



# Artificial Intelligence and the Crisis of Religious Authority: A Conceptual Review of Islamic Discourse in the Age of Machine Mediation

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## Abstract

This study explores the emerging crisis of religious authority in the age of artificial intelligence by examining how machine-mediated systems are reshaping Islamic discourse, interpretive legitimacy, and everyday patterns of religious engagement. Through a qualitative literature review grounded in Meuleman's discussion of Islam within globalization and Banchoff's framework of pluralism in world politics, this research synthesizes contemporary debates on AI, digital religion, and Islamic communication into a unified conceptual analysis. The inquiry is driven by the researcher's concern that many key actors in Islamic education—particularly scholars, educators, and institutional leaders—remain unprepared for the rapid advancement of AI and its capacity to blur long-established boundaries of religious authority. The findings reveal five major shifts: the rise of algorithmic authority that rivals traditional scholarship; the emergence of epistemic confusion generated by pseudo-objective machine outputs; the automation of routine religious tasks that introduces new theological and procedural questions; the ambivalent influence of algorithmic amplification on religious moderation; and a broader transformation in which religious authority becomes a socio-technical rather than purely theological construct. The analysis extends Meuleman's and Banchoff's insights by showing that AI constitutes a new stage in the global reconfiguration of Islamic knowledge. This study presents a layered model of authority and proposes institutional pathways to navigate the challenges of the AI era.

**Keywords:** *Artificial Intelligence and Religion, Algorithmic Religious Authority, Digital Islamic Discourse, Globalization and Pluralism, Socio-Technical Governance in Islam*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) has reshaped how individuals seek meaning, guidance, and spiritual orientation in contemporary society. For many Muslims, the incorporation of AI into everyday religious life—from basic inquiries about ritual practice to more complex theological questions—marks a new phase in the historical evolution of how Islamic knowledge is accessed and trusted. This encounter between humans and machines is not merely technological, but existential, as it challenges long-standing traditions of religious learning grounded in face-to-face transmission, communal study, and ethical accountability. In digital environments, questions once addressed to trusted scholars increasingly circulate through algorithmic systems whose confident and polished responses generate new forms of perceived authority.

These developments can be situated within broader theoretical discussions of Islam and authority in the context of globalization. Meuleman argues that Islamic authority has long been shaped by shifting flows of information, mobility, and plural encounters, transforming the internal grammar through which legitimacy is negotiated (Meuleman, 2002). Banchoff similarly emphasizes

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that religious authority is never insulated from political and communicative structures, but continuously entangled with global institutional arrangements (Banchoff, 2008). When AI intervenes in religious meaning-making, it extends these historical dynamics into a new socio-technical terrain in which technology no longer merely mediates authority, but actively participates in its construction.

Prior to AI, studies on digital religion had already documented significant transformations in religious authority. Research on digital da'wah shows that online platforms reconfigure legitimacy through visibility, emotional resonance, and communicative accessibility rather than formal scholarly credentials (Ulyan, 2023; Machendrawaty et al., 2022). Scholarship on religious moderation and digital literacy further indicates that algorithm-driven environments tend to privilege clarity, speed, and performative communication over methodological rigor (Handayani & Alfida, 2024; Baen et al., 2024; Nuriana & Salwa, 2024). These findings suggest that digital infrastructures had already reshaped the authority landscape, preparing the conditions for deeper algorithmic intervention.

Artificial intelligence introduces a qualitatively different dynamic. Unlike charismatic digital preachers, AI systems do not seek followers or embody ethical responsibility, yet many users feel comfortable posing intimate religious questions to them. The perceived neutrality and linguistic fluency of AI evoke a sense of objectivity, even when underlying datasets remain opaque or biased (Popova, 2024). Generative models do not “know” in a human sense; they predict linguistic patterns, creating an illusion of scholarly precision that can obscure the absence of interpretive methodology.

Recent scholarship warns that AI-generated religious content may intensify epistemic confusion. Studies note that AI systems increasingly provide religious guidance without awareness of historical context, interpretive tradition, or spiritual intentionality (Liu & Xie, 2025; Düzbayır, 2025). Comparative research further reveals divergent responses across religious communities, with AI perceived alternately as a tool, a threat, or a theological puzzle (Ahmed et al., 2024). Together, these works depict a religious environment in which meaning is delivered rapidly and confidently, yet often without the relational accountability central to classical Islamic scholarship.

Despite this growing body of literature, existing studies remain fragmented. Most approach AI as a technological or pedagogical instrument, while fewer engage with the deeper epistemological displacement produced when machines assume roles traditionally reserved for scholars. Moreover, no study has yet synthesized these developments through foundational theories of globalized Islamic authority and pluralism.

This study addresses that gap through a qualitative literature review that integrates Meuleman's analysis of globalized Islamic authority and Banchoff's framework of religious pluralism with contemporary scholarship on AI, digital religion, and Islamic knowledge practices. By approaching AI as a socio-technical actor rather than a neutral tool, this study seeks to map how AI reorganizes the structure, legitimacy, and ecology of Islamic religious authority and to develop a conceptual model for navigating this transformation. Accordingly, the study asks: How does artificial intelligence reshape Islamic religious authority in the age of machine mediation, and what institutional and ethical adaptations are required to preserve epistemic integrity?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing body of scholarship on digital religion, artificial intelligence, and Islamic authority provides an essential foundation for understanding how machine-mediated systems reshape contemporary religious life. At the core of this literature are two theoretical anchors—John Meuleman and Thomas Banchoff—whose works frame transformations of religious authority not merely as technological disruptions, but as continuations of broader global and pluralistic

dynamics. Meuleman's analysis of Islam in the context of globalization emphasizes that religious authority evolves through changing flows of information, mobility, and power, suggesting that technological mediation is not an anomaly but an extension of long-standing historical processes (Meuleman, 2002). Banchoff, meanwhile, situates religious authority within pluralistic political and communicative environments, highlighting that legitimacy is always negotiated in relation to external institutional structures (Banchoff, 2008). Together, these perspectives provide a conceptual framework for examining AI as a new actor within the ecology of Islamic authority.

Prior to the rise of AI, studies on digital religion had already documented significant shifts in religious authority. Research on digital da'wah demonstrates that online platforms reconfigure legitimacy through visibility, emotional resonance, and narrative intimacy rather than formal scholarly credentials (Ulyan, 2023; Machendrawaty et al., 2022). Studies on religious moderation and digital literacy further indicate that algorithm-driven environments tend to privilege clarity, speed, and performative communication over methodological rigor and deliberative reasoning (Handayani & Alfida, 2024; Baen et al., 2024; Nuriana & Salwa, 2024). This literature shows that digital infrastructures had already conditioned religious engagement, creating an authority landscape receptive to further algorithmic intervention.

More recent scholarship specifically addressing AI and religion deepens this analysis by identifying a profound epistemic shift. AI systems are increasingly understood not merely as tools, but as predictive systems capable of generating the appearance of authoritative knowledge without embodying scholarly intentionality or ethical accountability (Jiang et al., 2022). Popova (2024) highlights how AI-generated religious content challenges existing governance structures, particularly due to opaque datasets and limited institutional oversight. Studies by Liu and Xie (2025) and Düzbayır (2025) further suggest that reliance on algorithmic interpretation may reshape religious life by detaching guidance from contextual awareness, spiritual intentionality, and moral responsibility.

Research in Islamic education adds an applied dimension to these concerns. Studies show that AI is increasingly integrated into religious learning environments, raising questions about how authority, pedagogy, and ethical formation adapt when mediated by automated systems (Baen et al., 2024; Machendrawaty et al., 2022). Ethical reflections grounded in Islamic thought emphasize the need to evaluate AI through the *maqāsid al-sharī'a* to prevent epistemic distortion and preserve the moral aims of religious knowledge (Pabubung, 2021; Habib, 2025).

Despite the breadth of this literature, existing studies remain fragmented. Most examine AI either as a pedagogical aid, a technological challenge, or an ethical concern, without integrating these insights into a coherent framework of religious authority. In particular, there is a lack of synthesis linking AI-mediated religious practices to foundational theories of globalization and pluralism. This gap underscores the need for a conceptual model that explains how AI reshapes Islamic religious authority as a socio-technical phenomenon rather than a purely theological or technological one.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review to address the conceptual nature of its central inquiry, namely, how artificial intelligence reshapes Islamic religious authority in the age of machine mediation. Given that this phenomenon is emergent, multi-layered, and distributed across technological, theological, and sociological domains, a literature-based approach allows for integrative analysis beyond the limits of single-site empirical observation. Rather than examining one community or platform, the study traces broader patterns of authority transformation across Muslim digital publics, religious institutions, and AI-mediated environments.

The analysis is anchored in two foundational theoretical frameworks: Meuleman's discussion

of the globalization of Islamic authority and Banchoff's framework of religious pluralism. These perspectives are integrated with twenty-six contemporary peer-reviewed studies on digital religion, artificial intelligence, Islamic education, algorithmic communication, and ethics. Sources were selected based on three criteria: relevance to religious authority, explicit engagement with digital or algorithmic mediation, and contribution to understanding the socio-technical context in which Islamic knowledge is negotiated.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis, focusing on recurring patterns such as algorithmic authority, epistemic legitimacy, automation of religious practices, moderation dynamics, and institutional adaptation. These themes were then interpreted through the selected theoretical lenses, enabling a dialogical reading between classical debates on authority and contemporary technological developments. This approach positions AI not as a neutral tool but as a socio-technical actor that shapes religious life through its affordances and constraints.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of literature across Islamic studies, digital religion, artificial intelligence, and socio-technical governance reveals a fundamental transformation in the ecology of Islamic religious authority. Across diverse contexts, AI emerges not merely as a supporting tool but as an active mediator that reshapes how religious knowledge is produced, circulated, and trusted. These transformations intensify dynamics previously identified by John Meuleman regarding the globalization of Islamic discourse, in which authority becomes increasingly decentered and transnational, and by Thomas Banchoff concerning the pluralization of religious legitimacy within global political and communicative systems. In the age of machine mediation, these processes acquire a new dimension as algorithmic systems begin to participate directly in religious meaning-making.

Across the reviewed literature, five interrelated patterns emerge, collectively constituting a socio-technical reconfiguration of religious authority. These findings indicate that the current crisis is not a collapse of Islamic authority, but a structural transition that demands conceptual and institutional adaptation.

First, artificial intelligence produces a new algorithmic modality of religious authority that competes with, and in some contexts supplants, traditional sources. Unlike classical scholarly authority grounded in textual mastery, recognized credentials, and ethical accountability, algorithmic authority is generated through computational processes such as pattern recognition and predictive language modeling (Jiang et al., 2022). AI systems offer rapid, coherent answers to religious questions, often delivered with a level of confidence that users interpret as epistemic reliability. This performative certainty creates an implicit authority that operates without biography, lineage, or institutional endorsement. As Liu and Xie (2025) observe, users frequently consult AI systems before engaging human scholars, indicating a shift in everyday practices of religious consultation. The scalability of AI further amplifies this effect: while human scholars operate within relational and temporal limits, AI systems provide simultaneous guidance to vast audiences, subtly redirecting the center of religious authority toward machine-mediated environments.

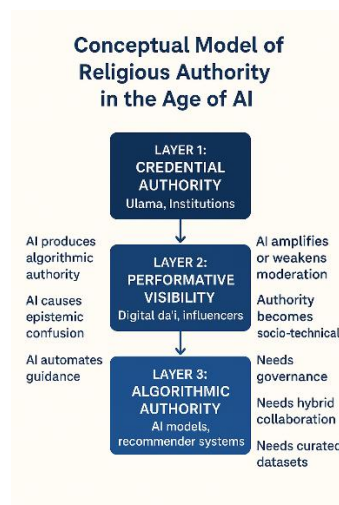
Second, AI intensifies epistemic confusion by presenting pseudo-objective outputs that blur the boundaries between knowledge, interpretation, and probabilistic inference. The literature consistently warns that AI-generated religious content often appears authoritative due to linguistic fluency rather than methodological rigor (Popova, 2024). Unlike classical Islamic scholarship, which is grounded in *manhaj*, *usul*, and traceable reasoning, AI outputs lack transparent epistemic foundations. Yet users frequently treat these outputs as definitive, particularly when they align with pre-existing beliefs. Habib (2025) characterizes this phenomenon as a form of pseudo-*ijtihad*, in

which the appearance of legal or theological reasoning is detached from its ethical and procedural conditions. The result is an unstable epistemic environment in which interpretive legitimacy becomes increasingly difficult to adjudicate.

Third, AI enables the delegation of routine religious tasks while simultaneously raising theological and procedural questions surrounding accountability and authority. Studies document the growing reliance on AI-driven systems for calculating prayer times, determining zakat obligations, verifying halal products, and summarizing fiqh texts (Baen et al., 2024; Sofa et al., 2025). While delegation itself is not new in Islamic practice, AI-driven automation extends into domains traditionally reserved for scholarly judgment. This expansion challenges foundational assumptions about authorship, responsibility, and intention in religious guidance (Pabubung, 2021). Because AI outputs are anonymous and non-accountable, errors or misinterpretations cannot be traced to an identifiable authority, creating what Daulay and Sazali (2024) describe as a vacuum of responsibility. Over time, this may reshape communal expectations, transforming religious guidance from a relational process into a transactional service.

Fourth, the influence of AI on religious moderation is fundamentally ambivalent. On one hand, AI-supported platforms have the potential to disseminate inclusive, pluralistic, and moderation-oriented interpretations of Islam at an unprecedented scale (Handayani & Alfida, 2024; Khairiyah & Abdillah, 2023). Automated translation, targeted messaging, and algorithmic recommendation systems can strengthen moderation initiatives, particularly in diverse societies. On the other hand, the same systems may amplify sensationalist or polarizing interpretations due to engagement-driven optimization (Nuriana & Salwa, 2024). Popova (2024) warns that without governance mechanisms, algorithmic environments may drift toward content that maximizes attention rather than ethical value. These findings suggest that AI itself is neither inherently moderating nor radicalizing; its impact depends on dataset design, institutional oversight, and user literacy.

Fifth, the crisis of religious authority in the age of AI is fundamentally socio-technical rather than purely theological. Authority now operates across multiple, overlapping layers: scholarly institutions, digital influencers, platform algorithms, and AI systems. This distributed configuration aligns with Banchoff's analysis of pluralized religious governance, but extends it by introducing non-human agents whose authority emerges from system architecture rather than theological legitimacy. Traditional religious institutions often lack the technical capacity to regulate AI-mediated content, while technology developers frequently lack theological frameworks for assessing its implications. This governance gap allows algorithmic authority to expand unchecked (Popova, 2024).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model of Religious Authority in the Age of AI (AI-assisted Visualization)



Taken together, these findings indicate that adaptation requires institutional–technological hybridity rather than rejection or uncritical adoption of AI. Scholars, technologists, educators, and policymakers must collaborate to develop governance frameworks that integrate ethical evaluation, curated datasets, and transparency mechanisms. The literature also emphasizes the importance of digital and theological literacy at the community level, enabling users to critically evaluate machine-generated religious content (Baen et al., 2024). Within this hybrid framework, religious authority can be reconceptualized as layered: grounded in scholarly credentials, mediated through digital visibility, and increasingly shaped by algorithmic recommendation.

Rather than signaling the erosion of Islamic authority, the rise of AI marks a transitional moment in which authority is renegotiated across human and technological domains. If approached proactively, this transformation offers opportunities to strengthen ethical governance, renew scholarly relevance, and preserve the integrity of Islamic knowledge in an era of machine mediation.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that artificial intelligence reshapes Islamic religious authority not by replacing classical scholarship, but by reconfiguring the structure through which authority is accessed, mediated, and perceived. Drawing on Meuleman’s insights on globalization and Banchoff’s framework of pluralism, the findings show that AI introduces algorithmic forms of authority, intensifies epistemic ambiguity, and expands the delegation of religious practices in ways that demand institutional and ethical adaptation. Rather than signaling a collapse of authority, this transformation marks a transitional moment in which religious legitimacy becomes layered, relational, and socio-technical. Navigating this shift requires hybrid governance, ethical oversight, and renewed scholarly engagement to preserve epistemic integrity in the age of machine mediation.

## LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, as the analysis is based on a qualitative synthesis of existing literature rather than direct empirical observation. While this approach is appropriate for developing a conceptual framework, it cannot fully capture the lived experiences of Muslims engaging with AI-mediated religious guidance in everyday contexts. In addition, the literature reviewed is unevenly distributed geographically, with stronger representation from Indonesian and Western scholarship than from African, South Asian, or diaspora Muslim contexts. Given the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence, some dynamics identified in this study may also shift as technologies and institutional responses continue to develop.

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