as a metaphor for moral alienation, demonstrating how Misbah’s hermeneutics transforms textual monotheism into a living moral critique. This approach situates his *tafsir* within what Ricoeur describes as a *hermeneutics of responsibility*, wherein reading the Qur’an becomes an act of ethical accountability toward God and humanity (Ricoeur, 2008).

Ethical Hermeneutics as a Distinct Interpretive Paradigm

Ethical hermeneutics, as applied in contemporary Qur’anic interpretation, represents a distinct paradigm that emphasizes the ethical dimensions inherent in interpretation. Unlike moral exegesis which seeks to extract normative ethical lessons from the text, ethical hermeneutics reconceptualizes interpretation as a morally situated encounter between interpreter and revelation. Within this framework, the exegete is not a passive transmitter of meaning but an ethically accountable subject whose interpretive choices, ranging from contextualization and relevance selection to normative application, reflect and construct ethical commitments. Thus, hermeneutics is not merely a technical

endeavor but a moral practice that embeds the interpreter within a broader framework of ethical obligations toward the sacred text and the interpretive community (Mostfa, 2024).

Moral exegesis commonly referred to as *tafsir akhlāqī* in Islamic scholarship, tends to isolate ethical values in Qur'anic verses and presents them as normative content (Moqbel, 2024). While this approach highlights ethical substance, it often leaves unexamined the ethical implications of the interpretive act itself. In contrast, ethical hermeneutics treats interpretation as a morally performative act, where the interpreter is a moral agent whose ethical commitments inform every exegetical decision, including contextual framing, relevance selection, and meaning application (Alak, 2023). Interpretation, therefore, is not merely an epistemic endeavor but a formative practice that shapes the interpreter into a morally accountable subject. This paradigm aligns with KH. Misbah Mustofa's approach in *al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*, which situates hermeneutics as a site of ethical formation rather than mere legal elaboration or normative assertion (Mostfa, 2024).

A comparable distinction can be drawn with *adabī ijtimā'ī tafsir* which emphasizes the Qur'an's relevance to socio-cultural realities by linking its verses to concrete social issues and cultural norms (Basri et al., 2024). While this approach commendably grounds interpretation in social relevance, it mainly focuses on content-oriented outcomes, such as ethical values or social critiques, rather than on the moral responsibility inherent in the interpretive act itself. In contrast, ethical hermeneutics highlights the interpreter's ethical agency, stressing accountability for how interpretive choices shape moral subjectivity and influence communal ethics. It examines not only the meanings derived but also how those meanings are constructed through moral deliberation. Studies show that *adabī ijtimā'ī tafsir* in contemporary Muslim scholarship is largely driven by contextual concerns, yet it rarely articulates a theoretical account of ethical agency as a key element of hermeneutical praxis (Dewi & Muhammad, 2022).

Similarly, contextual *tafsir* broadly seeks to make Qur'anic interpretation relevant by anchoring meaning within specific historical, cultural, or social frameworks (Fakhrurrozi et al., 2024; Kusroni & Zamzami, 2021). This approach acknowledges the dynamic interplay between text and context. However, ethical hermeneutics advances this perspective by asserting that interpretation is not merely contextually responsive but ethically imperative. Rather than treating context as a passive backdrop for meaning, ethical hermeneutics frames it as an ethically charged arena where textual understanding and moral accountability are interlinked. In this model, every interpretive act is a moral decision that impacts ethical formation and communal justice. Such a perspective aligns with broader religious hermeneutic theories, which conceptualize interpretation as a dialogical and situated praxis, an encounter where text, self, and society continuously shape one another in ethically significant ways (Mostfa, 2024).

Ethical hermeneutics is defined by three core dimensions that establish it as a morally grounded interpretive paradigm. *First*, it emphasizes moral agency by positioning the interpreter as an ethical subject whose choices shape how Qur'anic meanings are constructed and enacted in lived realities. *Second*, it focuses on virtue formation, viewing interpretation as a process that nurtures ethical dispositions such as justice, compassion, and balance, both individually and communally. This aligns with hermeneutic traditions

that consider understanding a path to moral cultivation. *Third*, it highlights social responsibility, asserting that interpretation must contribute to communal well-being and ethical coexistence. Meaning is not complete until realized as ethical action. By uniting these dimensions, ethical hermeneutics transcends mere methodology, becoming a moral engagement that connects text, self, and society (Mostfa, 2024).

Within KH. Misbah Mustofa's exegetical framework, this ethical orientation finds concrete expression. The Qur'an is not merely a text to be explained (*tafsīr*), contextualized (*ta'wīl*), or moralized in abstraction, but as a source of ethical enactment through a dynamic interpretive process that links understanding to moral transformation (Calis, 2022; Saeed & Akbar, 2021). This approach shows that religious moderation (*wasatīyyah*) in *al-Iklil fī Ma'āni al-Tanzīl* transcends ideological rhetoric and sociopolitical pragmatism. Moderation is not depicted as a passive middle ground or a state-imposed narrative, but as the ethical outcome of a hermeneutical practice that cultivates morally responsible individuals capable of upholding justice (*'adālah*), balance (*ta'ādul*), and mutual recognition (*ta'āruf*) within a plural and ethically complex society.

To clarify the conceptual structure of ethical hermeneutics as an independent interpretive paradigm, the schematic representation below is provided. This figure synthesizes the core components of ethical hermeneutics by illustrating how Qur'anic interpretation operates as a morally situated process in which the interpreter functions as an ethically accountable agent. Rather than reiterating the preceding theoretical discussion, the diagram visually maps the dynamic relationship between revelation, moral agency, hermeneutical engagement, and the formation of religious moderation as an ethical outcome.

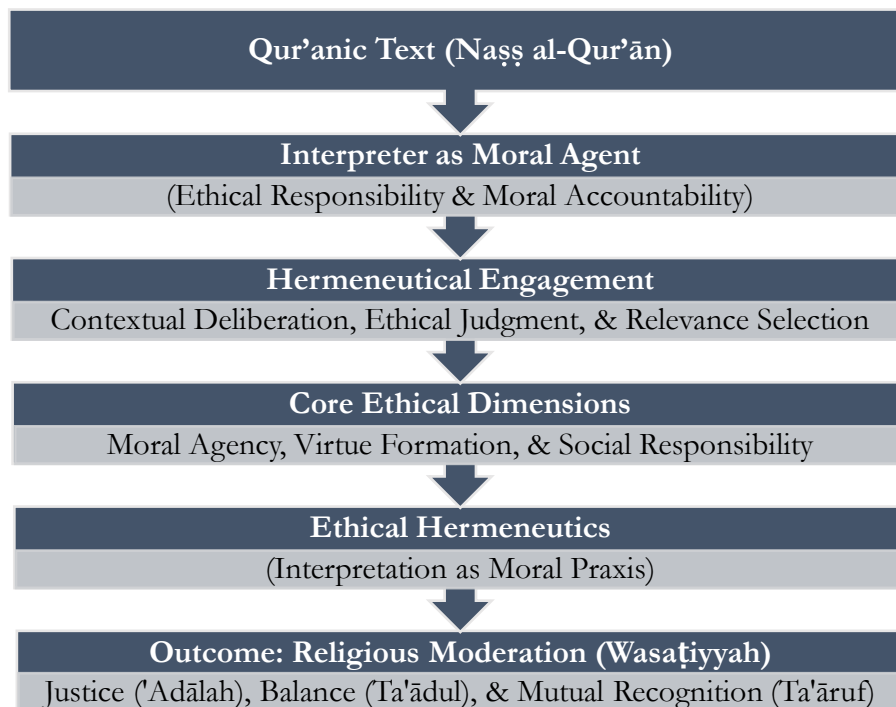


Figure 2. Conceptual Diagram Description for Manuscript Integration

This figure 2 demonstrates that ethical hermeneutics does not merely aim to extract ethical meanings from the text but positions interpretation itself as a moral act. The hermeneutical process begins with revelation; however, meaning does not emerge in a neutral manner. It is mediated by the ethical subjectivity of the interpreter, who bears moral responsibility for the consequences of interpretive choices.

Unlike moral exegesis (*tafsīr akhlāqī*) or *adabī ijtimā'ī* interpretation, which primarily focus on normative or social outcomes, ethical hermeneutics emphasizes the formation of the moral subject through the act of interpretation. Within this framework, religious moderation (*wasatīyyah*) emerges as an ethical outcome of the dynamic interaction between text, interpreter, and social responsibility, rather than as an ideological slogan or a passive middle position.

Ethical Hermeneutics and the Construction of Religious Moderation in *al-Iklāl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*

Al-Iklāl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl represents a unique form of ethical hermeneutics that interprets revelation not just as divine law (*sharī'ah*) but as a moral dialogue between God and humanity. Unlike *adabī ijtimā'ī tafsīr* which emphasizes literary ethics and social values, or purely contextual hermeneutics that prioritizes sociological settings, Misbah's approach integrates both (Maulana et al., 2021; Subaidi et al., 2023). He starts with *al-ma'nā al-lughawī* (linguistic meaning), moves to *as-siyāq an-nuzūlī* (historical context), and concludes with *ad-dalālah al-akhlāqīyyah* (ethical implication). Thus, "ethical hermeneutics" refers to an interpretive process where moral reasoning (*ta'āqul akhlāqī*) serves as both the method and the goal of understanding. This process reflects Ricoeur's concept of *refiguration*, in which the interpreter reconstructs moral identity through reading (Ricoeur, 2008), and aligns with Rahman's "double movement" that connects historical meaning with contemporary moral application (Rahman, 2024).

Misbah's interpretation of QS. al-Baqarah (2): 213 exemplifies this three-tier hermeneutical structure. First, he reads the verse linguistically, noting that *baghy* (transgression) signifies "egoistic deviation that fractures moral unity". Second, he explores its historical dimension, explaining that humanity was once one community (*ummatan wāhidah*) before moral corruption led to division. Finally, he derives its ethical meaning, arguing that divine justice (*ḥukm bi al-ḥaq*) must be enacted through moral humility (*tawāḍu'*) (Mustofa, 1980). This contrasts with al-Marāghī's commentary, which frames the verse as a legal account of prophetic succession (Maraghi (al), 1956), and aligns more closely with Fazlur Rahman's moral-hermeneutical reading that places ethical intentionality (*niyyah akhlāqīyyah*) at the core of divine guidance (Rahman, 2009). Misbah's innovation lies in transforming a historical verse into a living critique of ethical egoism, asserting that religious disunity arises less from doctrinal error than from moral arrogance that distorts communal justice.

Table 1. Thematic Stages of Ethical Hermeneutics in *al-Iklāl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*

| Analytical Stage | Hermeneutic Focus | Example of Qur'anic Verse | Ethical Dimension |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Al-ma'nā al-</i> | Semantic analysis of | QS. al-Nahl (16): | Justice as moral |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|
| <i>lughawī</i> | core moral terms (e.g., ‘ <i>adl</i> , ‘ <i>ihsān</i>) | 90 | perfection |
| <i>Al-siyāq al-nuẓūlī</i> | Socio-historical context of ethical revelation | QS. al-Baqarah (2): 213 | Moral unity and social humility |
| <i>Ad-dalālah al- akhlāqīyyah</i> | Normative reconstruction of moral values | QS. al-Ḥujurāt (49): 13 | Mutual recognition and ethical pluralism |

Table 1 illustrates the stages of ethical hermeneutics in KH. Misbah Mustofa’s *tafsir* integrates semantic, historical, and normative analysis. The first stage, *al-ma’na al-lughawī*, focuses on the semantic analysis of moral terms like ‘*adl* (justice) and ‘*ihsān* (benevolence). For example, QS. al-Nahl (16): 90 emphasizes justice as moral perfection, highlighting the ethical duty to uphold it. The second stage, *al-siyāq al-nuẓūlī*, considers the socio-historical context of revelation. In QS. al-Baqarah (2): 213, Misbah interprets the verse as a call for moral unity and social humility, urging believers to recognize their interdependence. The final stage, *al-dalālah al-akhlāqīyyah*, reconstructs moral values, deriving from QS. al-Ḥujurāt [49]: 13 the concepts of mutual recognition and ethical pluralism. This multi-layered hermeneutic approach guides individuals toward a balanced, virtuous life by extracting ethical principles from the Qur’an.

A similar interpretive trajectory appears in Misbah’s reading of QS. al-Isrā’ (17): 7. He begins by analyzing the linguistic repetition *in aḥsantum aḥsantum li anfusikum wa in asa’tum falahā*, interpreting it as a rhetorical emphasis on moral reciprocity. He then contextualizes the verse historically through the example of Banī Isrā’īl’s decline, which he views as the moral consequence of ethical negligence rather than political rebellion. Finally, he extracts its ethical principle, *sunnatullāh*, as a participatory moral law where human action determines divine response (Mustofa, 1980). Unlike al-Rāzī’s deterministic reading, Misbah situates causality within human moral agency, revealing his alignment with modern reformist thought. By highlighting that divine decree responds to ethical conduct, Misbah reframes divine sovereignty not as fatalistic control but as a relational dynamic grounded in human responsibility.

In QS. al-Ḥujurāt (49): 10-13, Misbah’s hermeneutic culminates in an *ethics of recognition* (Taufik, 2021). His interpretive sequence begins with the linguistic exposition of *li ta’arāfū*, defined as “active ethical engagement among diverse communities”. He draws historical references to early Muslim pluralism in Madinah, portraying the verse as a corrective to arrogance (*istikbār*) stemming from social and intellectual hierarchies. Finally, he universalizes the verse’s ethical significance: *taqwā* is not an inner abstraction but a visible disposition of humility (*tawāḍu’*) and social virtue (*ḥusn al-ḥuluq*) (Mustofa, 1980). In contrast to al-Marāghī’s moral exhortation or Sayyid Qutb’s ideological reading, Misbah’s *tafsir* represents an ethical shift from *believing rightly* to *acting righteously*. Sayyid Qutb interprets diversity primarily within the framework of divine order and ideological unity, while al-Marāghī emphasizes legal equality and social regulation. Fazlur Rahman frames the verse as an abstract moral principle grounded in ethical universalism. His approach aligns with Ṭāriq Ramadan’s argument that authentic spirituality manifests as

civic ethics and public virtue, making piety a social responsibility rather than private asceticism (Ramadan, Tariq, 2009).

KH. Misbah Mustofa's hermeneutical pattern shows that his *tafsir* is not just a thematic collection of moral teachings but a systematic ethical epistemology rooted in a triadic interpretive process. This process includes: (1) linguistic analysis (*al-ma'nā al-lughawī*), which examines the semantic dimensions of Qur'anic terms; (2) contextual reflection (*as-siyāq an-nuẓūlī*), which places the verses within their socio-historical context; and (3) ethical realization (*al-dalālah al-akhlāqīyyah*), which reconstructs their normative moral implications. Through this structured methodology, Misbah presents *wasatīyyah* not as a passive middle ground but as an active ethical stance characterized by dynamic balance (*ta'ādul*), distributive justice (*'adālah*), and mutual recognition (*ta'aruf*). In interpreting *wa kadhālika ja'alnākum ummatan wasātan* (QS. al-Baqarah (2): 143), he frames moderation as a theological anthropology, a moral framework for human identity under divine law. Thus, to be a *wasatī* community is to embody an ethical existence that integrates textual fidelity with contextual responsibility (Mustofa, 1980).

This ethical conception of moderation sharply contrasts with ideologically-driven or legalist interpretations by other prominent exegetes. Sayyid Qutb, for instance, views the same verse through the lens of Islamic civilizational struggle. In *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'an*, he interprets *wasatīyyah* as a sign of the ummah's divine election to lead humanity against systems of *jāhiliyyah*, which he equates with secular modernity. Here, moderation is subordinated to a broader ideological mission of Islamic revivalism, where ethical nuance is often displaced by theological militancy and collective mobilization (Qutb, 2000). Similarly, al-Marāghī adopts a legalistic approach, emphasizing equilibrium and the harmonization of Islamic law. His interpretation frames *ummatan wasātan* as a legal archetype representing fairness in religious obligations and moderation in jurisprudential rulings but pays limited attention to interpretive ethics or moral subjectivity in shaping that balance (Maraghi (al), 1956).

Fazlur Rahman offers a philosophical and reformist approach by linking moderation to his double-movement theory, where ethical values like justice, equality, and moral reasoning are derived from historical readings of the Qur'an and adapted for modern contexts. He views *wasatīyyah* as part of a broader moral vision that emphasizes rational engagement and universal ethics. However, his framework, while conceptually rich, remains abstract and often overlooks the concrete, localized practices of *tafsir* that embed ethics in communal and educational contexts. In contrast, KH. Misbah Mustofa's interpretive model provides an alternative paradigm that combines ethical intent, textual interpretation, and social critique. His *tafsir* aligns with Paul Ricoeur's idea of interpretation as a process that reshapes moral identity, positioning understanding as a site of ethical self-formation and social responsibility (Rahman, 1982). Thus, Misbah's *al-Iklil* connects reformist philosophy and lived hermeneutics within a grounded ethical framework.

Moderation as Resistance to Excess and Extremism in Local Contexts

KH. Misbah Mustofa in *al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* defines moderation not as complacent balance but as ethical resistance to both textual excess and moral neglect. His

interpretive method draws from verses that warn against *isrāf* (extravagance) and *baghy* (transgression). Commenting on *kulū washrabū wa lā tusrifū innahu lā yuḥibbu al-musrifīn* (QS. al-A'rāf (7): 31), he argues that excess, whether material, political, or religious, disrupts the divine order of justice (Mustofa, 1980). Misbah interprets *isrāf* not just as overconsumption but as a broader moral imbalance that leads to arrogance and hypocrisy. This reading underpins his criticism of phenomena such as *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ), which, he argues, transforms the Qur'an from a text of ethical reflection into a spectacle of performance. By anchoring his critique in the Qur'anic prohibition of *isrāf*, KH. Misbah reclaims moderation as an act of preserving sacred authenticity against commodification (Supriyanto, 2017).

Table 2. Comparative Frameworks of Religious Moderation

| Islamic Scholar | Hermeneutic Orientation | Main Focus | Ethical Outcome |
|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Al-Ṭabarī | Textual-linguistic | Balance in belief | Normative obedience |
| Al-Marāghī | Legal-contextual | Justice application | Juridical equity |
| Fazlur Rahman | Moral-intellectual | Double movement | Contextual ethics |
| KH. Misbah Mustofa | Ethical-hermeneutical | Justice, humility, and balance | Moral transformation and civic virtue |

Table 2 compares the hermeneutic orientations and ethical outcomes of four Islamic scholars, each contributing uniquely to Qur'anic interpretation. Al-Ṭabarī adopts a textual-linguistic approach, focusing on balance in belief and ensuring interpretations align with traditional norms and uphold normative obedience. Al-Marāghī employs a legal-contextual approach that emphasizes justice to ensure juridical equity and fairness in legal interpretations. Fazlur Rahman offers a moral-intellectual framework through his double movement theory, linking historical context with modern ethical applications to promote contextual ethics. KH. Misbah Mustofa follows an ethical-hermeneutical approach, prioritizing justice, humility, and balance, aiming for moral transformation and civic virtue. This comparison highlights how each scholar's unique methodology contributes to Islamic ethics, with KH. Misbah's emphasis on integrating ethics and societal well-being standing out.

The same hermeneutic of ethical resistance informs his opposition to state-sponsored family-planning programs. In interpreting *walaqad karramnā banī Ādam* (QS. al-Isrā' (17): 70), KH. Misbah emphasizes human life (*nafs*) as an inviolable trust from God. He links this verse with *waidh qāla rabbuka li al-malā'ikati innī jā'ilun fī al-arḍi khalīfah* (QS. al-Baqarah (2): 30) to assert that procreation and stewardship are interconnected forms of divine mandate (Mustofa, 1980). He argues that limiting birth through coercive policy constitutes *i'tirād 'alā amrillāh*, a rejection of divine wisdom governing creation. His reasoning aligns with the maqāṣid principle of *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (protection of life) and *ḥifẓ al-nasl* (preservation of progeny) (Auda, Jasser, 2008). Thus, his critique is not political dissent but a hermeneutical application of the Qur'an's moral order. By interpreting

demographic control through the lens of stewardship (*khilāfah*), KH. Misbah extends tafsir into the ethical governance of public policy.

KH. Misbah's approach crystallizes in what may be termed "critical moderation" (*al-wasāṭiyyah al-naqdiyyah*), a form of ethical reasoning that maintains balance while addressing structural excess. This model consists of three interlocking dimensions: (1) *normative moderation*, rooted in Qur'anic justice (*'adālah*) and compassion (*rahmah*); (2) *interpretive critique*, which examines social practices against scriptural ethics; and (3) *transformative engagement*, applying moderation as moral activism. For instance, in analyzing MTQ, Misbah does not condemn artistic recitation itself but questions its moral orientation, whether it fosters *taqwā* or spectacle. This evaluative stance reflects what Ramadan calls "reformist ethics," where believers translate piety into civic responsibility (Rahman, 2009). Hence, *critical moderation* is both devotional and critical, preserving the spirit of *wasāṭiyyah* while ensuring its relevance in evolving social contexts.

In comparative perspective, KH. Misbah's resistance to excess contrasts with al-Marāghī's conciliatory tone and Rahman's reformist rationalism. While al-Marāghī emphasizes adapting Islamic law to modernity, Misbah focuses on ethically preserving revelation within local contexts. Similarly, although Fazlur Rahman advocates for contextual renewal, Misbah enhances this with cultural critique, addressing how Javanese religiosity and state ideology may distort Qur'anic ethics. His tafsir thus embodies what could be termed *hermeneutical steadfastness*, maintaining moral balance without succumbing to literalism or secular relativism. Through this critique, Misbah reflects the Qur'anic injunction *wakadhalika ja'alnakum ummatan wasatan* (QS. al-Baqarah (2): 143) as a command to resist both doctrinal rigidity and moral laxity, making moderation an act of ethical vigilance.

Conclusion

This study concludes that *al-Iklil fi Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* by KH. Misbah Mustofa presents a distinctly Indonesian model of ethical hermeneutics, where Qur'anic interpretation serves as a continuous moral inquiry rather than a fixed doctrinal exposition. Addressing the initial question of how religious moderation (*wasāṭiyyah*) can be understood beyond political and sociological perspectives, the research finds that KH. Misbah's exegesis redefines moderation as an ethical process grounded in justice (*'adālah*), humility (*tawāḍu'*), and moral responsibility (*taklif akhlāqī*). Through his integration of *tafsīr taḥlīlī* and *adabī ijtima'ī* methods, Misbah advances an interpretive framework in which moderation becomes a dynamic moral stance rather than a midpoint between extremes. His hermeneutical vision positions ethical reasoning as the foundation for social harmony and spiritual balance within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

The findings indicate that KH. Misbah's ethical hermeneutics transforms Qur'anic interpretation into an active moral discourse, connecting textual engagement (*tafaqquh fi al-naṣ*) with ethical application (*taṭbiq akhlāqī*). This approach fulfills the study's objective by demonstrating that moderation in Islam is an interpretive virtue rooted in divine justice rather than a pragmatic political policy. The research contributes to Qur'anic Studies by positioning ethical hermeneutics as a critical methodology for renewing Islamic thought and promoting moral consciousness in modern contexts. Consequently,

the study affirms that Misbah's work expands the function of tafsir from textual analysis to moral transformation, bridging revelation and ethical responsibility in everyday life.

Despite its contribution, the study acknowledges limitations regarding its textual scope and contextual depth. The analysis focuses on selected thematic verses within *al-Iklil* and does not encompass Misbah's broader writings or their reception among pesantren scholars and contemporary exegetes. Future research should conduct comparative studies with figures such as Nawawi al-Bantani, Bisri Mustofa, Fazlur Rahman, and Tariq Ramadan to explore ethical moderation as a transnational hermeneutical paradigm. Employing discourse analysis or hermeneutic phenomenology could further trace how Misbah's interpretive ethics influence Islamic education, civic discourse, and social reform in Indonesia. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that ethical interpretation remains the most enduring form of moderation, balancing fidelity to revelation with contextual moral wisdom.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Achmad Azis Abidin: Drafting the core research theme, developing the analytical approach, and conducting investigations of Qur'anic verses. **Rokhmah Ulfah:** Visualizing and validating results by comparing primary and secondary research data. **Eka Mulyo Yunus:** Writing the article by analyzing and comparing the data, as well as editing and translating the text. **Faza Nailil Muna Syahida:** Interpreting the *al-Iklil* commentary, editing the layout, and finalizing the research.

Declaration of Competing Interest

We have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could appear to influence the work reported in this paper.

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