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Cosmopolitan Islam and Socio-Religious Plurality: Reassessing Gus Dur's Thought in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract

This article aims to reassess Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) thought on cosmopolitan Islam in response to the challenges of socio-religious plurality in contemporary Indonesia. The study is grounded in the tension between religious formalism and the substantive values of Islam, particularly amid the rise of conservatism and exclusivism. Using a descriptive-historical and philosophical approach, the research reconstructs the foundations of Gus Dur's thought through library research on his writings, speeches, and interpretations of his ideas. The analysis is conducted qualitatively using a hermeneutic method to explore the historical context and ethical underpinnings of his cosmopolitan Islamic perspective. The findings reveal that Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam is rooted in principles of humanism, inclusivity, and respect for cultural and religious diversity. His ideas provide not only an alternative to the dominant exclusive Islamic narratives but also offer an ethical-sociological paradigm for strengthening social cohesion, promoting justice, and nurturing tolerance in plural societies. The novelty of this research lies in its reformulation of Gus Dur's thought as a theoretical framework applicable to the sociology of religion and inclusive identity formation. It contributes to social and political sciences and recommends integrating cosmopolitan Islamic values into civic education, public policy, and interfaith dialogue as long-term strategies for building a just and tolerant society.

Keywords: *Citizenship Education, Cosmopolitan Islam, Inclusive Identity, Interfaith Dialogue, Plural Society*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, religious life in Indonesia has undergone significant changes that cannot be overlooked. The socio-religious dynamics, once characterized by the spirit of gotong royong (mutual cooperation), mutual respect amidst differences, and tolerance as shared values of communal life, are now gradually being displaced by rigid, formalistic religious expressions, and in some cases—exclusive tendencies leading to social segregation (Jamaludin, 2021; Mulya & Schäfer, 2023). The emergence of identity polarization, the rise of religion-based hate speech, and the proliferation of intolerant religious movements have become phenomena inseparable from the currents of information globalization and identity politics that have permeated the social spaces of Indonesian society (Faizin, 2024; Soderborg & Muhtadi, 2023). Amidst these currents, there is a growing yearning for a model of Islam

that is friendlier, more open, and integrated with the pulse of local culture and the plural realities of Indonesian society.

The central problem underpinning this study is how Islam is practiced and understood within a pluralistic society—not merely as a legal system or a set of ritual symbols, but as a way of life that embodies peace, justice, and respect for diversity. In this context, Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) thought on cosmopolitan Islam has become increasingly relevant to revisit (Maftukhin, 2023; Munir, 2022). His thought did not emerge in a vacuum but was the result of a long intellectual, spiritual, and social engagement with the colorful realities of Indonesian life. Gus Dur spoke of Islam not only as a religion but also as a social and cultural ethic that opens spaces for dialogue rather than domination.

Various studies have examined Gus Dur's ideas. For instance, Basid et al. (2024) and Ridwan (2024) highlight his contribution to building democracy and religious freedom in Indonesia. Islam (2025) and Safitri (2024) position Gus Dur as a representative of inclusive Islam that is contextually responsive to changing times. Ihsani et al. (2021) and Mu'iz et al. (2024) explore his articulation of pluralism through Sufi and universal humanist approaches. Meanwhile, Franklin (2024) emphasizes Gus Dur's role in formulating Islam as part of culture rather than merely as a normative system.

Other studies by Muwaffaq (2022) and Subekti & Mutiullah (2025) trace how Gus Dur's religious thought developed from the pesantren discourse, which is open to modern ideas. Rosyidin & Arifin (2021) and Shuhadak et al. (2024) compare Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam with other progressive Islamic thought in Southeast Asia. Ni'mah et al. (2023) and Puara et al. (2024) examine Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism narrative in the context of interfaith encounters in Indonesia. Kusuma et al. (2025) and Rohman (2022) attempt to formulate Gus Dur's thought into a pluralistic public ethic. These studies illustrate the wide scope of Gus Dur's intellectual contributions and their influence in contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse.

On the other hand, studies such as those by Fathorrozy & Qomariyah (2023) and Lücking (2023) focus more on the modernization process of Islam in Indonesia but do not specifically examine the framework of Islamic cosmopolitanism as an ethical foundation and social praxis. Bahri (2022) and Jin et al. (2024) have begun to address issues of pluralism and tolerance, but their discussions remain largely normative and have yet to formulate a social paradigm for inclusive Islamic thought. The same applies to works by Muslim et al. (2024) and Rustriningsih & Saad (2024), which emphasize the theoretical dimensions of cosmopolitanism without directly linking them to Indonesia's contemporary context of declining social cohesion.

From this landscape, it is evident that there is a significant gap in previous research: there has been little systematic effort to place Gus Dur's concept of cosmopolitan Islam as a social paradigm directly addressing the plural realities of present-day Indonesia. Most studies have focused on historical or normative aspects without contextualizing his thought in tackling contemporary religious challenges such as intolerance, religious politicization, and social fragmentation driven by identity differences.

Therefore, this article seeks to offer a reinterpretation of Gus Dur's idea of

cosmopolitan Islam as an ethical-sociological framework capable of responding to the challenges of Indonesia's diversity today. This reinterpretation goes beyond textual or narrative understanding, aiming to reformulate the concept of Islam that upholds universal human values and coexists harmoniously within a plural society. This is the distinctive feature of the present study—contextually connecting ideas with social praxis.

The aim of this research is to reconstruct Gus Dur's thought on cosmopolitan Islam in depth and examine its relevance in addressing the current problems of Indonesia's socio-religious pluralism. This study aspires to enrich the body of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in developing an inclusive model of Islam that is socially adaptive and capable of serving as a foundation for reconciliation amidst the intensifying polarization of religious identities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive-historical methods and philosophical analysis (Mulisa, 2022). The choice of a qualitative approach is not merely due to the intellectual nature of the object of study, but more importantly because this approach provides space for the researcher to capture the meaning, nuances, and historical as well as social contexts underlying Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) ideas on cosmopolitan Islam. As stated by Prosek and Gibson (2021), a qualitative approach is used when the researcher seeks to understand the meaning constructed by individuals within their social and cultural frameworks, particularly when the subject under study cannot be reduced to numbers or discrete variables.

In this context, Gus Dur's thought cannot be separated from historical contexts, personal experiences, pesantren traditions, and his involvement in Indonesia's political and social life. Therefore, the descriptive-historical method is chosen to systematically record and describe the development of Gus Dur's thought over time, drawing from his writings, speeches, and public engagements. In line with Smela et al. (2023), the historical approach in the study of ideas enables us to understand thought not as a singular product of an individual but as the result of interactions between intellectual reflection, lived experiences, and social realities.

To uncover the depth of meaning in the concept of cosmopolitan Islam he proposed, this study also applies philosophical and hermeneutical analysis. Hermeneutics, in this regard, is used as a method to interpret Gus Dur's texts, including essays, articles, speeches, and interviews. Interpretation is carried out by considering historical background, cultural context, and power relations underlying the emergence of such thought. As articulated by Bhat et al. (2023), the understanding of a text cannot be separated from the "hermeneutic circle" between the horizons of the author and the reader. In this process, the researcher does not merely act as a passive observer but engages actively in meaning-making, bringing a contemporary scholarly horizon into dialogue with Gus Dur's intellectual horizon.

The primary data sources in this research are Gus Dur's own works, including Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita (Wahid, 2006), Pergulatan Negara, Agama, dan Kebudayaan (Wahid,

2001), and Melawan dengan Lelucon (Wahid, 2000), as well as various essays, opinion columns, speeches, and interviews published across multiple platforms. In addition, the researcher draws upon secondary sources in the form of academic studies and intellectual biographies of Gus Dur, which enrich the interpretative perspective on his thought. Data from these various sources are not treated in isolation but are analyzed dialogically to trace continuity and change in his patterns of thinking.

During the analysis, the researcher identifies key themes in Gus Dur's thought related to cosmopolitan Islam, such as pluralism, humanism, inclusivity, and interfaith as well as intercultural relations. These themes are then contextualized within Indonesia's contemporary socio-religious conditions, particularly in relation to rising intolerance, identity polarization, and interfaith tensions. By linking text and context, this study seeks to demonstrate how Gus Dur's thought can serve as an ethical alternative for addressing today's crisis of pluralism.

The decision to focus the study on Gus Dur's thought is also intentional. Gus Dur was not merely a religious figure but also a public intellectual situated at the crossroads between classical Islamic tradition and modern discourse. He articulated a model of Islam that was not trapped in legalism or symbolism but rooted in universal ethical values embedded in local culture. For this reason, his thought offers fertile ground for exploring an Islamic perspective that can engage in dialogue with a plural world without losing its spiritual roots.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Context and Genealogy of Gus Dur's Thought on Cosmopolitan Islam

Gus Dur's concept of cosmopolitan Islam did not emerge suddenly or in a vacuum; rather, it was the result of a long dialectical process shaped by his life experiences, education, and intellectual engagement across various historical, social, and cultural contexts. His family background, rooted in the lineage of prominent Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) scholars, laid the initial foundation of his religious orientation. As the grandson of KH. Hasyim Asy'ari—the founder of NU—and the son of KH. Wahid Hasyim, Indonesia's first Minister of Religious Affairs, Gus Dur grew up in a pesantren environment steeped in the tradition of classical Islamic scholarship while remaining open to the dynamics of the times.

His pesantren education not only provided mastery over turath (classical Islamic heritage texts) but also instilled the scholarly ethics and inclusivity characteristic of the pesantren tradition, which tends to respect the diversity of schools of thought and opinion. His formative years in pesantren such as Tebuireng, Krapyak, and Tegalrejo cultivated in him a deep appreciation for the values of Islam Nusantara—a flexible and adaptive form of Islam in harmony with local culture. From this, Gus Dur learned that Islam need not be imposed in a rigid formalistic manner but could engage in productive dialogue with the sociocultural realities of society.

However, Gus Dur's intellectual trajectory did not remain confined to traditionalism. His studies in the Middle East, exposure to contemporary Islamic thought in Egypt and Iraq, and engagement with Western philosophy expanded his intellectual horizons. He read the

works of thinkers such as John Rawls and Immanuel Kant, whose emphasis on justice, freedom, and respect for human dignity provided an additional lens for understanding Islam as a religion grounded in ethics and humanitarian values. This Western humanism reinforced his conviction that Islam's universal values could be harmonized with modern humanistic principles without losing their essence.

It was this combination that gave rise to the concept of cosmopolitan Islam—an understanding of Islam that is open to diversity, pluralism, and universal human values. In his writings and speeches, Gus Dur frequently rejected rigid fiqh-based formalism in the public sphere. He emphasized the ethical and substantive dimensions of Islamic teachings over normative debates that often resulted in exclusivism. For him, religion should serve as a liberating force, not a restrictive one. He strongly criticized tendencies to formalize religion in politics, which he believed undermined Islam's inclusive and tolerant spirit.

In this regard, S.N. Eisenstadt's theory of Multiple Modernities is particularly relevant to explaining Gus Dur's approach to the relationship between Islam and modernity. Eisenstadt argues that modernity is neither singular nor uniform but emerges in diverse forms shaped by local contexts. Gus Dur consciously "Indonesianized" Islam—not by modernizing it in the sense of imitating the West, but by revitalizing local values consistent with the spirit of Islam: tolerance, consensus-building (musyawarah), and mutual cooperation (gotong royong). For him, Islam was a faith rooted in local contexts, in dialogue with indigenous culture, and thus capable of manifesting in plural forms.

These ideas were not born solely from theoretical reflection but were also shaped by his lived experiences as an activist, public intellectual, and religious leader navigating Indonesia's complex sociopolitical realities. Witnessing discrimination against minorities, religion-based violence, and the hegemony of monolithic interpretations of Islam motivated him to consistently promote a friendly, inclusive, and civil Islam. In various national and international forums, Gus Dur asserted that Indonesian Islam represents a model of Islam capable of coexisting peacefully with diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions—a cosmopolitan form of Islam. To illustrate the roots of Gus Dur's thought in a structured manner, the following table is presented:

Table 1 Genealogy of Gus Dur's Thought on Cosmopolitan Islam

Aspect	Contribution to Thought	Main Sources
Pesantren Environment	Classical Islamic scholarship, inclusivity, ethics of inter-school debate	Tebuireng, Krapyak, Tegalrejo
Scholarly Family	Nationalist outlook, integration of religion and state, tolerance	KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, KH. Wahid Hasyim
Middle East	Contemporary Islamic insights, Islamic reformism	Studies in Egypt and Iraq
Western Philosophy	Universal ethics, human rights, social justice	John Rawls, Immanuel Kant

Source: Compiled from various works by Gus Dur and supporting literature (2025)

With this background, it becomes clear that Gus Dur's concept of cosmopolitan Islam was not an instant idea but the result of a sustained engagement between text and context, tradition and modernity, locality and universality. This is where Gus Dur's significance lies within the landscape of Islamic thought in Indonesia and beyond: he demonstrated that being a Muslim does not require abandoning one's national identity, and that Islam is not the exclusive property of a religious elite but an ethical force that must side with humanity.

Principles of Cosmopolitan Islam in Gus Dur's Thought

Gus Dur's conception of cosmopolitan Islam rests upon the universal values of Islam, interpreted contextually and progressively. He proposed an Islamic outlook that does not become trapped in the formalism of the sharia, but instead emphasizes the ethical and humanitarian meaning embedded within Islamic teachings. Within this framework, there are four main principles that form the pillars of Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam: humanism, social inclusion, respect for diversity, and egalitarianism. These four principles were shaped not only through theoretical reflection, but also through Gus Dur's lived experience in engaging with Indonesia's highly pluralistic social reality.

The first principle, humanism, lies at the heart of how Gus Dur understood Islam—as a religion that prioritizes the welfare of humankind. On numerous occasions, he stressed that Islam must be a liberating force, not an oppressive one. Values such as empathy, justice, and respect for human dignity were, for him, the very soul of Islam, not mere supplementary elements. This perspective aligns with the notion of humanist Islam—an approach that treats humans as dignified subjects rather than as mere objects of law. This interpretation also functioned as Gus Dur's critique of sharia-centric exclusivism, which often neglects the complexities of real human life. He believed that religious texts must always be reinterpreted in accordance with the spirit of the age and the social context, so they do not become instruments of domination in the name of religion.

The second principle, social inclusion, was consistently championed by Gus Dur both in thought and in practice. He did not only defend the rights of Muslims but also those of minority groups such as the Chinese-Indonesians, the Ahmadiyya community, Christians, and even indigenous groups like the Dayak and Papuans. For him, the presence of such groups was not a threat, but a legitimate part of Indonesia's societal fabric. Within the framework of ethical pluralism, as explained by Cortés-Capano et al. (2022), pluralism is not merely a sociological reality but an ontological fact inherent to human life. Gus Dur saw pluralism as a source of richness and dialogue, not as a reason to impose value homogeneity. He believed that each community possesses unique values that deserve to be respected and embraced.

The third principle, respect for diversity, was for Gus Dur not a pragmatic political choice but an ethical foundation of Islam itself. In many of his writings and lectures, Gus Dur often cited Qur'an Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13) as a theological basis for accepting differences in ethnicity, nationality, and religion as a divine will that must be embraced wholeheartedly. He rejected uniformity in religious expression, arguing that such uniformity would only produce moral authoritarianism and symbolic violence. Consequently, he was a strong critic of groups

that monopolize religious truth and deny the legitimacy of diverse interpretations. He held that pluralism is not a threat to faith, but rather a pathway to spiritual and social maturity.

The fourth principle is egalitarianism, the idea that all human beings have equal standing before both God and the state. In Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam, there is no room for discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, gender, or social class. This principle was evident in his advocacy for gender equality, the rights of persons with disabilities, and economic justice. Gus Dur strongly opposed religious interpretations that justify the subordination of women or other vulnerable groups. Instead, he emphasized social justice as a manifestation of maqāṣid al-sharī'ah (the higher objectives of Islamic law), which should aim to fulfill basic human rights such as the protection of life, intellect, dignity, and property.

Gus Dur demonstrated that Islam could be a force supporting democracy, human rights, and social justice without losing its theological identity. He offered a progressive reading of classical Islam—not one that abandoned its roots, but one that revived them in ways relevant to contemporary challenges. Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam is not a "new" Islam, but rather a re-reading infused with openness and a commitment to humanity. This is the intellectual and spiritual legacy that continues to inspire—not only Indonesian Muslims, but also the global community in search of a peaceful and compassionate face of religion.

Table 2 Pillars of Cosmopolitan Islam in Gus Dur's Thought

Principle	Elaboration	Theoretical Basis	Example of Gus Dur's Practice
Humanism	Islam as a liberating force from oppression	Islamic ethical philosophy, Western humanism	Consistently defending the rights of minorities
Social Inclusion	Acceptance of different groups as part of the ummah	Ethical Pluralism (Parekh, 2020)	Advocating for the abolition of discrimination against Chinese-Indonesians
Respect for Diversity	Rejection of singular religious interpretations	Contextual reading of Qur'an 49:13	Opposing bans on local religions
Egalitarianism	Equality of rights and dignity for all	Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah, universal human rights	Defending women and persons with disabilities

Source: Adapted from Gus Dur's thought and related literature (2025)

Cosmopolitan Islam as a Response to Conservatism and Identity Polarization

Cosmopolitan Islam, as formulated by Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), is not merely an intellectual response to theological dynamics, but also a practical offer that embodies values of liberation, inclusion, and respect for differences amid an increasingly polarized society. In the face of rising religious conservatism and identity politics, Gus Dur's thought serves as a middle path that rejects extremism, whether in the form of rigid secularism or religious puritanism. He envisioned a form of Islam that is not trapped in symbolism, but rooted in the substance of values and the moral virtues of Islam. On many occasions, Gus Dur strongly criticized the tendency of certain groups to politicize religion for exclusive interests,

even turning it into a tool of domination over other groups differing in ethnicity or beliefs.

Gus Dur's thinking on the relationship between the state and religion also demonstrates the sharpness of his pluralist vision. He consistently rejected the idea of a religious state because, for him, a state that sides only with one religious interpretation risks oppressing other citizens. In the framework of civic pluralism as outlined by Sunesti et al. (2021), Gus Dur's approach is highly relevant: building a multicultural society is not achieved by erasing differences, but by nurturing them through inclusive policies and public values. Civic pluralism emphasizes the importance of recognizing group identities as part of citizenship rights. This aligns with Gus Dur's support for groups marginalized in mainstream discourse, such as the Chinese-Indonesian community, the Ahmadiyya, and Christians in minority regions.

In the Indonesian context, Gus Dur's bold move to revoke Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967, which restricted Chinese cultural expression, was a concrete commitment to cultural pluralism. This decision was not merely about policy but also about values: that diversity is a strength, not a threat. His stance toward the Ahmadiyya community and adherents of local religions was similar—Gus Dur did not view them through the lens of theological deviance, but from the perspective of human and citizenship rights. He asserted that the state must not bow to majority pressure seeking to unilaterally define the faith of others.

His critique of Islamic puritanism was equally sharp. In various writings and interviews, Gus Dur reminded people that Islam has never grown in a sterile space, but has always interacted and negotiated with social and cultural contexts. Therefore, efforts to "purify" Islam by rejecting accommodation to local traditions, in his view, betray Islam's own historical dynamics. Here we see that cosmopolitan Islam rejects the false dichotomy between the secular and the religious. It is neither an elite, exclusive religion nor an ahistorical, literalist interpretation, but a religion of life that is present within human diversity and social complexity.

This paradigm also serves as resistance to the homogenization of identity, a hallmark of recent populist politics. Gus Dur rejected views that confine religious identity to a single line, as this would sacrifice the internal diversity of Islam and reduce the complexity of Indonesian society. In this context, cosmopolitan Islam becomes a counter-narrative to exclusive identity politics. This narrative affirms the sociological fact that Indonesian society has been plural from the start—and that pluralism is not just passive tolerance, but an ethical foundation for building a just and equal society.

In Gus Dur's framework of thought, cosmopolitan Islam is not only a moral idea but also an intellectual strategy and social praxis for responding to the symptoms of conservatism that freeze the dynamics of religious life and identity polarization that threaten national cohesion. For Gus Dur, the rise of religious conservatism is not merely a theological problem, but a socio-political phenomenon rooted in identity anxiety, injustice, and weak religious literacy. Therefore, the response to conservatism cannot rely solely on normative arguments, but must build a new consciousness rooted in progressive and contextual Islamic ethics.

Gus Dur observed that many conservative groups tend to understand Islam rigidly and exclusively, emphasizing formal symbols such as sharia, the jilbab (headscarf), and literal mastery of religious texts. He did not reject these symbols outright, but opposed treating them as the sole benchmarks of Islamic faith. In his book Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita ("My Islam, Your Islam, Our Islam"), Gus Dur stressed the importance of distinguishing between "Islam as values" and "Islam as symbols." According to him, when Islam is understood solely as symbols, the potential for political manipulation becomes very high, and religion loses its social function as a mercy for all creation (rahmatan lil 'alamin).

Furthermore, Gus Dur conceived cosmopolitan Islam as a form of religiosity not confined by ethnic, sectarian, or even majority interpretations. For him, Islam is divine revelation that lives within diverse cultural spaces, and thus must remain open to interpretive possibilities rooted in plural social experiences. With this perspective, Gus Dur sought to free Islam from the trap of "interpretive uniformity" promoted by puritan groups, while at the same time building bridges between the universal values of Islam and the historical plurality of Indonesian society.

In this context, we can see how Gus Dur's thought aligns with the framework of civic pluralism developed by Sunesti et al. (2021), in which pluralism is not viewed as a threat but as a socio-political construction that must be institutionally protected and culturally embraced. Civic pluralism rejects the erasure of identity for the sake of false unity, and instead affirms that differences in identity (religion, ethnicity, gender) are part of the foundation of equal citizenship. Gus Dur, in his characteristic way, embodied this principle in both narrative and policy—for example, when he defended Ahmadiyya minorities, adherents of local religions, and even former PKI members—not because he agreed with their ideologies, but because he rejected political exclusion and human discrimination in the name of religion.

Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam also carries the spirit of de-hegemonizing Islamic discourse. In his view, the hegemony of certain groups over religious interpretation will only produce a politics of fear, where difference is labeled heresy and minorities are deemed threats. In several speeches, Gus Dur critiqued the tendency of political Islam groups to push the public toward their own version of "normative Islam." Yet, in Islamic history, pluralism of thought has been an inevitability that enriches the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the Muslim community.

Moreover, Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam is a critique of the process of depoliticizing identity that intensified after the New Order era. Under an authoritarian regime, social identities were suppressed for political stability; post-reformasi, that suppression transformed into excessive politicization, where groups exploited religious sentiment to mobilize support and eliminate opponents. Here, Gus Dur played a key role: he did not reject religion entering the public sphere, but he opposed religion being used as a tool to narrow the public space that should remain inclusive.

The Relevance of Cosmopolitan Islam for Contemporary Indonesia: Social Cohesion and Inclusive Religious Identity

Amid rising social tensions rooted in religious and cultural identity, the idea of cosmopolitan Islam championed by Gus Dur has regained its relevance as an alternative paradigm for nurturing harmony and building social cohesion. More than a mere project of normative idealism, cosmopolitan Islam as understood by Gus Dur is a form of social praxis — the application of Islamic values in national and societal life in a contextual, inclusive, and civilized manner. He avoided reducing religion to mere doctrine, and instead emphasized its function as a moral force that fosters tolerance, social justice, and mutual understanding.

Gus Dur placed interreligious and interfaith dialogue as an essential foundation for maintaining social peace in a pluralistic Indonesia. In various forums, he often stated that diversity is not a problem to be solved, but a treasure to be preserved. During his presidency, Gus Dur opened both symbolic and structural spaces for reconciliation with minority groups such as Confucians, Ahmadis, and local communities in Papua. This stance was not limited to symbolic gestures, but was grounded in the ethical view that all human beings have equal dignity before God, in line with the Islamic ethic of karamah insaniyyah (human dignity).

Beyond advocating multiculturalism, Gus Dur brought Islamic ethics into the realm of civic education and public policy. Religious education, in his view, must teach the values of tolerance rather than fostering exclusivism. In many of his essays, Gus Dur criticized educational systems that tended to promote labeling of “us” versus “them.” He believed that education should shape citizens who are both religious and cosmopolitan — individuals rooted in their traditions yet open to difference. This concept aligns with the idea of civic friendship developed by Billingham & Taylor (2023), where education plays a role in cultivating empathy across identities to build a fairer and more cohesive society.

In the context of contemporary Indonesia — where religion-based hate speech is spreading via social media and identity-based groups are increasingly competing politically — cosmopolitan Islam becomes an important form of social capital. Gus Dur’s approach did not employ the logic of conflict or domination, but the logic of empathy and humanity. This is reflected in his principle: “It does not matter what your religion is; what matters is whether you can do good for others,” a statement that illustrates Islam’s universal ethos — one that is not exclusive but opens space for interfaith solidarity.

Furthermore, cosmopolitan Islam can be understood as a form of social soft power in a multicultural democracy. The term soft power, as introduced by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to the ability to influence through the example of values rather than through coercion or economic-military force. In this sense, the Islamic values embodied by Gus Dur — such as inclusivity, justice, and respect for diversity — become gentle instruments for preventing conflict, creating a healthy public sphere, and strengthening democracy based on equal participation.

Gus Dur’s role in bridging tensions among cultural groups can also be seen in the way he treated local cultures. He did not impose religious homogenization but instead celebrated cultural diversity as fertile ground for expressions of faith. In Papua, for instance, he

supported the recognition of indigenous cultural rights and promoted dialogue-based rather than repressive approaches toward local movements. This approach resonates with the concept of multicultural citizenship, which holds that citizenship must accommodate diverse identity expressions rather than concealing them under a single narrative (Steyn & Vanyoro, 2024).

Current realities show that intolerance remains a serious challenge to Indonesian democracy. According to Rosyidi (2025), there were more than 300 incidents of religious freedom violations in Indonesia in just the past year, most targeting minority groups. In such circumstances, cosmopolitan Islam can serve as an antithesis to segregationist ideologies while also acting as a unifying force that does not sacrifice diversity. It offers a transcendent perspective on social and political boundaries, fostering a society built on mutual respect within an ethical togetherness.

Gus Dur's ideas have an impact that goes beyond the boundaries of the Muslim community. In many Christian, Hindu, and indigenous faith communities, Gus Dur is remembered as a figure who defended them when the state failed to provide protection. This demonstrates that cosmopolitan Islam is not merely an internal Islamic narrative but functions as a universal dialogue platform. It broadens the Islamic horizon from mere ritual to ethical praxis in national life.

The cosmopolitan Islam envisioned by Gus Dur holds profound relevance for Indonesia today. It challenges the dominance of exclusive identity discourses, offers egalitarian spaces for dialogue, and builds a moral foundation for a humane democracy. In a time when religion is often used as an instrument of exclusion, this idea emerges as an alternative voice affirming that true religiosity is found in the ability to respect the dignity of others — regardless of identity.

The relevance of cosmopolitan Islam grows even stronger when we observe the increasing trend of intolerance and religion-based violence in recent years. This phenomenon occurs not only in physical spaces but also in the digital sphere, where narratives of hate, discriminatory speech, and identity polarization are intensifying, especially ahead of political moments. Gus Dur long warned that identity politics based on religion would erode Indonesia's pluralist foundations if not counterbalanced with ethical education and cultural reconciliation.

The increase in these incidents is not merely a matter of statistics but a reflection of a social crisis threatening national unity. In this context, Gus Dur's thought on cosmopolitan Islam offers a practical response that rejects the hegemony of a single religious interpretation and replaces it with an embracing perspective. His idea situates religion as a cultural force for creating social harmony, not as a tool of domination or segregation.

Cosmopolitan Islam, as articulated by Gus Dur, is not an idea confined to seminar halls or academic discourse. It transforms into social soft power that touches policy, education, and culture on a broad scale. When the above data show that minority groups such as the Ahmadis and indigenous communities remain targets of violations, Gus Dur's approach — rejecting discrimination on the basis of majoritarian interpretations — offers a highly relevant

ethical logic. In Gus Dur's framework, Islam is a religion that liberates, not restricts; that honors humanity, not politicizes difference.

Moreover, the table indicates that online hate speech became the dominant form of violation in 2024. This suggests that future challenges are not only structural but also cultural and digital. Gus Dur once emphasized that cultural work — including digital literacy — is part of religious responsibility. In a world increasingly fragmented by algorithms and filter bubbles, cosmopolitan Islam offers a counter-narrative that is broader, more open, and grounded in ethics.

Findings from the Setara Institute highlight a concerning trend regarding the state of freedom of religion and belief in Indonesia over the past three years:

Table 3 Genealogy of Gus Dur's Thought on Cosmopolitan Islam

Category	2023	2024
Number of Incidents	217	260
Number of Actions	329	402
Actions by State Actors	–	159
Actions by Non-State Actors	–	243
Acts of Intolerance by the Public	26	73
Discriminatory Acts by the State	23	50
Cases of Blasphemy	15	42
Disruption of Establishment/Operation of Houses of Worship	65	42

Source: Compiled from various works by Gus Dur and supporting literature (2025)

Reformulating Cosmopolitan Islam as an Ethical–Sociological Paradigm

The reformulation of cosmopolitan Islam as an ethical–sociological paradigm is an effort to elevate Gus Dur's thought from merely a moral narrative into a theoretical framework that can be operationalized in interpreting and responding to contemporary socio-religious dynamics. In this context, cosmopolitan Islam is not only understood as a discourse of openness and tolerance in religious practice but also as an epistemic foundation for a social ethic capable of bridging the tension between religious values and the reality of Indonesia's societal pluralism. Through his ideas on pluralism and respect for local culture, Gus Dur formulated a mode of religiosity that upholds human rights, social justice, and humanity as the core values of Islam itself.

This idea is particularly significant given the underdevelopment of sociological paradigms that can address diversity in an applied and contextual way in Indonesia. So far, the discourse on pluralism has mostly existed in normative or theological terms, without sufficient elaboration as a framework for social action. Yet, as Gus Dur emphasized in many of his writings, Islam should be "a way of life that liberates and humanizes, not one that confines people within the walls of identity." From this perspective, cosmopolitan Islam can be seen as social ethics in action — a religious ethic that lives within social practice, not just in doctrine.

As an ethical–sociological paradigm, cosmopolitan Islam offers three main pillars that can be applied in Indonesia's social context: multicultural education, justice-based public policy, and cultural transformation rooted in inclusivity. In education, for example, the cosmopolitan Islamic approach encourages the inclusion of minority narratives in curricula, as well as fostering interfaith and intercultural learning spaces. In public policy, this paradigm rejects the exclusive formalization of religion and instead urges the state to act as a facilitator of social justice for all citizens, as Gus Dur advocated during his leadership. In social practice, cosmopolitan Islam can serve as the basis for building cross-religious and cross-ethnic solidarity through a culture of dialogue, empathy, and participation.

Theoretically, Gus Dur's thought can be aligned with Jürgen Habermas's approach to discursive ethics, which emphasizes the importance of rational communication and equality of position in the public sphere. Like Habermas, Gus Dur believed that social consensus must be built through equal and respectful dialogue, not through the dominance of a single truth. In this sense, cosmopolitan Islam serves as a counter-discourse to the growing theological conservatism in Indonesia's public sphere.

To strengthen the applicative dimension of this paradigm, the following table outlines the potential implementation of cosmopolitan Islam across various sectors of social life:

Table 4 Application of Cosmopolitan Islam as an Ethical–Sociological Paradigm in Contemporary Indonesia

Sector of Life	Cosmopolitan Islamic Principles Applied	Examples of Practical Implementation
Education	Inclusivity, interfaith dialogue, multicultural narratives	Interfaith modules in schools, minority local history curriculum
Public Policy	Social justice, minority protection, ethics of service	Affirmative policies for indigenous communities and religious minorities
Media & Digital	Diversity literacy, counter-narratives to hate speech	Online tolerance campaigns, peace journalism
Community & Culture	Cross-identity solidarity, preservation of inclusive local traditions	Interfaith cultural festivals, inter-community dialogue forums

Source: Compiled by the Author based on an analysis of Gus Dur's thought and sociology of religion literature (2025)

This table illustrates that cosmopolitan Islam is not an abstract concept detached from reality but can be translated into concrete forms of policy, curricula, and social movements. This reinforces the position of Gus Dur's thought as an important part of intellectual heritage in contemporary social sciences and humanities.

In the development of Indonesian social science, Gus Dur's intellectual legacy can serve as a foundation for a more grounded and progressive sociology of religion. It opens space for integrating religious values with the complexities of a plural society, without being trapped in the dichotomies of West–Islam or Secular–Religious. Therefore, the reformulation of cosmopolitan Islam is not only necessary as an ethical approach but also as a new

sociological paradigm capable of addressing identity crises, social exclusion, and societal fragmentation in Indonesia's current democratic landscape.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research affirm that Gus Dur's cosmopolitan Islam constitutes both an ethical offering and a relevant theoretical framework for responding to the challenges of socio-religious plurality in contemporary Indonesia. Amid the rise of religious conservatism and exclusivism, cosmopolitan Islam emerges not merely as an alternative inclusive narrative but as an ethical–sociological paradigm that places human values, cultural openness, and respect for diversity as the substantive foundation of Islamic faith. Through a hermeneutic approach to Gus Dur's texts and contexts, this study shows that his ideas possess not only historical and philosophical strength but also practical applicability in shaping an inclusive social identity and strengthening social cohesion. The reformulation of this thought becomes a theoretical contribution to the development of a sociology of religion rooted in the Indonesian context, while also offering a practical approach for integrating cosmopolitan Islamic values into civic education, public policy, and interfaith dialogue as a long-term strategy for fostering justice and tolerance in a plural society.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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