



Negotiating Religious Authority in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Qur'anic Interpretation in Digital Environments

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Abstract

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the production, access, and circulation of religious knowledge, including Qur'anic interpretation. This study examines how AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation reshapes the conditions of religious interpretive authority in digital environments. Employing a qualitative critical integrative literature review, the study synthesizes scholarship on digital religious authority, algorithmic mediation, Qur'anic interpretation, and artificial intelligence. The analysis focuses on the relationship between AI-generated interpretation and the epistemic foundations of tafsir, particularly source attribution, methodological grounding, contextualization, and scholarly accountability. The findings indicate that generative AI does not automatically replace traditional religious authority but introduces new forms of AI-mediated epistemic credibility based on accessibility, computational capacity, responsiveness, and linguistic fluency. However, such credibility does not necessarily constitute religious legitimacy because Qur'anic interpretation remains connected to established textual, methodological, and scholarly traditions. The study further identifies four mechanisms through which authority is negotiated: validation, contestation, complementation, and hybridization. Based on these findings, the study proposes a conceptual model of negotiated religious authority, in which traditional scholarly legitimacy interacts with technologically mediated forms of religious knowledge production. The study contributes to digital religion and Qur'anic studies by explaining how generative AI transforms not merely access to religious knowledge but the conditions through which interpretive authority is constructed and legitimized.

Keyword: *artificial intelligence; Qur'anic interpretation; religious authority; digital religion; tafsir.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI and large language models, is transforming the ways in which knowledge is produced, accessed, interpreted, and circulated. Unlike earlier digital technologies that primarily facilitated the storage, retrieval, and dissemination of information, generative AI can produce seemingly coherent responses to complex questions in real time. This development has significant implications for religious knowledge because users can now formulate questions concerning sacred texts and receive immediate interpretive responses without directly consulting established scholarly institutions or religious specialists. The emergence of this form of computational mediation therefore raises a fundamental question concerning not merely access to religious information, but the conditions under which religious knowledge becomes credible and authoritative.¹

The transformation is particularly significant in the field of Qur'anic interpretation.

¹ Yuli Andriansyah, 'The Current Rise of Artificial Intelligence and Religious Studies: Some Reflections Based on ChatGPT', *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies*, 2023, ix–xviii, <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol22.iss1.editorial>.



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Historically, the production of tafsir has been embedded within traditions of scholarship in which interpretive legitimacy is associated with textual competence, knowledge of Arabic, familiarity with the Qur'an and Hadith, awareness of historical contexts, and mastery of established exegetical methodologies. The authority of interpretation has consequently been connected to the qualifications of interpreters and to their relationship with established scholarly traditions. Contemporary contextual approaches to Qur'anic interpretation further emphasize the importance of relating textual meaning to historical circumstances and contemporary social realities.² Such approaches demonstrate that Qur'anic interpretation is not simply a process of retrieving textual meanings, but an epistemological activity involving sources, interpretive methods, historical contexts, and judgments concerning the application of meaning.

The digitalization of religious knowledge has already challenged the exclusivity of these traditional structures. Digital platforms have enabled Qur'anic interpretations to circulate beyond conventional scholarly institutions and have allowed religious figures, institutions, audiences, and technological infrastructures to participate simultaneously in the production and dissemination of religious meaning. Campbell argues that religious authority in online environments should not be treated as a single or homogeneous category. Instead, authority operates through multiple layers, including hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding contemporary Qur'anic interpretation because the digital environment may alter not only who communicates religious knowledge but also how interpretive legitimacy is constructed and recognized. Campbell's later work similarly emphasizes the importance of examining how emerging media environments reshape the relationship between religious communities, authority, and communication technologies.³

Recent research demonstrates that digital Qur'anic interpretation has developed into a complex ecosystem in which traditional religious authority interacts with platform structures, audiences, and algorithms. Rhafik, for example, show that digital tafsir distributed through YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Islamic websites involves interactions among religious authority, audience participation, and algorithmic mediation. Their findings indicate that individual platforms tend to rely on charismatic religious figures, whereas collective platforms draw legitimacy from institutional structures and editorial mechanisms. At the same time, algorithms influence the visibility, popularity, and circulation of particular interpretations. These findings are important because they demonstrate that the transformation of Qur'anic authority in digital environments cannot be explained solely through the expansion of access to religious texts. Rather, authority is increasingly embedded in a socio-technical environment in which scholarly credentials, institutional legitimacy, audience participation, and algorithmic visibility interact.⁴

However, generative AI introduces a qualitatively different form of mediation. In conventional digital environments, algorithms primarily determine the visibility, ranking, recommendation, and circulation of religious content produced by human actors. Generative AI, by contrast, can participate directly in the formulation of interpretive responses. The distinction is therefore between an algorithm that determines what users encounter and a generative system that can participate in determining what is said in response to a religious question. This difference is analytically significant because it moves the discussion from the algorithmic distribution of religious knowledge toward the computational generation of interpretive knowledge itself.

Emerging scholarship has begun to address this problem. Recent studies have examined

² F. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³ Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Inggris: Routledge, 2013).

⁴ Muhammad Nur Rhafik et al., 'Qur'anic Exegesis in the Digital Sphere: The Dynamics of Authority, Audience, and Algorithms on Individual and Collective Platforms', *QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies* 5, no. 2 (2026): 597–626, <https://doi.org/10.23917/qist.v5i2.17742>.

AI-assisted Qur'anic interpretation in relation to epistemology, attribution, methodology, and the limits of computational interpretation. Saifullah et al. (2026), for instance, tested seven mainstream language models using a contested Qur'anic interpretive question and evaluated their responses through the framework of *tafsīr bi al-ma'sūr*, particularly in terms of traceable attribution, *isnād*, *tarjīh*, and fidelity to established sources. Their study demonstrates that the central problem surrounding AI-generated interpretation is not simply whether an AI response appears linguistically coherent, but whether the process and sources underlying that response satisfy established epistemic expectations of Qur'anic interpretation.⁵

Other recent scholarship has similarly emphasized the epistemological and ethical implications of computational approaches to Qur'anic studies. Research on computational hermeneutics points to the capacity of AI and natural language processing to process large bodies of scriptural material while simultaneously raising questions concerning contextualization, epistemic reductionism, interpretive bias, and the relationship between computational processing and established hermeneutical traditions. This emerging literature indicates that AI should not be understood simply as a faster instrument for retrieving religious information. It represents a new mode of mediation through which textual knowledge can be selected, synthesized, reformulated, and presented to users.

At the same time, empirical research has begun to examine how established religious authorities respond to AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation. Azizi and Nurullah (2025), for example, examine the negotiation of Qur'anic interpretive authority in Aceh through interviews with *ulama* associated with traditional Islamic boarding schools. Their findings show that AI can expand access to Qur'anic resources while simultaneously generating concerns about interpretive authority, educational risks, and the boundaries of legitimate AI use. The significance of this study lies in demonstrating that the emergence of AI does not automatically eliminate traditional authority. Instead, religious scholars actively negotiate the appropriate role and limits of AI in Qur'anic learning and interpretation.⁶

This emerging debate is also visible at the institutional level. In 2026, Egypt's Dar al-Ifta issued an institutional position concerning reliance on artificial intelligence for Qur'anic interpretation, emphasizing the importance of established exegetical knowledge and qualified interpreters rather than treating AI as an autonomous source of interpretation. Such institutional responses illustrate that the emergence of AI has already generated a contest over the epistemic boundaries of religious interpretation. AI may increase accessibility and provide rapid interpretive responses, but institutional religious actors continue to assert the importance of scholarly competence, methodological knowledge, and interpretive accountability.

Taken together, these studies establish three important developments in the existing literature. First, research on digital religion has demonstrated that religious authority is increasingly mediated by technological environments rather than being confined to conventional institutional structures ⁷. Second, studies of digital Qur'anic interpretation demonstrate that algorithms, platforms, audiences, religious figures, and institutions collectively influence the circulation and legitimacy of tafsir.⁸ Third, emerging research on AI and Qur'anic interpretation has shifted attention toward epistemological questions concerning attribution, methodological rigor, contextualization, and the limits of computational interpretation.⁹ These strands of scholarship are highly relevant, but they have largely developed around different analytical questions.

The principal limitation in the existing literature, therefore, is not the complete absence

⁵ Saifullah, Soleh Hasan Wahid, and Muhammad Ihza Fazrian, 'Between Machines and the Tafsīr Tradition: Reorienting Tafsīr Bi al-Ma'sūr in the Age of Computational Interpretation', *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 27, no. 2 (2026): 458–93, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v27i1.7499>.

⁶ Afkar Azizi and Nurullah Nurullah, 'Negotiating Qur'anic Interpretive Authority in the Age of Artificial Intelligence in Aceh', *TAFSE: Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2025): 165–78, <https://doi.org/10.22373/tafse.v10i2.33016>.

⁷ Campbell, *Digital Religion*.

⁸ Rhafik et al., 'Qur'anic Exegesis in the Digital Sphere'.

⁹ Saifullah, Wahid, and Fazrian, 'Between Machines and the Tafsīr Tradition'.

of research connecting AI, Qur'anic interpretation, and religious authority. Rather, the problem is fragmentation. Studies of platformized religious authority tend to emphasize visibility, audience participation, and algorithmic circulation; studies of AI-assisted tafsir focus primarily on epistemological validity, attribution, and methodological limitations; while empirical studies of religious scholars examine how established authorities negotiate the use of AI. What remains insufficiently theorized is how these dimensions intersect when generative AI moves beyond the distribution of religious content and becomes capable of producing interpretive responses itself. In other words, the question is not only whether AI-generated interpretations are accurate or methodologically adequate, but what the emergence of such interpretations does to the conditions through which Qur'anic interpretive authority is recognized, contested, validated, or constrained.

This article addresses this conceptual gap by bringing together three analytical perspectives: digital religious authority, algorithmic mediation, and the epistemology of Qur'anic interpretation. Following Campbell's multilayered conception of religious authority, the study approaches authority not as a fixed possession of religious actors but as a configuration involving hierarchy, institutional structures, ideological frameworks, and textual interpretation.¹⁰ Algorithmic mediation is then used to explain how AI intervenes in the production and presentation of religious knowledge, while the epistemology of Qur'anic interpretation provides criteria through which the legitimacy of AI-mediated interpretation can be critically examined. Within this framework, the study proposes the concept of negotiated religious authority to describe the process through which traditional scholarly legitimacy interacts with technologically mediated forms of epistemic credibility.

The central argument advanced in this article is that generative AI does not necessarily replace traditional religious authority. Rather, its ability to generate apparently coherent Qur'anic interpretations introduces a new form of AI-mediated epistemic credibility that can interact with, reinforce, challenge, or be constrained by established scholarly and institutional authority. The critical issue is therefore not whether AI should simply be categorized as a new religious authority, but how its interpretive capacity changes the conditions under which authority is constructed and legitimized. In this sense, the emergence of AI may produce forms of hybridization in which traditional scholarly authority remains significant while technological mediation becomes increasingly influential in how religious knowledge is accessed, evaluated, and experienced.

The study consequently asks three questions. First, how does generative artificial intelligence transform the production and mediation of Qur'anic interpretation in digital environments? Second, how does AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation challenge the traditional epistemic foundations of religious interpretive authority? Third, how is religious authority negotiated between traditional scholarly legitimacy and AI-mediated forms of Qur'anic interpretation? By addressing these questions through a critical integrative literature review, this study contributes to the growing scholarship on digital religion and Qur'anic studies by shifting the analytical focus from the simple expansion of digital access toward the changing epistemic conditions of interpretive authority. Conceptually, the article seeks to explain how religious authority can remain rooted in established scholarly traditions while simultaneously being renegotiated within an increasingly AI-mediated environment.

METODOLOGI

This study employs a qualitative critical integrative literature review to examine the transformation and negotiation of religious authority in AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation. This approach was selected because the research integrates several interconnected areas of scholarship, namely digital religion, religious authority, algorithmic mediation, Qur'anic interpretation, and artificial intelligence. Rather than merely summarizing previous studies, the research critically compares and synthesizes existing scholarship to identify conceptual patterns, epistemological tensions, and emerging forms of religious authority in digital

¹⁰ Campbell, *Digital Religion*.

environments.

The literature search was conducted through Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Crossref, and relevant Indonesian academic databases. The search strategy was organized into four thematic clusters: (1) religious authority and digital religion; (2) digital Qur'anic interpretation; (3) artificial intelligence and Qur'anic interpretation; and (4) artificial intelligence, algorithmic mediation, and religious authority. Keywords included "*religious authority*," "*digital religion*," "*Qur'anic interpretation*," "*Qur'anic exegesis*," "*tafsir*," "*artificial intelligence*," "*generative AI*," "*large language models*," and "*algorithmic mediation*." Foundational theoretical literature was not restricted by publication year, while studies concerning artificial intelligence and contemporary digital religious practices were primarily drawn from publications between 2020 and 2026.

Sources were selected according to their relevance to the research questions, academic quality, and substantive contribution to the discussion. Peer-reviewed journal articles were prioritized, particularly publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Academic books and book chapters were included when they provided foundational theoretical or epistemological perspectives. Selected institutional documents were also considered when they directly addressed the legitimacy or limitations of AI in Qur'anic interpretation. Sources were excluded when they only mentioned AI without substantive analysis, lacked adequate bibliographic information, or were unrelated to the research focus.

Data were organized through a literature matrix containing information concerning authorship, publication year, research context, object of study, methodology, theoretical perspective, conceptualization of religious authority, role of AI or algorithms, major findings, and identified limitations. The analysis employed thematic coding and critical comparative synthesis. Initial coding identified recurring concepts such as scholarly authority, algorithmic mediation, AI-generated interpretation, textual grounding, attribution, contextualization, epistemic credibility, and scholarly accountability. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories representing traditional scholarly legitimacy and AI-mediated forms of epistemic credibility.

The analysis was guided by three interconnected perspectives: digital religious authority, algorithmic mediation, and the epistemology of Qur'anic interpretation. Campbell's (2007) conception of religious authority provided the basis for examining how authority operates across hierarchical, structural, ideological, and textual dimensions in digital environments. The epistemological analysis focused on source attribution, methodological grounding, contextualization, and scholarly accountability¹¹. The synthesis then examined how these dimensions interact when generative AI participates in the production of Qur'anic interpretation. Through this process, the study develops the concept of negotiated religious authority to explain how traditional scholarly legitimacy may be reinforced, contested, constrained, or hybridized through AI-mediated forms of religious knowledge production.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Digital Access to AI-Mediated Qur'anic Interpretation

The digitalization of Qur'anic knowledge has fundamentally altered the ways in which religious texts, exegetical works, and interpretive authorities are accessed by contemporary audiences. In conventional scholarly settings, access to Qur'anic interpretation is mediated through established forms of learning, including printed tafsir literature, religious institutions, teachers, and scholarly networks. Digital technologies have gradually weakened the exclusivity of these channels by allowing users to access Qur'anic translations, tafsir databases, lectures, and religious discussions through online platforms. Consequently, the digital environment has transformed Qur'anic interpretation from a predominantly institutionally mediated activity into

¹¹ Campbell.

a more accessible and networked form of religious knowledge production.

This transformation, however, should not be understood simply as the democratization of access. Digital platforms also introduce new mechanisms through which religious knowledge becomes visible, prioritized, and circulated. Campbell (2007) argues that religious authority in digital environments must be examined through multiple dimensions, including hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. From this perspective, digitalization does not necessarily eliminate religious authority; rather, it changes the environment in which authority is constructed and negotiated. Recent studies of digital Qur'anic interpretation similarly demonstrate that authority is increasingly shaped through interactions among religious scholars, audiences, institutional structures, platform mechanisms, and algorithms. Rhafik et al. (2026), for example, show that digital Qur'anic exegesis is influenced not only by the credentials of interpreters but also by audience engagement, platform characteristics, and algorithmic visibility.¹²

Generative artificial intelligence introduces a further transformation that differs from earlier forms of digital mediation. Social media and search engines primarily facilitate the distribution, retrieval, and visibility of religious knowledge produced by human actors. Generative AI, in contrast, can produce a direct response to a user's question and formulate an apparently coherent interpretation by processing patterns across its training or retrieved information. The distinction is therefore not merely technological but epistemological. Earlier digital systems primarily determined what religious information users encountered, whereas generative AI can participate in determining how an interpretive answer is formulated.¹³

This shift can be conceptualized as a movement from digital access toward AI-mediated interpretation. In the first stage, users access existing Qur'anic interpretations through digital repositories or platforms. In the second, algorithms influence the visibility and circulation of those interpretations. In the third, generative AI can synthesize information and produce a new textual response to an interpretive question. The relationship can therefore be represented as:

Digitization → Digital Mediation → Algorithmic Mediation → Generative Interpretation.

This distinction is important because the emergence of generative AI potentially changes the location of interpretive mediation. The user no longer necessarily moves from a question to a specific mufassir or tafsir text. Instead, the user may move directly from a question to an AI-generated response. The interface consequently becomes a new point of contact between the user and the accumulated body of religious knowledge.

Recent scholarship confirms that this development has generated new methodological and epistemological concerns. Saifullah et al. (2026), for instance, examined AI-generated Qur'anic interpretations through the framework of *tafsīr bi al-ma'sūr* and assessed issues including attribution, *isnād*, *tarjīh*, and fidelity to established sources. Their findings demonstrate that the apparent fluency of AI-generated responses cannot by itself establish interpretive legitimacy. Similarly, emerging research on computational hermeneutics identifies both the analytical potential of AI and the risks associated with decontextualization, algorithmic bias, and the reduction of complex interpretive traditions into computationally processable patterns.¹⁴

The transformation is therefore not simply a question of whether AI makes Qur'anic knowledge more accessible. Rather, it raises the question of what happens when accessibility is

¹² Campbell; Rhafik et al., 'Qur'anic Exegesis in the Digital Sphere'.

¹³ Susanna Trotta, Deborah Sabrina Iannotti, and Boris Rähme, *Religious Actors and Artificial Intelligence: Examples from the Field and Suggestions for Further Research*, 17 January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.30965/27507955-20230027>.

¹⁴ Saifullah, Wahid, and Fazrian, 'Between Machines and the Tafsīr Tradition'.

combined with automated interpretive production. Greater accessibility may reduce the practical barriers to religious knowledge, but it does not necessarily reduce the epistemological requirements for legitimate interpretation. An AI-generated response may be linguistically sophisticated, immediately available, and apparently comprehensive while remaining problematic in terms of source attribution, methodological transparency, or contextual grounding.¹⁵

This distinction suggests that interpretive fluency and religious authority should not be treated as equivalent. Generative AI can demonstrate considerable linguistic and informational fluency without possessing the institutional position, scholarly training, or traditional forms of accountability associated with a qualified mufassir. Thus, the emergence of AI does not automatically constitute the emergence of an autonomous religious authority. Instead, it creates a new form of mediation through which religious knowledge is encountered and evaluated.

The significance of this transformation becomes clearer when examined through the concept of religious authority. In traditional Qur'anic interpretation, authority is connected to the qualifications and recognition of the interpreter as well as to established textual and methodological traditions. In digital environments, however, users increasingly encounter religious knowledge through interfaces that obscure the distinction between source, mediator, and producer. Generative AI intensifies this ambiguity because the system can present a synthesized response without necessarily making its epistemic genealogy immediately visible.

Consequently, the central issue is not whether AI replaces the mufassir but whether AI changes the conditions through which interpretive authority is recognized. The movement from digital access to AI-mediated interpretation therefore represents a shift from the democratization of religious information toward the computational mediation of religious meaning. This shift provides the foundation for examining the epistemological tensions that arise between AI-generated interpretations and established traditions of Qur'anic exegesis.

Epistemic Tensions between AI and the Tafsir Tradition

The emergence of generative AI creates an epistemological tension because the ability to produce an interpretive response does not necessarily correspond to the traditional conditions under which Qur'anic interpretation acquires legitimacy. Within the tafsir tradition, interpretation is not simply the production of a plausible meaning. It involves a complex relationship between textual evidence, linguistic competence, transmitted knowledge, interpretive methodology, historical context, and scholarly judgment. Contemporary contextualist approaches further emphasize that interpretation requires movement between the historical context of revelation and the circumstances in which the Qur'an is interpreted and applied today.¹⁶

The first tension concerns source and attribution. Traditional tafsir places considerable importance on identifying the sources upon which an interpretation rests. Whether an interpretation derives from the Qur'an itself, prophetic traditions, reports from the Companions, linguistic analysis, or rational interpretation has implications for how its authority is evaluated. Generative AI, however, can produce synthesized responses that combine information from multiple sources without always making their epistemic origins sufficiently transparent. The problem is therefore not simply that AI may provide incorrect information, but that users may

¹⁵ Shoaib Ahmed Malik, 'Artificial Intelligence and Islamic Thought: Two Distinctive Challenges', *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 8, no. 2 (2023): 108–15, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/article/928145>.

¹⁶ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*.

have difficulty determining why a particular interpretation has been generated and which interpretive tradition it represents.¹⁷

The issue of attribution becomes especially significant in light of recent empirical testing of language models. Saifullah et al. (2026) demonstrate that evaluating AI-generated Qur'anic interpretation requires attention to traceable attribution, *isnād*, *tarjīh*, and fidelity to recognized sources. This finding reinforces a central distinction between computational output and traditional exegetical scholarship: an answer can be linguistically coherent while remaining epistemically underdetermined.¹⁸

The second tension concerns methodological transparency. A classical mufassir normally operates through an identifiable interpretive methodology. Even when scholars disagree, their arguments can be examined in relation to established approaches, textual evidence, and principles of reasoning. Generative AI, by contrast, produces an output through computational processes that are not equivalent to a recognizable method of tafsir. The prompt may influence the answer, but the underlying generation process does not necessarily constitute an explicit hermeneutical methodology.

This creates a significant epistemological distinction: computational generation is not equivalent to exegetical methodology. AI can simulate the language of interpretation, identify recurring associations, and synthesize information, but these capacities do not automatically establish that the system is applying a coherent theory of interpretation. Consequently, methodological transparency becomes a critical criterion for evaluating AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation.

The third tension concerns contextualization. Qur'anic interpretation is historically embedded. Approaches developed by Fazlur Rahman and Abdullah Saeed emphasize the importance of understanding the historical circumstances surrounding revelation while also considering the contemporary context in which Qur'anic principles are applied (Rahman, 1982; Saeed, 2006, 2014). AI can process contextual information when such information is available in its knowledge base or provided through prompts, but the presence of contextual information does not guarantee contextual interpretation.

This distinction is crucial. Contextual data refers to information about historical circumstances, whereas contextual interpretation involves reasoning about how historical meaning relates to contemporary circumstances. The latter requires interpretive judgment. Therefore, the ability of AI to retrieve historical information should not automatically be equated with the hermeneutical capacity to determine its significance.

The fourth tension concerns scholarly accountability. Traditional religious interpretation is embedded in relationships of responsibility. A mufassir can be identified, evaluated, criticized, and held accountable by a scholarly community. The authority of interpretation is therefore connected not only to knowledge but also to responsibility. With AI-generated interpretation, accountability becomes more diffuse. Responsibility may be distributed across developers, model providers, platform operators, users, and the institutions that choose to employ AI.

This produces an important conceptual problem: Who is accountable for an AI-generated interpretation? If the response contains a theological or exegetical error, the user may not know whether the problem originates from the training corpus, the model, the prompt, the retrieval

¹⁷ Soleh Hasan Wahid, *Artificial Intelligence in Islamic Guidance: Assessing Chatbot Performance and Jurisprudential Adherence*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1163/27732363-20250003>.

¹⁸ Saifullah, Wahid, and Fazrian, 'Between Machines and the Tafsir Tradition'.

system, or the interpretation of the output. The diffusion of responsibility potentially weakens one of the mechanisms through which traditional scholarly authority is maintained.

The fifth tension concerns the difference between epistemic fluency and epistemic legitimacy. Generative AI is capable of producing responses that appear authoritative because they are grammatically sophisticated, organized, immediate, and responsive to the user's question. Such qualities may generate an impression of competence. However, linguistic fluency is not equivalent to epistemic legitimacy. A persuasive answer does not necessarily have a valid source, appropriate methodology, or adequate contextual grounding.

This distinction is particularly important for religious interpretation because religious authority involves more than informational accuracy. It involves the legitimacy of the interpreter and the reliability of the interpretive process.¹⁹ Therefore, AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation should be assessed not merely according to whether its answers appear correct, but according to how its interpretive claims can be justified and validated ²⁰.

Taken together, these tensions demonstrate that AI introduces a different epistemic regime into Qur'anic interpretation. The problem is not simply that AI is technologically imperfect. Rather, AI operates according to principles of knowledge production that differ from those historically associated with tafsir. Consequently, the emergence of generative AI creates a space in which traditional epistemic criteria and technologically mediated forms of credibility encounter one another. It is within this space that the foundations of interpretive authority become subject to renegotiation.

Reconfiguring the Foundations of Interpretive Legitimacy

The epistemic tensions surrounding AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation indicate that the emergence of artificial intelligence does not merely introduce a new technological instrument into an established interpretive tradition. It also reconfigures the conditions through which an interpretation becomes recognizable as legitimate. In the classical and modern traditions of Qur'anic interpretation, legitimacy is closely associated with the relationship between the interpreter, the text, established sources, methodological competence, and scholarly communities. Consequently, interpretive authority has historically been embedded in both textual and social structures. The emergence of generative AI complicates this configuration because it separates the capacity to produce an interpretive response from the conventional social position of the interpreter.

Campbell's (2007) multilayered conception of religious authority provides a useful starting point for understanding this transformation. Rather than treating authority as a single attribute possessed by religious leaders, Campbell distinguishes authority across hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. This approach is particularly relevant to AI-mediated interpretation because the emergence of AI potentially affects several of these dimensions simultaneously. The hierarchical dimension concerns who is recognized as an authoritative interpreter; the structural dimension concerns how religious knowledge is organized and transmitted; the ideological dimension concerns the interpretive frameworks through which religious meaning is constructed; and the textual dimension concerns the status and

¹⁹ Hanifah Amini et al., 'Rethinking the Qur'an's Literary Evolution: Nicolai Sinai's Approach to Inner-Qur'anic Chronology', *Mutawatir : Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith* 14, no. 2 (December 2024): 368–91, <https://doi.org/10.15642/mutawatir.2024.14.2.368-391>.

²⁰ Muhammad Andrean and Mardian Idris Harahap, 'Artificial Intelligence and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Critical Comparative Study of ChatGPT and Classical Tafsir', *Al-Fahmu: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 4, no. 2 (2025): 658–70, <https://doi.org/10.58363/alfahmu.v4i2.641>.

interpretation of authoritative religious texts ²¹.

From this perspective, AI does not necessarily acquire religious authority simply because it can generate interpretations. Instead, it introduces a new technologically mediated source of interpretive credibility. This distinction is important. Religious authority traditionally depends on recognized qualifications, institutional recognition, scholarly reputation, and participation in established interpretive traditions. AI possesses none of these characteristics in the conventional sense. Its credibility derives from different features, including accessibility, computational capacity, linguistic fluency, responsiveness, and the apparent breadth of information that it can synthesize. Thus, AI may produce an impression of epistemic competence without possessing the social and scholarly credentials historically associated with the authority of a mufassir ²².

This distinction allows interpretive legitimacy to be understood through two partially overlapping configurations. The first is scholarly legitimacy, which is grounded in knowledge, methodological competence, textual mastery, historical awareness, and accountability within a scholarly tradition. The second is technological credibility, which may emerge from the perceived efficiency, accessibility, coherence, and responsiveness of an AI system. These two forms of credibility should not be treated as equivalent. An AI response may appear persuasive because of its linguistic fluency while remaining insufficiently grounded in identifiable sources or established exegetical methodologies. Conversely, a traditional interpretation may possess strong scholarly legitimacy even when it does not conform to the speed or communicative expectations of digital environments ²³.

Recent scholarship on digital Qur'anic interpretation demonstrates that such a reconfiguration did not begin with generative AI. Digital platforms have already altered the relationship between authority, audience, and religious knowledge. Rhafik et al. (2026), for example, show that digital Qur'anic exegesis is shaped through the interaction of religious authority, audience participation, and algorithmic mediation. Their findings indicate that the legitimacy and circulation of tafsir in digital environments cannot be explained exclusively through the formal status of religious interpreters because platform dynamics and audience engagement also contribute to the visibility of particular interpretations.

Generative AI, however, intensifies this transformation by introducing a distinction between authority over interpretation and capacity for interpretation-like production. A scholar may possess recognized authority to interpret the Qur'an, whereas an AI system may possess the technical capacity to produce an interpretation-like response. The latter capacity does not automatically generate the former authority. This distinction is essential because it prevents the analysis from assuming that technological capability necessarily leads to the displacement of religious scholars.

The changing relationship between capacity and legitimacy can be illustrated through the following conceptual sequence:

Interpretive capacity → perceived credibility → epistemic evaluation → legitimacy → authority.

AI may demonstrate interpretive capacity by generating an answer. Users may then

²¹ Campbell, *Digital Religion*.

²² A. Umar et al., 'Artificial Intelligence and the Ethics of Tafsir: Integrating Digital Technologies and Islamic Humanities in Automating Interpretative Processes', *Journal of Educational Technology and Learning Creativity* 3, no. 2 (2025): 324–47.

²³ Jonathan Barlow and Lynn Holt, 'Attention (to Virtuosity) Is All You Need: Religious Studies Pedagogy and Generative AI', *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 1059, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091059>.

perceive the answer as credible because it is coherent and accessible. However, credibility must still undergo epistemic evaluation through questions concerning sources, methodology, context, and attribution. Only through such processes can an interpretation acquire broader legitimacy. Religious authority therefore remains a social and epistemic achievement rather than an automatic consequence of technological capability.

This distinction becomes particularly important in light of recent research directly testing AI-generated Qur'anic interpretation. Saifullah demonstrate that language-model outputs can be evaluated through established criteria of *tafsīr bi al-ma'sūr*, including traceable attribution, *isnād*, *tarjīh*, and fidelity to recognized sources. Their study suggests that the legitimacy of AI-generated interpretation cannot be determined solely by the apparent quality of its textual output. Instead, the interpretive genealogy and methodological grounding of the response remain crucial.

The resulting configuration can therefore be understood as a layered legitimacy structure. At the first layer, Qur'anic textual authority provides the normative foundation. At the second, scholarly traditions provide interpretive methods and criteria for determining legitimate meaning. At the third, religious institutions provide mechanisms of recognition, validation, or rejection. At the fourth, digital technologies and AI introduce new forms of accessibility and epistemic credibility. These layers do not necessarily operate in harmony. They may reinforce one another, compete with one another, or impose constraints upon one another.

This layered configuration also explains why the emergence of AI should not be conceptualized as a simple transition from human authority to machine authority. Such a binary model overlooks the possibility that users may employ AI as a preliminary interpretive tool while continuing to rely on scholars, tafsir literature, or religious institutions for validation. In this configuration, AI becomes a supplementary mediator rather than an autonomous religious authority. Conversely, when users treat AI-generated responses as sufficient without further verification, the relationship between technological credibility and religious legitimacy becomes more problematic.

The central transformation, therefore, lies in the reconfiguration of the pathway through which interpretive legitimacy is established. Traditional pathways tend to move from textual sources through qualified interpreters and scholarly communities toward religious audiences. AI-mediated pathways can move from a user's question through a computational system toward an immediately generated response.²⁴ This shortened pathway potentially reduces the visibility of the traditional interpretive intermediary. The issue is not necessarily that the intermediary disappears, but that its role may become less visible in the initial encounter between the user and religious knowledge.

Consequently, AI introduces a new question into the sociology and epistemology of Qur'anic interpretation: must interpretive authority remain attached to the identity of the interpreter, or can credibility increasingly attach to the technological system through which interpretation is produced? The literature reviewed suggests that the answer cannot be reduced to either complete technological displacement or the complete preservation of traditional authority. Instead, the emerging configuration involves an ongoing negotiation between textual authority, scholarly legitimacy, institutional recognition, and technologically mediated credibility.

²⁴ Randy Putra Alamsyah and Daud Lintang, 'Cultural Integration and Political Consciousness in Qur'anic Exegesis: A Study of the Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm by Binjai's Ulama Tiga Serangkai', *Fikri : Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya* 10, no. 1 (July 2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.25217/jf.v10i1.6161>.

This reconfiguration provides the conceptual basis for understanding negotiated religious authority. Authority in AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation is not simply transferred from scholars to machines. Rather, its foundations are increasingly distributed across multiple sites of validation. The next section therefore examines how these different sources of legitimacy interact, particularly through processes of validation, contestation, complementation, and hybridization.

Negotiating Religious Authority between Scholarly Tradition and AI

The reconfiguration of interpretive legitimacy discussed above does not necessarily result in the displacement of traditional religious authority by artificial intelligence. Rather, the interaction between scholarly tradition and AI produces a process of negotiation, in which different sources of legitimacy interact, compete, and occasionally reinforce one another. In this context, religious authority should be understood not as a fixed possession but as a relational process through which particular interpretations become accepted, contested, validated, or rejected. This perspective is consistent with Campbell's (2007) argument that religious authority in digital environments is multidimensional and shaped by interactions among religious structures, actors, texts, and technological environments.²⁵

The first form of negotiation occurs through validation. AI-generated interpretations may be treated as preliminary information rather than authoritative conclusions. Users can compare AI responses with established tafsir works, Qur'anic commentaries, Hadith collections, and explanations provided by qualified scholars. In this configuration, AI functions primarily as an instrument for accessing and organizing religious knowledge, while scholarly traditions remain the principal reference point for determining interpretive legitimacy. The role of AI is therefore complementary rather than substitutive. Its value lies in facilitating access to information, identifying relevant themes, or generating initial explanations that subsequently require scholarly or textual verification.

This pattern is particularly significant because it demonstrates that technological accessibility does not automatically produce religious authority. An AI response may be readily available and linguistically persuasive, but users may still subject it to verification against recognized sources. Recent research on AI-generated Qur'anic interpretation illustrates the importance of such verification. Saifullah, for example, emphasize attribution, *isnād*, *tarjīh*, and fidelity to established sources as important criteria for assessing AI-generated interpretations. Thus, the authority of the AI response remains conditional upon its relationship with an existing epistemic tradition.²⁶

The second form is contestation. AI-mediated interpretations may conflict with established exegetical approaches, scholarly consensus, or institutional religious positions. In such situations, the presence of an AI-generated interpretation does not automatically challenge traditional authority. Instead, it can trigger a process through which scholars, institutions, and users evaluate and potentially reject the interpretation. The contestation itself becomes significant because it makes the boundaries of legitimate interpretation more visible.

Recent empirical research in Aceh illustrates this dynamic. Azizi and Nurullah show that Islamic scholars negotiate the use of AI in Qur'anic interpretation by recognizing its potential as a technological resource while simultaneously emphasizing the continuing importance of scholarly competence and traditional interpretive authority. The significance of this finding is

²⁵ Campbell, *Digital Religion*.

²⁶ Saifullah, Wahid, and Fazrian, 'Between Machines and the Tafsīr Tradition'.

that religious authority does not simply disappear when AI becomes available. Instead, scholars actively redefine the appropriate boundaries between technological assistance and legitimate interpretation.²⁷

A third form of negotiation is complementation. AI may be incorporated into religious scholarship without being granted autonomous interpretive authority. In this configuration, AI can assist scholars and students in searching large textual corpora, comparing interpretations, identifying recurring themes, translating passages, or organizing relevant literature. The human interpreter remains responsible for evaluating the information and determining its theological or exegetical significance. Such a configuration is particularly compatible with the distinction between technological capability and epistemic legitimacy established in the previous section.²⁸

The distinction is important because the use of AI does not necessarily imply a transformation of the underlying epistemology of tafsir. Technology may accelerate particular stages of research while leaving the normative responsibility for interpretation with human scholars. Thus, AI can function as an epistemic tool without becoming an epistemic authority. This distinction provides a more nuanced understanding of technological change than narratives that portray AI either as an inevitable replacement for religious scholars or as a completely neutral instrument.

A fourth form is hybridization. In some circumstances, traditional scholarly authority and AI-mediated knowledge may become interconnected rather than remaining separate. AI systems may draw upon digitized tafsir collections and scholarly works, while scholars and religious institutions may themselves use AI to support research, education, and communication. Digital religious authority therefore becomes distributed across human and technological actors. Studies of digital Qur'anic interpretation already demonstrate that religious authority can emerge through interactions among scholars, audiences, institutions, platforms, and algorithms rather than from a single source.²⁹

However, hybridization does not mean that all forms of authority become equal. The interaction between AI and scholarly tradition remains structured by asymmetries of legitimacy. A qualified mufassir possesses forms of scholarly and institutional recognition that an AI system does not possess. AI may provide computational efficiency and informational breadth, but it does not independently possess a scholarly biography, intellectual responsibility, or institutional accountability. Consequently, hybrid authority should be understood as asymmetrical integration, in which technological capabilities are incorporated into existing structures of religious knowledge without necessarily replacing their normative foundations.

The negotiation of authority can therefore be conceptualized through four mechanisms:

Mechanism	Relationship between AI and scholarly authority	Result
Validation	AI output is checked against tafsir and scholarly sources	Traditional authority reinforced
Contestation	AI output conflicts with established interpretation	Authority boundaries become explicit
Complementation	AI assists research, learning, and information retrieval	Human–AI cooperation

²⁷ Azizi and Nurullah, 'Negotiating Qur'anic Interpretive Authority in the Age of Artificial Intelligence in Aceh'.

²⁸ Lluís Oviedo, 'Artificial Intelligence and Theology: Looking for a Positive—but Not Uncritical—Reception', *Zygon* 57, no. 4 (2022): 938–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12832>.

²⁹ Rhafik et al., 'Qur'anic Exegesis in the Digital Sphere'.

Hybridization	AI and scholarly institutions become interconnected	Layered authority
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These mechanisms demonstrate that the relationship between AI and religious authority is dynamic rather than binary. The relevant question is not whether AI will replace scholars, but under what conditions AI-generated interpretations are accepted as credible and who possesses the authority to validate them. This shifts the analytical focus from technological capability toward processes of legitimacy.

Such a perspective also clarifies the significance of the digital user. Users are not merely passive recipients of either scholarly or AI-generated knowledge. They participate in the process of authority construction by deciding whether to trust, verify, reject, or further investigate AI-generated interpretations. In this sense, religious authority becomes increasingly relational and participatory. The authority of an AI-generated interpretation depends partly on how it is evaluated by users and whether it can be connected to recognized sources of religious legitimacy.

Nevertheless, user acceptance should not be equated with religious legitimacy. Popularity, convenience, and repeated use may increase the perceived credibility of AI, but these factors do not necessarily establish theological or exegetical validity. This distinction is particularly important in digital environments where visibility and engagement can create an appearance of authority. The growing accessibility of AI therefore introduces a tension between popular credibility and scholarly legitimacy.³⁰

The negotiation becomes even more complex when institutional religious actors intervene. Religious institutions can establish boundaries concerning acceptable AI use, determine which forms of AI-assisted interpretation are permissible, and reaffirm the qualifications required for legitimate Qur'anic interpretation. Such institutional responses demonstrate that religious authority retains an important regulatory dimension. AI may alter the mechanisms through which knowledge is produced and accessed, but religious institutions can still influence the criteria through which that knowledge is recognized as legitimate.³¹

Accordingly, the relationship between scholarly tradition and AI is best understood as a process of negotiated authority rather than technological replacement. AI introduces new possibilities for accessing and generating interpretive knowledge, while scholarly traditions retain significant influence over the criteria of legitimacy. Between these two poles, multiple configurations become possible: AI may reinforce traditional authority through improved access to classical sources; challenge it by producing alternative interpretations; complement it by assisting scholarly work; or contribute to hybrid configurations of knowledge production.

The central finding of this section is therefore that AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation redistributes the sites through which interpretive credibility is produced without necessarily redistributing ultimate religious authority. The authority of the mufassir may be challenged at the level of accessibility and informational mediation, but it remains significant at the level of epistemic validation, methodological judgment, and accountability. This distinction provides the basis for the final analytical step: developing a conceptual model that explains how these multiple forms of legitimacy interact within AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation.

Toward a Model of Negotiated Religious Authority

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the emergence of generative artificial intelligence does not produce a simple transfer of Qur'anic interpretive authority from religious

³⁰ Dedi Masri, Randy Putra Alamsyah, and Muhammad Azizan Sabjan, 'Vernacularization of The Interpretation of The Qur'an Al-Karim by The Ulama Tiga Serangkai (Abdul Halim Hasan, Abdurrahim al-Haitami, and Zainul Arifin Abbas)', *ZAD Al-Mufasssirin* 8, no. 1 (June 2026): 621–47, <https://doi.org/10.55759/zam.v8i1.409>.

³¹ Riri Susanti et al., 'Digitalizing the Quran and Hadith: Epistemological Reconstruction and Challenges of Religious Authority in the Digital Age', *El-Rusyd* 10, no. 2 (2025): 349–59, <https://doi.org/10.58485/elrusyd.v10i2.485>.

scholars to technological systems. Rather, AI introduces a new layer of mediation that changes how religious knowledge is produced, accessed, evaluated, and legitimized. The central finding of this study is therefore that the relationship between AI and religious authority is best understood as a process of negotiation. This negotiation occurs because AI-mediated interpretations encounter established forms of textual, scholarly, and institutional legitimacy, while simultaneously generating new forms of technological credibility.

Based on the literature synthesized in this study, negotiated religious authority can be defined as *a dynamic process through which the legitimacy of religious interpretation is constructed, validated, contested, and reconstructed through interactions between established scholarly traditions and technologically mediated forms of knowledge production*. This conceptualization extends the understanding of religious authority in digital environments by shifting attention from the question of who possesses authority toward the question of how authority is produced and recognized under changing technological conditions.³²

The proposed model consists of four interconnected stages: mediation, generation, evaluation, and negotiation.

1. Mediation

The first stage is algorithmic mediation. Before generative AI produces an interpretation, religious knowledge is already embedded within digital infrastructures. Qur'anic texts, translations, tafsir works, Hadith collections, and other religious materials may be digitized, indexed, retrieved, or processed computationally. This process transforms the relationship between users and religious knowledge.

At this stage, AI does not yet function as an autonomous interpreter. Instead, it operates as an intermediary that shapes how users encounter religious information. This extends earlier discussions of digital religious authority in which platforms and algorithms influence the visibility and circulation of religious content. The difference is that generative AI can subsequently move beyond mediation toward the production of an interpretive response.

2. Generation

The second stage involves AI-generated interpretation. Users submit questions concerning verses, concepts, or religious issues, and generative AI produces a textual response. This capacity represents a significant departure from earlier digital religious environments because the system does not merely retrieve an existing interpretation. It can synthesize information and formulate a new response based on patterns learned from large-scale textual data.

However, the production of an interpretation-like response should not automatically be understood as the acquisition of religious authority. The distinction between interpretive capacity and interpretive legitimacy remains fundamental. AI may possess the technical capacity to formulate an answer, but the legitimacy of that answer depends on how its sources, methodology, context, and reasoning are evaluated. Recent studies examining AI-generated tafsir reinforce this distinction by demonstrating the importance of attribution, *isnād*, *tarjīh*, and fidelity to established interpretive sources.

3. Epistemic Evaluation

The third stage is epistemic evaluation. AI-generated interpretations encounter criteria derived from established Qur'anic interpretive traditions. Based on the literature reviewed, five criteria are particularly significant: source attribution, methodological grounding, contextualization, interpretive coherence, and accountability.

Source attribution asks whether the origin of an interpretation can be identified and verified. Methodological grounding examines whether the response follows recognizable principles of Qur'anic interpretation. Contextualization considers whether historical, linguistic, and contemporary dimensions are appropriately incorporated. Interpretive coherence concerns the consistency of the argument with the relevant textual and exegetical tradition. Finally,

³² Mohammad Fattahun Niam, 'Does Artificial Intelligence Go beyond the Limits of Religious Authority? An Ethical Review on IslamGPT', *Al'Adalah* 27, no. 1 (2024): 71–84, <https://doi.org/10.35719/aladalah.v27i1.477>.

accountability addresses the question of who is responsible for the interpretation and its consequences.

These criteria establish an important boundary between AI-mediated epistemic credibility and religious authority. AI may generate a highly coherent response, but coherence alone does not satisfy the epistemic requirements of tafsir. Consequently, technological credibility must pass through processes of evaluation before it can acquire broader legitimacy.

4. Negotiation

The fourth stage is negotiation. Once an AI-generated interpretation is evaluated, it enters into a relationship with established forms of religious authority. Four possible outcomes can emerge: validation, contestation, complementation, and hybridization.

Validation occurs when AI-generated interpretations are consistent with recognized Qur'anic and exegetical sources and are subsequently confirmed through scholarly or textual verification. In this situation, AI may reinforce existing religious authority by making established knowledge more accessible. Contestation occurs when AI-generated interpretations conflict with established exegetical methodologies, scholarly judgments, or institutional positions. Rather than demonstrating the disappearance of traditional authority, such contestation can strengthen the visibility of the criteria through which legitimate interpretation is distinguished from unacceptable interpretation.

Complementation occurs when AI is incorporated as a supporting instrument in research, education, translation, information retrieval, or preliminary analysis while interpretive responsibility remains with human scholars. Here, AI functions as an epistemic tool rather than an autonomous religious authority. Hybridization represents the most complex configuration. In this situation, technological capabilities and traditional scholarly structures become integrated. Scholars may use AI to search and organize large textual corpora, while AI systems may rely on digitized bodies of classical and contemporary scholarship. Religious knowledge is consequently produced through interactions among human expertise, digital infrastructure, textual traditions, and computational systems.

CONLUSSION

This study demonstrates that the emergence of generative artificial intelligence is reshaping the conditions under which Qur'anic interpretation is produced, accessed, and legitimized. Rather than simply replacing traditional religious scholars, AI introduces a new form of technological mediation that can generate interpretive responses and influence how users encounter religious knowledge. The analysis shows that AI-mediated Qur'anic interpretation creates important epistemological tensions concerning source attribution, methodological grounding, contextualization, and scholarly accountability. The apparent fluency and accessibility of AI-generated responses do not automatically constitute religious authority. Interpretive legitimacy continues to depend on the relationship between textual sources, established tafsir methodologies, scholarly competence, and mechanisms of verification.

The study therefore proposes the concept of negotiated religious authority. Religious authority in AI-mediated environments is not transferred from scholars to machines but negotiated through processes of validation, contestation, complementation, and hybridization. AI may reinforce traditional authority when used to facilitate access to established knowledge, while potentially challenging it when users treat AI-generated interpretations as independent sources of religious knowledge. Theoretically, this study contributes by connecting digital religious authority, algorithmic mediation, and Qur'anic interpretive epistemology within a single conceptual framework. The study also highlights the importance of distinguishing AI-mediated epistemic credibility from religious authority itself. Future empirical research should examine how scholars, religious institutions, and Muslim users actually evaluate and use AI-generated Qur'anic interpretations in different social and cultural contexts.

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