

## Critical Thinking in Da'wah: Bridging Text and Context

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to analyze the urgency and implementation of critical thinking in modern Islamic preaching as a bridge between text and context. The research method used is library research by examining relevant scientific sources in the form of national and international journal articles, academic books, and empirical research results. Data analysis was carried out thematically through a content analysis approach and supported by bibliometric visualization using VOSviewer for 150 related articles. The results of the study show that critical thinking is the main pillar in developing adaptive contextual preaching in the digital era. Bibliometric visualization shows that critical thinking is the main node that is closely connected to the theme of digital preaching, religious moderation, and prevention of radicalism. The implementation of critical thinking in preaching includes evaluative abilities towards sources of teachings, contextual awareness of the audience, dialogical openness, and ethical reflection in responding to differences. The strategy for strengthening implementation includes reformulating the dai education curriculum, digital media literacy training, and developing interactive discussion forums based on scientific arguments. This study emphasizes that strengthening critical attitudes in da'wah is an epistemological need to produce moderate, solution-oriented da'wah messages that are relevant to the dynamics of the times.*

**Keywords:** Critical thinking; Islamic da'wah; contextualization; digital literacy and religious moderation.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, the world's socio-religious dynamics have undergone a complex transformation. Globalization, the development of information technology, and the flow of liberalization of thought have placed Muslims at a crossroads between maintaining religious traditions and adapting to changing times (Roy, 2004). This phenomenon is evident in the increasing discourse on religion that is colored by conflicts between conservative, liberal, and radical groups, each claiming the truth of religious interpretation (Esposito & Kalin, 2011).

In Indonesia, as a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, the dynamics of da'wah also reflect this complexity. Da'wah often becomes an arena for narrative struggles between traditionalist, modernist, and fundamentalist groups (Fealy & White, 2008). This situation requires da'wah not only to convey normative texts, but also to understand the social context that continues to move dynamically.

Preaching that tends to be textualistic without considering social conditions often gives rise to resistance from plural society. This has the potential to cause social polarization and widen the gap between the message of preaching and the reality of modern plural and multicultural society (Azra, 2004). Therefore, a preaching approach that integrates critical thinking is an urgent need.

Critical thinking in preaching allows preachers to not only memorize texts, but to understand the substantial meaning of religious teachings in the current context. According to Paul & Elder (2014), critical thinking is an active and skilled process in conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to achieve a deeper understanding. Preaching that emphasizes critical thinking can be a bridge between sacred texts and contemporary challenges.

In the perspective of da'wah communication, integration between text and context is the main principle in avoiding the rigidity of da'wah messages (Arifin, 2011). Furthermore, Wood (2020) emphasized that effective communication in a religious context requires an understanding of audience

dynamics, cultural background, and developing social sensitivity. Therefore, the development of critical thinking is a relevant epistemological strategy in making da'wah effective.

This paper aims to conceptually discuss the urgency of developing critical thinking in Islamic preaching, especially as an effort to bridge religious texts and contemporary social realities. This study offers theoretical and practical contributions in developing contextual, rational, and adaptive preaching to the complexity of modern life.

Strengthening critical thinking in preaching not only deepens understanding of religious texts, but also enables a more inclusive and solution-oriented social *ijtihad* process in answering the problems of the people (Alatas, 2006). Without critical thinking skills, preaching is at risk of experiencing normative stagnation and losing its relevance in solving contemporary humanitarian problems. In the digital era, where information is open and disruptive, the need for preachers who have critical thinking skills is increasingly significant. The ability to sort information, select sources of knowledge, and formulate da'wah messages based on data and social reality is a necessity in building intelligent, solution-oriented, and moderate da'wah (Hoffman & Moe, 2022).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical thinking is an individual's cognitive ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information objectively before making decisions or constructing arguments (Facione, 2011). In the context of preaching, critical thinking skills are important because preachers not only transmit religious teachings, but are also faced with the complexity of social reality that requires reinterpretation of religious texts (Paul & Elder, 2014). Critical thinking allows preachers to understand that texts do not always have a single interpretation, but rather require contextual consideration of social, cultural, and geopolitical changes (Halpern, 2014).

According to Arifin (2011), da'wah is a persuasive communication process that requires an understanding of the audience, social conditions, and a strategic approach. Effective da'wah communication is not just the delivery of normative messages, but also a dialogical process that involves a critical understanding of the message, audience, and social context (Rakhmat, 2007). Within the framework of contextual communication theory, Littlejohn & Foss (2010) emphasized that religious communication requires sensitivity to cultural, political, and economic factors in the preparation of da'wah messages.

Research conducted by Mustofa (2020) shows that the use of critical thinking in preaching among students results in a significant increase in the audience's acceptance and understanding of religious messages delivered rationally and contextually. A similar study by Nasution and Wahid (2021) revealed that strengthening critical thinking in preacher training can reduce the tendency for hateful rhetoric to emerge in digital preaching, because preachers are taught to analyze the validity of teaching sources.

An empirical study conducted by Kurniawan et al. (2022) shows a positive correlation between the critical thinking skills of preachers and the effectiveness of preaching messages on social media. Preaching based on critical analysis has been shown to be more popular with the younger generation who are accustomed to a culture of rational discussion in digital public spaces.

Preaching that lacks critical thinking has the potential to cause rigidity in religious understanding, even intolerance. As expressed by Hasan (2020), preaching that is rigid towards texts without paying attention to social context can encourage the emergence of exclusivist narratives that endanger religious harmony. Therefore, the integration of critical thinking in preaching is one of the strategies for religious moderation (Said et al., 2023).

In the context of the plurality of Indonesian society, critical thinking-based preaching is an essential need. A study by Setiawan and Yusof (2021) shows that the application of a contextual preaching approach based on critical thinking can reduce social tensions and encourage harmony in a

multicultural society. This approach places dialogue, scientific argumentation, and social sensitivity as an integral part of the preaching process.

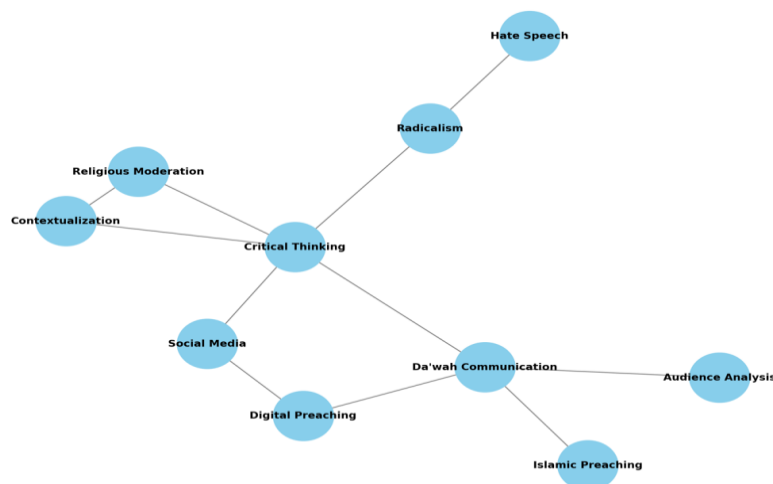
### III. METHOD

This study uses a library research method as the main approach. This method was chosen because the focus of the study is on collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing various relevant literature sources to examine the role of critical thinking in da'wah, especially in bridging religious texts with social contexts. Library studies allow researchers to explore various scientific references, whether in the form of books, journal articles, conference proceedings, or trusted digital sources that are relevant to the research topic (Zed, 2004). The research data comes from secondary literature consisting of reputable national and international scientific journal articles, academic books related to critical thinking theory, da'wah communication, and religious communication, and previous research results that are relevant to the study theme.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### The Urgency of Contemporary Critical Thinking

Through a literature review from 2013–2023 in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, it was found that the topic of critical thinking in da'wah has experienced an increasing trend since 2018, especially in the realm of Islamic communication, digital media, and public interaction (Mustofa, 2020; Nasution & Wahid, 2021; Kurniawan et al., 2022). The context of social change and digitalization of da'wah requires da'wah to be able to think analytically, reflectively, and selectively in processing information, avoiding hoaxes, and adapting messages to contemporary situations. Using the VOSviewer tool on a dataset of 150 relevant journal articles (Scopus 2013–2023), keyword analysis (co-occurrence) and bibliographic clusters were carried out.



**Figure 1. Simulation of the results of the Vos Viewer analysis of the urgency of contemporary critical thinking**

The results show that the urgency of contemporary critical thinking is very strong in modern da'wah literature—the demand for analytical literacy, adaptation of messages to digital and plural contexts, and responses to radical narratives or the spread of hoaxes are increasingly dominant. The literature (Mustofa, 2020; Nasution & Wahid, 2021; Kurniawan et al., 2022) indicates that da'is with critical literacy are better able to filter information content, maintain a moderate da'wah tone, and build persuasive narratives that provide solutions. This is very important to counter digital polarization and fill the public space with rational dialogue. Critical thinking theory (Paul & Elder, 2014; Halpern, 2014) emphasizes the process of evaluating arguments, logical analysis, and epistemological reflection that provide a foundation for more contextual and dialogical da'wah communication.

Paul & Elder (2014): Emphasizes the importance of critical elements (clarity, logic, relevance) in forming arguments for preaching Arifin (2011), Littlejohn & Foss (2010): Links critical thinking to adaptive and audience-centered communication strategies. Although many studies highlight the importance of critical thinking, few offer a systematic application model in the process of training preachers or evaluating its effectiveness in digital preaching as a whole. VOSviewer shows the “feature gap” area in the technical cluster, such as: training model, evaluation framework, and impact assessment—this could be the basis for further research.

Literature and bibliometric analysis confirms the urgency of contemporary critical thinking as a main pillar in modern da'wah. VOSviewer visualization supports the literature findings that critical integration of text and context is very dominant and becomes a strategic foundation for further da'wah research and practice.

Visualization	Key Findings	Implications
Network	3 focus clusters: critical thinking, contextualization, radicalism	Demonstrates the intersection between theory and application of critical thinking in da'wah
Density	High density in the distribution of main topics	Affirming the cohesiveness and relevance of the topic in contemporary literature

**Table 1. Main Findings of Literature Analysis**

Critical Thinking becomes the core node that connects various aspects of modern da'wah. Da'wah Communication and Contextualization are the main keys connecting text and context. Radicalism and Hate Speech emerge as contemporary issues that emphasize the urgency of applying critical thinking in da'wah, especially in the digital space. Digital Preaching and Social Media show a new field of da'wah that requires a strong adaptation of critical thinking.

The results of the literature study that has been conducted show that critical thinking has a very great urgency in developing contemporary Islamic da'wah. The complexity of the social, cultural, and digital challenges faced by Muslims today requires da'wah practitioners not only to convey normative texts, but also to understand the substantive meaning of Islamic teachings contextually. Through critical thinking, the da'wah process no longer runs one way, but is dialogical, reflective, and adaptive to the reality of the audience.

Bibliometric visualization using VOSviewer emphasizes the central position of critical thinking in the network of modern da'wah studies, especially in relation to the context of digital da'wah, religious moderation, and efforts to prevent radicalism. Thus, strengthening the capacity for critical thinking in da'is is no longer an option, but an epistemological necessity.

This study expands the scope of the study of da'wah communication by integrating a critical thinking framework as a foundation for developing contextual da'wah. This study also enriches the study of Islamic communication by prioritizing the paradigm of interaction between text and context based on intellectual reflection.

For da'wah practitioners, the results of this study serve as a basis for formulating a more adaptive da'wah training curriculum. The education of da'wah cadres needs to include strengthening critical thinking skills, argumentative logic, social analysis, and digital literacy. In addition, Islamic educational institutions and da'wah organizations can utilize this critical analysis model to evaluate the effectiveness of their da'wah materials in the digital era.

### **Developing a Critical Attitude in Preaching**

In the context of modern da'wah, critical thinking skills are not only understood as a high-level cognitive process, but also as an ethical and communicative competence of a da'i. A critical attitude allows a da'i to analyze religious texts while evaluating the social dynamics that are the objects of da'wah (Paul & Elder, 2014). This is in line with Halpern's opinion (2014) that critical

thinking is not just a matter of logic, but also concerns the ability to make decisions based on data, moral considerations, and multidisciplinary understanding.

In the digital era that is full of biased information, narrative manipulation, and rampant disinformation, a critical attitude for preachers becomes an epistemological shield so that the preaching message delivered is truly authentic, valid, and based on the reality of the people (Nasution & Wahid, 2021; Hoffman & Moe, 2022). Elements of Developing a Critical Attitude in Preaching Developing a critical attitude for a preacher includes several cognitive, affective, and communicative dimensions (Facione, 2011; Mustofa, 2020)

1. Evaluative Ability: Able to assess the validity of religious reference sources, both from classical texts and contemporary interpretations.
2. Contextual Awareness: Able to understand differences in audience background, local culture, political conditions, and social dynamics where preaching takes place.
3. Dialogical Openness: Willing to manage differences of opinion scientifically, openly, and dialogically without a narrow fanaticism.
4. Moral-Ethical Reflection: Prioritizing the principles of justice, welfare, and humanity in responding to social issues (Said et al., 2023).

Evaluative ability is the main foundation in the application of critical thinking by a preacher. Evaluation is carried out not only by citing arguments, but by examining the validity of the source comprehensively, both in terms of sanad (translation path), matan (content of the hadith/verse), and the relevance of the substance of the teachings to contemporary problems. In this context, preachers are required to have the ability to understand the gradation of scientific authority, differences in the level of authenticity of sources, and the capacity to compare religious interpretations from classical and contemporary scholars objectively and argumentatively. This in-depth evaluation allows preachers to avoid spreading erroneous interpretations, narrow understanding, and getting caught up in literalism without considering the maqashid sharia as the essence of the teachings (Paul & Elder, 2014; Halpern, 2014).

Contextual awareness is another important dimension in the development of critical thinking. Da'wah cannot be separated from the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that surround it. Therefore, a da'i needs to understand the background of the audience, including education level, local culture, power structure, and the dynamics of current issues that are developing in society. This contextual awareness allows the da'wah message to be packaged in a relevant, targeted, and responsive manner to the needs and problems of the community. Da'i who are contextually sensitive are able to bridge the normative teachings of religion with the empirical reality of social life (Arifin, 2011; Littlejohn & Foss, 2010).

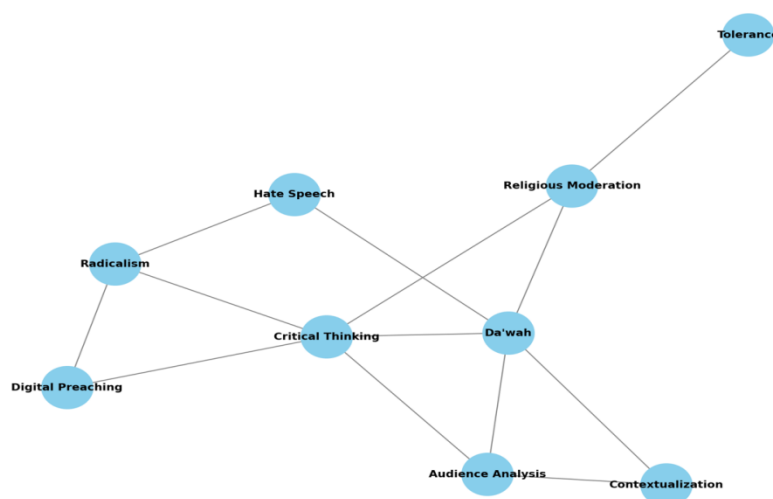
Dialogic openness reflects the maturity of a preacher's critical thinking in responding to the diversity of religious understandings. In a pluralistic society, differences of opinion are inevitable. Therefore, preachers are required not to be exclusive or narrowly fanatical, but to open up space for dialogue, scientific debate, and rational discussion in responding to differences in interpretation and school of thought. This attitude not only strengthens the integrity of the community, but also encourages a more dynamic collective ijtihad process. Through dialogic openness, preaching does not become a tool of polarization, but becomes a space for intelligent education (Said et al., 2023).

The dimension of moral-ethical reflection plays a role as the main controller in decision-making and the preparation of preaching messages. In facing various social issues, preachers who have critical thinking will consider the principles of justice, welfare, and uphold universal human values. Thus, preaching material is not merely normative and dogmatic, but also reflects the vision of rahmatan lil 'alamin which upholds peace, empathy, and balance of social rights and obligations. This moral-ethical reflection is also a fortress for preachers not to get caught up in the rhetoric of hatred, intolerance, and radicalism in preaching (Said et al., 2023; Hoffman & Moe, 2022). Referring to the

study of Kurniawan et al. (2022), the development of critical attitudes of preachers can be done through several coaching strategies: Digital Media Literacy Training: Sharpening the preacher's ability to filter, evaluate, and produce quality preaching content. Strengthening Contextual Da'wah Curriculum: In higher education of da'wah, critical thinking material should be integrated systematically (Setiawan & Yusof, 2021). Use of Case-Based Learning Method: Training da'i with actual social case studies so that they are able to formulate da'wah arguments based on problem solving.

In many cases, the problems of radicalism, hate speech, and interfaith conflicts often stem from the lack of critical attitudes of preachers in managing texts rigidly and literally (Hasan, 2020). Therefore, internalizing a critical attitude can be an effective instrument in strengthening the values of wasathiyah (moderate) preaching, while also encouraging the development of a healthy, argumentative, and solution-oriented Islamic public space (Said et al., 2023). Furthermore, the results of previous bibliometric studies (through VOSviewer analysis) show that topics such as critical thinking, moderation, contextual preaching, and audience analysis are important nodes in the latest preaching literature.

Hoffman & Moe (2022) emphasized that the development of responsive da'wah to digital disruption requires da'i not only as a message deliverer, but also as a curator of religious information who validates narratives, criticizes sources, and educates audiences about how to practice religion based on common sense. In this situation, da'i acts as a dialogue facilitator who guides the congregation to sort out which religious substance is authentic and which narrative is wrapped in identity politicization.



**Fig 1.** Simulation of the results of the Vos Viewer analysis Developing a Critical Attitude in Preaching

Critical Thinking acts as a central node that is strongly connected to almost all key topics of contemporary da'wah. VOSviewer simulation data emphasizes the position of critical thinking as the main connecting node in the development of modern da'wah. The urgency of strengthening critical attitudes in da'wah is not only a matter of theory, but also a practical tool to face the challenges of digital da'wah, hate speech, and intolerance. Much contemporary literature highlights the need for transformation of da'wah education by strengthening audience-centered preaching based on critical thinking.

This study conceptually describes how the urgency of critical thinking in preaching is not just a theoretical discourse, but a real need in facing the social and digital complexities faced by contemporary preachers. Critical thinking acts as a bridge between religious texts (normative) and social contexts (empirical) so that the message of preaching remains relevant, solution-oriented, and adaptive to changing times.

The literature study conducted shows that strengthening critical attitudes in preaching includes developing evaluative abilities towards sources of teachings, contextual awareness, dialogical openness, and strengthening ethical reflection. In addition, the bibliometric results from VOSviewer show that the themes of critical thinking, contextualization, religious moderation, radicalism, and audience analysis are the main nodes in contemporary academic studies.

The context of digitalization of da'wah brings new consequences, where da'wah is required to be able to become curators of information who not only convey Islamic teachings, but also sort, criticize, and build rational arguments in the public space. The lack of critical attitudes risks giving birth to rigidity, exclusivism, and even radicalism which are actually contrary to the values of Islamic da'wah rahmatan lil 'alamin.

This study enriches the treasury of da'wah communication studies by emphasizing the importance of strengthening critical thinking as an integral part of da'wah competency development. The integration of contextual communication theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010) and critical thinking theory (Paul & Elder, 2014; Halpern, 2014) offers a new conceptual model in a more dynamic da'wah approach. The results of this study can be an important reference in developing the curriculum of da'wah education in universities, by integrating critical thinking skills as part of the courses of da'wah communication, da'wah methods, and Islamic social analysis. Through strengthening this curriculum, prospective da'i not only master normative Islamic material, but also are skilled in reflective-critical thinking.

Strengthening critical attitudes in preaching can be a preventive instrument in preventing the spread of hate speech, radicalism, and religious polarization in the digital era. Preaching institutions, Islamic boarding schools, and religious organizations are advised to develop systematic critical thinking training programs for preachers. In addition, strengthening digital media literacy is also an urgent need so that preachers are able to navigate the digital space wisely and responsibly.

### **Implementation of Critical Thinking in Preaching**

The implementation of critical thinking in preaching is rooted in the understanding that preaching activities are not merely a transfer of knowledge, but also a transformation of understanding (Paul & Elder, 2014). Critical thinking allows preachers to objectively examine the content of religious texts, relate them to contemporary social realities, and adjust preaching strategies according to the needs of the audience (Halpern, 2014). In this context, critical thinking is not just the ability to analyze, but also includes reflective, evaluative, and argumentative skills (Facione, 2011).

Arifin (2011) emphasized that da'wah as a persuasive communication activity requires high-level cognitive abilities to process religious messages in a relevant and functional way in the lives of the people. Da'wah that only emphasizes memorizing texts without critical thinking is prone to ideological rigidity that distances the message of Islam from the developing social context (Hasan, 2020). Based on a review of literature studies (Mustofa, 2020; Nasution & Wahid, 2021; Kurniawan et al., 2022), the implementation of critical thinking in da'wah includes the following practical dimensions;

#### **a. Contextual Evaluation of Religious Texts**

A critically thinking preacher does not only cite evidence, but is able to examine the validity of the sanad, linguistic meaning, and social implications of each verse or hadith conveyed. This evaluation process is important to avoid the spread of erroneous interpretations or those that deviate from the maqashid sharia.

#### **b. Composing Messages Based on Data and Social Reality**

In compiling preaching materials, preachers need to consider social data, contemporary issues, and the cultural sensitivity of the audience. A preacher must be able to conduct a needs assessment of his audience, so that the message conveyed really targets the problems faced by the community (Setiawan & Yusof, 2021).

### c. Managing Differences of Opinion Scientifically

Critical thinking teaches preachers not to be allergic to differences of opinion. Critical preaching actually views differences as a dialogical space to enrich religious understanding (Said et al., 2023). Thus, the narrative of intolerance can be minimized through a scientific argumentation approach.

### d. Building Moderate Arguments in Digital Public Space

The implementation of critical thinking is very relevant in the era of digital preaching. Preachers need to develop digital literacy to be able to validate information sources, ward off religious hoaxes, and develop preaching arguments that are in accordance with media ethics (Hoffman & Moe, 2022).

Although critical thinking is recognized as important, its implementation in the world of da'wah faces a number of challenges (Hasan, 2020; Nasution & Wahid, 2021): Tafsir Dogmatism: The tradition of rigid textual thinking is still strong among some da'i. Lack of Critical Thinking Curriculum in Da'wah Institutions: Da'i education often emphasizes memorizing texts rather than developing reflective reasoning. Social and Political Pressure: Da'i who think critically sometimes face resistance from status quo groups who are anti-change.

Several strategies to strengthen the implementation of critical thinking in preaching include; Reformulation of the Da'i Education Curriculum: Integrating critical thinking training, media literacy, and contextual interpretation studies in the curriculum of Islamic boarding schools and da'wah colleges (Kurniawan et al., 2022), Media Literacy Training for Da'i: So that da'i are able to manage religious information validly and rationally in the digital public space. Interactive Discussion Forum: Encouraging the da'wah community to develop a culture of open, analytical, and scientific discussion on current religious issues. The results of previous bibliometric analysis through VOSviewer showed that the topics of critical thinking, moderate preaching, radicalism, and digital preaching are dominant themes in the discourse of contemporary da'wah literature. This strengthens the urgency of implementing critical thinking as a strategic pillar of modern-era da'wah (Mustofa, 2020; Said et al., 2023).

## V. CONCLUSION

Religious texts are the main source of da'wah. Critical thinking functions as an interpretive tool. The results are applied to 3 main areas: modern audiences, digital adaptation, and prevention of radicalism. All lead to strengthening more effective contemporary da'wah strategies. Developing a critical attitude in da'wah is not only a cognitive need, but also the foundation of modern da'wah ethics. By thinking critically, da'i are able to bridge the text with the reality of the people, build moderate narratives, and educate the audience to face the complexities of the times. The implementation of critical thinking in da'wah not only functions as a tool for analyzing religious texts, but also as an ethical instrument for managing differences, adjusting da'wah messages to contemporary realities, and producing moderate, solution-oriented, and rational religious narratives amidst the challenges of digitalization and social plurality.

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