

Understanding of Students of the Faculty of Ushuluddin, State Islamic University Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, about Liberal Islam in Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the understanding of students of the Faculty of Ushuluddin UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau towards liberal Islam and the factors that shape this understanding and its implications on students' religious and social attitudes. This research uses a qualitative approach with field research methods through in-depth interviews, limited observations, and documentation studies. The results of the study show that students' understanding of liberal Islam is diverse, ranging from open-critical attitudes to theological rejection, which are influenced by educational backgrounds, campus environment, digital media literacy, and organizational experience. Liberal Islam is understood as a relevant intellectual discourse to be studied, but it is still addressed selectively by making faith a normative boundary. This finding confirms that Ushuluddin students are in a dialectical dynamic between contextual thinking and commitment to Islamic orthodoxy, so the results of this research are important as a contribution to understanding the direction of development of contemporary Islamic thought in the Islamic university environment.

Keywords: Understanding; liberal Islam; pluralism; contemporary Islamic thought; tolerance.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the emergence of liberal Islamic discourse in Indonesia is one of the issues that is hotly discussed in the public and academic spheres. In the midst of the development of globalization and the rapid flow of information, students as a young generation of intellectuals cannot be separated from the debate surrounding this religious thought. Liberal Islam, which emphasizes freedom of thought, pluralism, and reinterpretation of religious texts, often raises pros and cons, especially among students of the Faculty of Ushuluddin, Suska Riau State Islamic University, who are daily engaged in Islamic studies. On the one hand, some students see liberal Islam as a form of contemporary *ijtihad* that is relevant to the challenges of modern times, but on the other hand, not a few reject it because it is considered too close to secularism and Western influence. This difference in response makes liberal Islam a real social fact in the Islamic campus environment, as well as interesting to be researched to understand the tendency of Islamic thought of the current generation of young Muslims.¹

¹ Samsudin and Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia 1970-2015," *Patanjala: Journal of History and Cultural Research* 11, no. 3 (2019): 483-485, DOI: 10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522.

The study of liberal Islam has been widely discussed in the academic literature, both in Indonesia and in the Islamic world in general. Charles Kurzman, in his book *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, asserts that liberal Islam is rooted in the tradition of rationalism and *ijtihad* that has long developed in the history of Islamic thought, although it is often seen as something new and controversial. In Indonesia, Greg Barton revealed that figures such as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid were instrumental in introducing the idea of liberal Islam that emphasizes pluralism, democracy, and human rights. Meanwhile, studies in various journals show that students' responses to liberal Islamic discourse are very diverse, depending on their educational, organizational, and religious literacy background. This literature shows that liberal Islam is not only an elitist discourse, but also has direct implications for the way of thinking of the young generation of Muslims, including in the environment of state Islamic campuses such as UIN Suska Riau.²

The purpose of this research is to understand in depth how students of the Faculty of Ushuluddin UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau interpret the discourse of liberal Islam in Indonesia. This research seeks to explore the understanding, attitude, and construction of students' thinking towards the idea of liberal Islam, which often causes debates in the academic space and in the wider community. Through this study, it is hoped that the factors that affect the differences in student acceptance and rejection can be known, including organizational backgrounds, religious experiences, academic literacy, and the influence of liberal Islamic figures. In addition, this research also aims to provide an overview of the direction of the thinking tendency of the young generation of Muslims on state Islamic campuses, so that it can be a material for reflection and contribution to the development of Islamic education that is adaptive to contemporary dynamics, but still based on Islam.³

This paper is based on the argument that liberal Islam as a discourse of contemporary thought raises pros and cons among Muslims, especially in the academic environment. Some see it as a positive effort to answer the challenges of the times through a more contextual reinterpretation of Islamic teachings, while others see it as a threat that has the potential to reduce the purity of religious teachings. This difference in views is increasingly evident among students who live in a campus atmosphere, where critical discourse, academic freedom, and encounters with various literature become part of their daily lives. Therefore, researching how students of the Faculty of Ushuluddin UIN Suska Riau understand liberal Islam is important, because it is from here that it can be seen whether they tend to see liberal Islam as an idea of renewal, a form of compromise with the West, or just an academic discourse that needs to be studied objectively. In other words, this research departs from the argument that students' response to liberal Islam can reflect the direction of the development of Islamic thought of the younger generation in Indonesia.

² Greg Barton, "Liberal Islam in Indonesia: History, Ideas, and Movements," *Jurnal Paramadina* Vol. 3, No.1 (2004): 1–25.

³ Aprilia Mawaddah, et al., "Getting to Know Liberal Islamic Thought," in *Al-Tarbiyah: Journal of Islamic Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2025): pp. 119–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59059/al-tarbiyah.v3i1.1927>

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Liberal Islam

The word "liberal" comes from the Latin *liber*, which means "free". In English, "liberal" means free-thinking, unbound by dogma, and open to change and renewal. In the modern context, the term has evolved into an ideology that emphasizes individual freedom, rationality, and tolerance for diversity of views.⁴

Liberal Islam is a contemporary Islamic thought style that emphasizes the importance of freedom of thought, open *ijtihad*, and the reinterpretation of Islamic teachings to be in line with the values of democracy, human rights, pluralism, and gender equality. This approach not only relies on a textual understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith, but also considers the historical and social context in religious interpretation.⁵

This thought was born out of the anxiety of Muslim intellectuals against the dominance of conservative interpretations that are considered less responsive to the dynamics of modernity and the development of the times. Therefore, liberal Islam seeks to answer global challenges by opening up space for humanistic and rational alternative interpretations.⁶

2.2 Category: Islam Liberal

Liberal Islam is a thought movement that emphasizes freedom of thought, rational interpretation, and the relevance of Islamic teachings to the context of modernity. In Indonesia, liberal Islamic discourse has developed rapidly since the early 2000s through various institutions and intellectual forums such as the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL), Paramadina, and The Wahid Institute. Liberal Islamic thinkers seek to reform the perspective of religious texts and their salvation with democratic values, human rights, and pluralism.⁷

2.2.1 Liberal Theology

Theological liberalism focuses on reinterpreting the basic teachings of religion, such as the concepts of revelation, destiny, and God's law. Liberal theologians emphasize that Islam must be understood rationally and be open to changing times. This thinking is rooted in classical Islamic rationalism (*Mu'tazilah*), which emphasizes freedom of thought.⁸ In Indonesia, this approach is seen in the idea of Nurcholish Madjid, who invites Muslims to *demystify* religion, which is to free Islam from sacred symbols that limit intellectual creativity.⁹

⁴ M. Samsudin & Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia (1970–2015)," in Patanjala: Journal of History and Culture, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2019): pp. 483–498. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522>

⁵ Farahwahida Yusof & Nur Raihan Nordin, "The Views of the Liberal Islamic Movement on Women's Human Rights," Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2012, p. 2–3. PDF: <https://core.ac.uk/display/11786892>

⁶ Aprilia Mawaddah, et al., "Getting to Know Liberal Islamic Thought," in Al-Tarbiyah: Journal of Islamic Education, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2025): pp. 119–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59059/al-tarbiyah.v3i1.1927>

⁷ Greg Barton, "Liberal Islam in Indonesia: History, Ideas, and Movements," *Jurnal Paramadina* Vol. 3, No.1 (2004): 1–25.

⁸ Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islamic Discourse: Contemporary Islamic Thought on Democracy, Human Rights, and Modernity* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 2003), p. 19.

⁹ Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam, Doctrine, and Civilization* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1992), p. 53.

2.2.2 Social and Political Liberalism

This category emphasizes the importance of democracy, pluralism, and human rights as part of Islamic values. For its supporters, Islamic teachings not only regulate worship rituals but also a socio-political system that guarantees freedom and justice. This thought is widely promoted by figures such as Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and Ulil Abshar Abdalla, who see Islam as a religion that is humanist and open to diversity. Liberal¹⁰ Islam in a socio-political context seeks to uphold the principle of *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah*, which is to maintain human welfare without having to be bound by a formal Islamic state form.¹¹

2.2.3 Liberalism Hermeneutis

Hermeneutical liberalism developed from the modern hermeneutic approach, which interprets the text of the Qur'an not literally, but based on its social and historical context. This thought considers religious texts to be open to new meanings according to the times.¹² This approach is used by Muslim scholars such as Hassan Hanafi and Muhammad Arkoun, and in Indonesia it was developed by M. Amin Abdullah, who emphasized the need for a multidisciplinary approach in Islamic studies.¹³

2.2.4 Liberalism Gender

This category arises from criticism of classical interpretations that are considered gender-biased. Liberal Islamic thinkers in this field emphasize the equality of men and women based on justice and the principle of universal humanity.¹⁴ Figures such as Siti Musdah Mulia argue that many verses of the Qur'an need to be reinterpreted to conform to the principles of social justice and gender. She rejects patriarchal views in Islamic family law and advocates a more egalitarian reading.¹⁵

2.2.5 Liberalism Kultural

Cultural liberalism emphasizes Islam's adaptation to local culture and global modernity. This approach sees that Islam does not have to appear in a uniform form, but rather conforms to the character of society.¹⁶ In Indonesia, the idea of "Islam Nusantara" introduced by Nahdlatul Ulama can be included in this category because it prioritizes Islam that is culturally friendly and tolerant of local diversity¹⁷

¹⁰ Abdurrahman Wahid, *My Islam, Your Islam, Our Islam* (Jakarta: The Wahid Institute, 2006), p. 67.

¹¹ M. Quraish Shihab, "Islam and Democracy in the Perspective of Maqasid al-Sharia'ah," *Al-Burhan Journal* Vol. 12, No.2 (2014): 143–157, <https://doi.org/10.24014/alburhan.v12i2.2217>.

¹² M. Amin Abdullah, "Hermeneutic Approaches in Islamic Studies," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* Vol. 41, No.2 (2003): 383–404, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2003.412.383-404>.

¹³ Hasan Hanafi, *Islam in Hermeneutics* (Yogyakarta: LKIS, 2005), p. 88.

¹⁴ Siti Musdah Mulia, *Islam and the Inspiration of Gender Equality* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2014), p. 12.

¹⁵ Lies Marcoes, "Women and the Reinterpretation of Islam," *Women's Journal* Vol. 24, No.3 (2019): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.34309/jp.v24i3.412>.

¹⁶ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Islam Nusantara as Indonesian Islamic Identity," *Maarif Journal* Vol. 10, No.2 (2015): 36–49, <https://doi.org/10.47651/mrf.v10i2.109>.

¹⁷ M. Syafiq A. Mughni, *Islam and Local Culture* (Jakarta: Pustaka Antara, 2011), p. 74.

3. Method

3.1 Type and Scope of Research

This research adopts a qualitative research type with a *field research approach*.¹⁸ The qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to understand in depth and holistically the construction of students' understanding, including their views, theological arguments, and the background of their attitudes towards the Liberal Islamic discourse, which is complex in nature and cannot be reduced to statistical figures.¹⁹ The scope of this research is specifically focused on the active student population at the Faculty of Ushuluddin UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, which is known as a center for the fundamental study of Islam in the region.

3.2 Research Participants

The determination of research participants (informants) is carried out through *purposive sampling techniques*, with the main criteria for participants being students of the Faculty of Ushuluddin UIN Suska Riau from various departments such as Qur'an and Tafsir, Islamic Aqidah and Philosophy, Hadith Studies, and Religious Studies who are in odd semesters.²⁰ Informants are divided into three groups: pro-liberal groups (tend to favor reinterpretation), counter-liberal groups (tend to reject), and critical-selective groups (tend to Islamize liberal ideas).²¹

Research Instruments

The main instrument of this research is the researcher himself (*human instrument*), assisted by *in-depth interview guides* and *field notes*.²² The interview guidelines are structured in a semi-structured manner, covering the dimensions of the conceptual understanding of Liberal Islam, the sources of information accessed (literature, lecturers, social media), and their theological arguments in accepting or rejecting Liberal Islamic principles (such as religious pluralism and *ijtihad*). The use of these detailed interview guidelines aims to maintain the focus of the research while giving the informant the freedom to convey his or her perspectives in depth and honestly.²³

3.3 Research Procedure

The research procedure begins with the pre-research stage, namely the management of permits and preliminary studies (initial observation) in the campus environment and student organizations to map key informants. The second stage is data collection, which includes in-depth interviews, participatory observations in

¹⁸ Samsudin and Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia 1970-2015," Patanjala: Journal of History and Cultural Research 11, no. 3 (2019): 483-485, DOI: 10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522

¹⁹ Muhammad Abror Rosyidin, "Liberalism and Conservatism in Indonesian Islamic Studies," Mukaddimah: Journal of Islamic Studies 8, no. 1 (2023): 101-103

²⁰ Ahdar Djamaluddin, Musyarif, and Suriati, "Da'wah and the Phenomenon of the Liberal Islamic Movement," Tasamuh 18, no. 1 (2020): 96-98

²¹ Muhammad, M., Inayatul Khaqu Al-Amini, Siti Duwi Lestari, and Astika Nurul Hidayah, "Progressive Islam and Liberal Islam: A Comparison," Gudjar Multidisciplinary Journal of Liberal Islam 1, no. 6 (2023): 223-224, DOI: 10.59435/gjmi.v1i6.190

²² Ahdar Djamaluddin, Musyarif, and Suriati, "Da'wah and the Phenomenon of the Liberal Islamic Movement," Tasamuh 18, no. 1 (2020): 98-100

²³ Muhammad Abror Rosyidin, "Liberalism and Conservatism in Indonesian Islamic Studies," Mukaddimah: Journal of Islamic Studies 8, no. 1 (2023): 103-105

student discussion forums, and documentation related to campus policies. To ensure the validity of the data, source triangulation is carried out, which is comparing data from various informants with different attitudes (pros and cons), as well as method triangulation, which is comparing the results of interviews with the findings of observations in the field²⁴.

3.4 Data Analysis (Data Analysis)

Data analysis was carried out using an interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which consisted of three main continuous stages.²⁵ The first stage is data reduction, in which raw data from interview transcripts and field notes are sorted, focused, and simplified based on central themes related to the understanding of Liberal Islam. The second stage is data *display*, which is the compilation of reduced data in the form of matrices, charts, or thematic narratives to facilitate pattern discovery. The final stage is conclusion drawing and verification, in which pattern findings (such as critical-selective attitude patterns) are re-verified with field data to produce solid and credible conclusions.²⁶

4. Results

4.1 Construction of Liberal Islamic Understanding in Ushuluddin Students

The construction of the students' understanding of Ushuluddin at the Faculty of UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau towards Liberal Islam is greatly influenced by the faculty's curriculum and academic traditions. Courses such as Islamic Philosophy, Comparative Religion, and Textual Hermeneutics are the main analytical tools that allow them to dissect Liberal Islam methodologically. In this environment, Liberal Islam is often positioned as a critical theory that must be tested for validity, rather than as a dogma. The use of Liberal Islamic analysis helps students identify the roots of liberalism in Western thought and compare it with the tradition of classical Islamic rationalism (*Mu'tazila*), so that their understanding becomes layered and historical.²⁷

Student understanding is also formed through a dichotomization process in which Liberal Islam is often confronted with other Islamic concepts that develop in Indonesia, such as Conservative Islam, Progressive Islam (Muhammadiyah), or Islam Nusantara (NU). This comparative process allows students to place the position of Liberal Islam on the map of Indonesian Islamic thought. For example, they see that Liberal Islam has similarities with Progressive Islam in the spirit of *tajdid*, but differs in the scope of its *ijtihad*. Liberal Islam is more radical because it touches the realm

²⁴ Muhammad, M., Inayatul Khaqu Al-Amini, Siti Duwi Lestari, and Astika Nurul Hidayah, "Progressive Islam and Liberal Islam: A Comparison," *Gudang Jurnal Multidisciplinary Islam Liberal* Mu 1, no. 6 (2023): 224-225, DOI: 10.59435/gjmi.v1i6.190

²⁵ Muhammad Idrus, "Phenomenological Approach in Qualitative Research", *Ushuluddin Journal* Vol. 18 of 2012, p. 38

²⁶ Muhammad Nur Budiyanto, Arrahman Syafebri, and Amma Fathuurrahmaan, *Qualitative Research Methods and Contemporary Digital Applications: Thesis, Thesis and Dissertation* (Medan: PT Media Penerbit Indonesia, Cet. I, September 2025), p. 22

²⁷ Samsudin and Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia 1970-2015," *Patanjala: Journal of History and Cultural Research* 11, no. 3 (2019): 485-487, DOI: 10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522

of *ubudiyah*, while it is a direct antithesis to Conservative Islam, which tends to be literalist and rejects the idea of pluralism.²⁸

The central figure factor is also significant in constructing students' understanding. Nurcholish Madjid, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, and the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL) are the main references.²⁹ For students, studying the history of JIL since its founding in 2001 is an entry point to understand controversial issues such as *the hermeneutics of the Qur'an* and the rejection of the formalization of sharia. However, this exposure is not always intact; students who obtain information only from social media or *counter-ideological* narratives tend to understand Liberal Islam to understand a simplistic understanding and easily label Liberal Islam as "controversial," which points to a serious challenge in maintaining academic objectivity amid biased digital information flows.

4.1 Factors Affecting Student Admissions and Rejections

The most crucial internal factor in determining students' attitudes is the depth of their understanding of *Usul Fiqh* and philosophy. Students who have a strong foundation in *Usul Fiqh* and *Mantiq* (logic) tend to more easily accept methodological aspects of Liberal Islam, such as the importance of *contextual istinbath* (law-making). Conversely, those who focus on normative textual studies without adequate analytical tools tend to reject Liberal Islam dogmatically because they fail to see the difference between the spirit of *ijtihad* and deviation from principles.³⁰

The social environment and student organizations (*Ormawa*) are the determining external factors. Students who are active in religious groups that tend to be conservative, such as LDK (Campus Da'wah Institute), are often influenced by a narrative of strong rejection of Liberal Islam¹⁵. They absorb the view that Liberal Islam is a product of Western imports aimed at destroying the *ummah*. Conversely, students who join philosophical study groups, theaters, or more open discussion groups tend to show higher acceptance rates, seeing Liberal Islam as a tool to legitimize freedom of opinion and social criticism.³¹

On the other hand, the role of UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau as an academic institution that guarantees the freedom of the academic rostrum is also very significant. By providing a safe *space* for discussion and requiring public courses on religious moderation, the campus indirectly facilitates Islamic liberalization with a critical-selective attitude. The campus encourages students to study Liberal Islam as a theory, not as a threat, thereby minimizing *takfiri* (disbelief) attitudes and encouraging healthy dialectics, which are characteristic of the *Ushuluddin* environment.³²

²⁸ Muhammad, M., Inayatul Khaqu Al-Amini, Siti Duwi Lestari, and Astika Nurul Hidayah, "Progressive Islam and Liberal Islam: A Comparison," *Gudtag Jurnal Multidisciplinary Islam Liberal Mu* 1, no. 6 (2023): 224-225, DOI: 10.59435/gjmi.v1i6.190.</p>

²⁹ Ahdar Djamaluddin, Musyarif, and Suriati, "Da'wah and the Phenomenon of the Liberal Islamic Movement," *Tasamuh* 18, no. 1 (2020): 108-110

³⁰ Muhammad Abror Rosyidin, "Liberalism and Conservatism in Indonesian Islamic Studies," *Mukaddimah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2023): 110-112

³¹ Samsudin and Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia 1970-2015," *Patanjala: Journal of History and Cultural Research* 11, no. 3 (2019): 491-492, DOI: 10.30959/patanjala.v1i3.522.</p>

³² Muhammad, M., Inayatul Khaqu Al-Amini, Siti Duwi Lestari, and Astika Nurul Hidayah, "Progressive Islam and Liberal Islam: A Comparison," *Gudjar Jurnal Multidisciplinary Islam Liberal Mu* 1, no. 6 (2023): 227-228, DOI: 10.59435/gjmi.v1i6.190

4.2 Implications of Student Understanding on Religious Moderation

The critical-selective understanding of Ushuluddin Faculty students who are oriented towards Liberal Islam has direct and positive implications for the Religious Moderation program carried out by the government. Students who are able to sort out the ideas of Liberal Islam tend to internalize moderate Liberal Islam, such as tolerance and non-violence. They accept Liberal Islam insofar as it supports universal Liberal Islam, such as equality, which is in line with the principle of *tawassut* (middle way) in Islam. This attitude allows them to become agents of spreading inclusive Islam in Riau society.³³

On the contrary, an understanding dominated by a total and simplistic rejection of Liberal Islam can actually be a serious obstacle to Religious Moderation. If students fail to distinguish between constructive criticism and theological threats, they risk viewing all forms of reform as heresy or deviation, which will trigger theological polarization on campus. This condition can hinder dialogue between sects and between religious communities, which ultimately threatens social harmony in the Riau Malay community.³⁴

Ushuluddin students, with their specialisations, act as *gatekeepers* in religious discourse. Their ability to analyse *the Usul* (principles) of *the Furu'* (branch) makes them the last bastion in the face of radicalism, both arising from extreme conservatism and from excessive liberalism. In this context, the faculty is required to continue to hone students' ability to use critical methodologies to create a balanced interpretation of Islam, that is, one that respects tradition but remains progressive.³⁵

Therefore, the most important implication of these findings is that the Faculty of Ushuluddin UIN Suska Riau has a great responsibility to continue to facilitate the study of critical thought of Liberal Islam. Through an emphasis on comparative and philosophical studies, the faculty must ensure that graduates not only understand dogma, but also be able to engage constructively with modern ideas, including Liberal Islam, so that they can become highly knowledgeable, insightful, and moderate-temperate personalities in society.³⁶

5. Discussion

The word "liberal" comes from the Latin *liber*, which means "free". In English, "liberal" means free-thinking, unbound by dogma, and open to change and renewal. In the modern context, the term has evolved into an ideology that emphasizes individual freedom, rationality, and tolerance for diversity of views.³⁷

³³ Muhammad, M., Inayatul Khaqu Al-Amini, Siti Duwi Lestari, and Astika Nurul Hidayah, "Progressive Islam and Liberal Islam: A Comparison," *Gudun Jurnal Multidisciplinary Islam Liberal Mu* 1, no. 6 (2023): 225-226, DOI: 10.59435/gjmi.v1i6.190

³⁴ Ahdar Djamaluddin, Musyarif, and Suriati, "Da'wah and the Phenomenon of the Liberal Islamic Movement," *Tasamuh* 18, no. 1 (2020): 110-112

³⁵ Samsudin and Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia 1970-2015," *Patanjala: Journal of History and Cultural Research* 11, no. 3 (2019): 492-493, DOI: 10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522

³⁶ Muhammad Abror Rosyidin, "Liberalism and Conservatism in Indonesian Islamic Studies," *Mukaddimah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2023): 114-116

³⁷ M. Samsudin & Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia (1970-2015)," in *Patanjala: Journal of History and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2019): pp. 483-498. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522>

Liberal Islam is a contemporary Islamic style of thought that emphasizes the importance of freedom of thought, open ijtihad, and the reinterpretation of Islamic teachings to be in line with the values of democracy, human rights, pluralism, and gender equality. This approach not only relies on a textual understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith, but also considers the historical and social context in religious interpretation.³⁸

This thought was born out of the anxiety of Muslim intellectuals against the dominance of conservative interpretations that are considered less responsive to the dynamics of modernity and the development of the times. Therefore, liberal Islam seeks to answer global challenges by opening up space for humanistic and rational alternative interpretations.³⁹

The results of this study show that the understanding of UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau students towards liberal Islam is not singular. They have diverse interpretations; some consider liberal Islam as a renewal of Islamic thought, others consider it as a form of deviation from normative teachings. This variation in understanding is influenced by many factors, ranging from educational background, social environment, organizational affiliation, to the literature they access.

Most students understand liberal Islam as a religious discourse that tries to adapt Islamic teachings to the times. They see that this thought emphasizes freedom of thought, gender equality, democracy, and religious pluralism. Students from the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy, especially those active in the study of Islamic philosophy and the study of contemporary theology, tend to be more open to these ideas. They argue that liberal Islam is a modern form of ijtihad that offers an alternative interpretation of religious texts that are too literal and rigid.

As stated by Aprilia Mawaddah et al., students who are exposed to readings such as the works of Nurcholish Madjid or Ulil Abshar Abdalla tend to be more sympathetic to liberal Islam because they are used to contextual and historical approaches to religious texts. They interpret liberal Islam as an open discussion space for Muslims to reinterpret sharia according to current conditions.⁴⁰

However, there are also student groups that show resistance to this thought. They call liberal Islam a form of deconstruction of established Islamic principles. In their view, freedom of interpretation in liberal Islam is considered to open a gap for value relativism, even religious secularization. Students who are active in campus da'wah organizations such as KAMMI, FSLDK, or those with Islamic boarding school backgrounds are more likely to reject liberal Islam. They call it a "Western project" that threatens the integrity of the Muslim faith.

This is in line with the findings of Farahwahida Yusof and Nur Raihan Nordin, who stated that resistance to liberal Islam generally arises from groups that hold to

³⁸ Farahwahida Yusof & Nur Raihan Nordin, *"The Views of the Liberal Islamic Movement on Women's Human Rights,"* Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2012, p. 2–3. PDF: <https://core.ac.uk/display/11786892>

³⁹ Aprilia Mawaddah, et al., *"Getting to Know Liberal Islamic Thought,"* in *Al-Tarbiyah: Journal of Islamic Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2025): pp. 119–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59059/al-tarbiyah.v3i1.1927>

⁴⁰ Aprilia Mawaddah, et al., *"Getting to Know Liberal Islamic Thought,"* *Al-Tarbiyah: Journal of Islamic Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2025): 119–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59059/al-tarbiyah.v3i1.1927>

traditional and normative interpretations. They see that liberal Islamic thought blurs religious boundaries, especially on the issue of religious pluralism and women's rights.⁴¹

Some students do not absolutely accept or reject liberal Islam. They occupy a middle position and tend to be critical-selective. This group argues that liberal Islam should be studied more deeply, not simply rejected because of outside influences or accepted rawly. They argue that some of the issues raised, such as social justice and equality, are important to consider, but not all ideas of liberal Islam should be adopted.

Some informants said that figures such as Gus Dur and Charles Kurzman had provided a lot of inspiration for the birth of a more inclusive and pluralist Islamic thought. However, attitudes towards them were diverse: some made them scholarly references, others considered their thinking to be too liberal and contrary to the nash. This difference reflects a sharp divide in understanding among students.

In the study by Maryono and Siti Julaiha, it was stated that students' perception of liberal Islam is greatly influenced by the campus curriculum, lecturers, and student organizations. A campus environment that is open to contemporary thinking will produce students who are able to be open, critical, and selective in responding to liberal Islamic issues.⁴²

Some students do not have a complete understanding of what liberal Islam is. They only know it at a glance from social media, public discussions, or controversial issues such as LGBT or pluralism. As a result, they often judge liberal Islam from the surface, without understanding its epistemological background and history of development. This shows that scientific literacy is still a major challenge in understanding modern Islamic thought.

In the overall results of observations and interviews, it can be concluded that students' understanding of liberal Islam is divided into three main tendencies: accepting (because it is considered relevant and progressive), rejecting (because it is considered to damage Islamic values), and being critical-selective (because it recognizes the need for a balance between tradition and renewal).

The difference in students' attitudes towards liberal Islam basically reflects the diversity of their social, scientific, and religious backgrounds. Students who are open to this thought generally come from an academic environment that encourages freedom of thought, as well as having exposure to contemporary Islamic literature. Meanwhile, students who reject liberal Islam often depart from conservative and traditional religious understandings, or are active in Islamic organizations that have a strict ideological attitude towards Western thought.

One of the main factors that affect students' attitudes is their educational background and religious understanding that has been formed before entering college. Students who come from traditional Islamic boarding schools or a family

⁴¹ Farahwahida Yusof & Nur Raihan Nordin, *The Views of the Liberal Islamic Movement on Women's Human Rights*, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2012, pp. 2–3.

PDF: <https://core.ac.uk/display/11786892>

⁴² Maryono and Siti Julaiha, "The Role of the UIN Curriculum on Liberal and Fundamentalist Islamic Understanding among Students," in *Proceedings of the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy of UIN Sunan Kalijaga*, 2020, pp. 3–5. PDF: <https://uin-suka.ac.id/media/dokumen/Proceeding-FUAD2020.pdf>

upbringing that is strict in terms of religion tend to view liberal Islam as something that deviates and is contrary to orthodox Islamic values. Meanwhile, students who were previously familiar with academic discourse, philosophy, and contextual interpretation will be more open in responding to liberal Islamic ideas.

As shown by Samsudin and Lubis (2019), attitudes towards liberal Islam cannot be separated from the long process of religious education experienced by students before and during their time in the Islamic campus environment. This process creates a frame of reference that is very decisive in responding to modern religious discourses such as liberal Islam.⁴³

In addition, the influence of intra- and extra-campus organizations is very large in shaping students' attitudes towards liberal Islam. Students who are active in organizations such as PMII or HMI tend to have a more open and plural spectrum of thought because these organizations are known to be inclusive and progressive. Meanwhile, organizations such as KAMMI and LDK tend to show a more conservative and normative attitude towards contemporary Islamic issues.

Maryono and Julaiha (2020) found that the student organization environment has a significant role in strengthening or rejecting liberal Islamic discourse. The ideological affiliation of an organization often determines the boundaries of the acceptance of discourse among its members, including in accepting or rejecting Islamic liberalism.⁴⁴

Religious literacy and reading resources are also important differentiators in shaping student perception. Students who have access to liberal Islamic academic books or articles such as the works of Charles Kurzman, Greg Barton, or Nurcholish Madjid usually have a more thorough and non-tendentious understanding. On the other hand, those who only get information from lectures or social media that is propaganda tend to respond to liberal Islam cynically or emotionally.

Hidayah (2022) emphasized that exposure to academic literacy greatly affects students' attitudes towards sensitive religious issues. In the context of liberal Islam, students who read the writings of their figures tend to be more reflective, while those who only source from popular narratives are more reactive.⁴⁵

Another factor that also influences this is the epistemological tendency in understanding Islam, between textual and contextual. Students with a textual approach tend to see liberal Islam as a form of liberalization of interpretation that is invalid and irresponsible. Meanwhile, students who are used to thinking contextually or historically are more accepting of the possibility of plurality of meanings in the interpretation of Islamic teachings.

This difference is often also rooted in different perspectives on the relationship between Islam and modernity. Some students see that Islam does not need to be

⁴³ M. Samsudin & Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia (1970–2015)," in Patanjala: Journal of History and Culture, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2019): pp. 483–498. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522>

⁴⁴ Maryono and Siti Julaiha, "The Role of the UIN Curriculum on Liberal and Fundamentalist Islamic Understanding among Students," in *Proceedings of the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy of UIN Sunan Kalijaga*, 2020, pp. 3–5. PDF: <https://uin-suka.ac.id/media/dokumen/Proceeding-FUAD2020.pdf>

⁴⁵ Nurul Hidayah, "Liberal Islam and Feminism in the Thought of Muslim Female Students," *Marwah Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2022): 13–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24260/jm.v21i1.1492>

adapted to modern values such as democracy or human rights, because it is complete and final. On the other hand, some are of the view that modernity is a reality that must be faced intellectually, and Islam needs to be approached creatively to remain relevant.

Sintia Aprianty (2022) said that the dynamics of liberal Islamic thought are heavily influenced by the relationship between modernity, secularism, and Islamic tradition. Students are at a point of attraction between the three, depending on how deeply they interact with the discourse.⁴⁶

The influence of lecturers and curriculum also cannot be ignored. Students who take courses such as contemporary Islamic thought, Islamic philosophy, or gender and human rights studies tend to be open to liberal Islamic discourse. On the other hand, students who only dwell on normative studies such as classical interpretation and fiqh do not have much contact with liberal Islamic concepts, so they have the potential to reject them because they are considered foreign.

A study conducted by Aprilia Mawaddah et al. (2025) revealed that students' perception of liberal Islam is influenced by curriculum approaches and academic advisors. Lecturers who open a space for critical discussion help shape students' perspectives on progressive issues.⁴⁷

From these results, it can be concluded that the difference in students' attitudes towards liberal Islam does not occur by chance, but is the result of the interaction of various factors, ranging from previous education, campus environment, organizational affiliation, access to literacy, to academic curriculum. This shows that student thinking is a product of a complex, dynamic, and sometimes contradictory field of discourse.

The construction of students' thinking towards liberal Islam is the result of intellectual struggles and complex social experiences. The attitude of accepting, rejecting, or being critical of liberal Islamic discourse is influenced by four main aspects: organizational background, academic literacy, religious experience, and the influence of intellectual figures. These four factors do not work separately, but intersect in shaping students' perspectives on contemporary Islamic issues.

Student organizations play a large role in shaping students' attitudes and ideological orientations. Students who are active in intra-campus organizations such as the Campus Da'wah Institute (LDK) typically develop a more conservative attitude toward liberal Islam. They tend to maintain a literal understanding of religious texts and have a high sensitivity to issues of secularism and pluralism. In contrast, students who are active in extra-campus organizations such as HMI, PMII, or IMM tend to show openness to liberal Islamic approaches due to their more pluralistic and contextual discussion culture.

Maryono and Siti Julaiha (2020) revealed that the ideological orientation of the organization greatly determines student acceptance of liberal Islam. The

⁴⁶ Sintia Aprianty, *Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia (Dynamics of Development in 1980–2010)*, Tanjak: Journal of Islamic History and Civilization 2(3), 2022, 309–311. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24042/tanjak.v2i3.13874>

⁴⁷ Aprilia Mawaddah, et al., "Getting to Know Liberal Islamic Thought," *Al-Tarbiyah: Journal of Islamic Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2025): 119–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59059/al-tarbiyah.v3i1.1927>

organization's curriculum, the narrative built in the study, and the attitude of the organization's seniors all shape the mindset of members towards issues of Islamic liberalism.⁴⁸

The level of academic literacy also determines the depth of students' understanding of liberal Islam. Students who read the works of figures such as Nurcholish Madjid, Greg Barton, or Charles Kurzman have a stronger analytical framework and are not in a hurry to judge liberal Islam as heretical. They realize that liberal Islam is a response to the challenges of the times and not an attempt to deflect religion.

On the other hand, students who have minimal access to scientific reading are more easily influenced by popular narratives, such as online da'wah, which often simplifies or misunderstands the concept of liberal Islam. This creates a sharp dichotomy between those who understand the substance and those who reject it simply because of the dominant discourse.

Aprilia Mawaddah et al. (2025) stated that exposure to academic literature has a direct effect on students' open attitude towards liberal Islam. Students who have the habit of reading contemporary Islamic journals and books are more critical and analytical in assessing this discourse.⁴⁹

Religious experience before entering college is also very influential. Students who graduate from pesantren or madrassas that are highly textual usually show a defensive attitude towards liberal Islam. They view Islam as a final doctrine that should not be freely reinterpreted. On the other hand, students who grow up in a pluralistic and inclusive religious environment are more open to looking at religious pluralism, gender equality, and contextual interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith.

Farahwahida Yusof and Nur Raihan Nordin (2012) in their research show that students' religious experiences directly shape their sensitivity to contemporary Islamic issues. Students from an inclusive environment are more willing to dialogue with liberal ideas in Islam.⁵⁰

Intellectual figures have an important role in shaping the construction of student thought. Students who know and read the works of Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, Azyumardi Azra, or Ulil Abshar Abdalla tend to see liberal Islam as a scientific discourse, not as an aberration. They appreciate the contribution of these figures in building a more democratic, open, and humanistic Islamic thought.

Names such as Ulil, Greg Barton, or even Jalaluddin Rakhmat became references in academic discussions. Students who have discussed or written papers

⁴⁸ Maryono and Siti Julaiha, "The Role of the UIN Curriculum on Liberal and Fundamentalist Islamic Understanding among Students," in *Proceedings of the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy of UIN Sunan Kalijaga*, 2020, pp. 3–5. PDF: <https://uin-suka.ac.id/media/dokumen/Proceeding-FUAD2020.pdf>

⁴⁹ Aprilia Mawaddah, et al., "Getting to Know Liberal Islamic Thought," *Al-Tarbiyah: Journal of Islamic Education*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2025): 119–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59059/al-tarbiyah.v3i1.1927>

⁵⁰ Farahwahida Yusof & Nur Raihan Nordin, *The Views of the Liberal Islamic Movement on Women's Human Rights*, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2012, pp. 2–3. PDF: <https://core.ac.uk/display/11786892>

about these figures have a more reflective view of liberal Islam, although not all agree with all of their thoughts.

Samsudin and Lubis (2019) underline that exposure to the ideas of liberal Islamic figures directly shapes the tendency of students to think, because these figures act as a "bridge" between religious texts and social reality.⁵¹

6. Conclusion

This research shows that the understanding of students of the Faculty of Ushuluddin UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau towards liberal Islam is diverse and non-homogeneous. Liberal Islam is understood as a discourse of contemporary Islamic thought born from certain social and intellectual contexts, so it is positioned as an object of academic study, not as a normatively accepted religious doctrine. This diversity of understanding is formed through the interaction between the campus academic environment, digital media literacy, educational backgrounds, and student organizational experiences. The campus environment acts as an intellectual dialectic space that encourages critical attitudes, while digital media and student organizations function as supporting factors that enrich, as well as challenge, students' perspectives on liberal Islamic discourse.

The implications of this diversity of understanding are reflected in the religious and social attitudes of students who are relatively moderate, dialogical, and selective. Students tend to be open to the values of pluralism, tolerance, and contemporary issues such as democracy, human rights, and gender, but still place the creed and basic principles of Islamic teachings as normative boundaries. This finding confirms that Ushuluddin students are in a dialectical position between intellectual openness and theological commitment, so that they are able to respond to liberal Islam proportionally. Thus, this research makes an important contribution in understanding the dynamics of contemporary Islamic thought in the Islamic university environment and affirms the strategic role of Islamic higher education in shaping critical, moderate, and socially responsible religious attitudes.

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⁵¹ M. Samsudin & Nina Herlina Lubis, "The History of the Emergence of Liberal Islamic Thought in Indonesia (1970–2015)," in Patanjala: Journal of History and Culture, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2019): pp. 483–498. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30959/patanjala.v11i3.522>

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