



## Repositioning Surah Al-Kāfirūn in the Discourse of Religious Pluralism: An analysis of the Theoretical *Nizām Al-Qur'ān* by Amīn Aḥsan al-Iṣlāḥī



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### Abstract

The existence of Surah al-Kāfirūn is frequently interpreted by certain scholars and groups as the Qur'anic manifesto on religious pluralism, particularly with reference to its sixth verse, which is often regarded as emblematic of Islam's recognition of religious diversity. This interpretation has gained considerable traction within contemporary Islamic discourse and is commonly invoked as a justificatory basis for endorsing pluralism. The present study seeks to critically assess the validity of this perspective through a reinterpretation of Surah al-Kāfirūn employing the theory of *nizām al-Qur'ān*. This investigation is significant because many existing interpretations of pluralism tend to be partial and neglect the unity and coherence of the surah's overall structure. The research gap addressed herein concerns the limited utilisation of the *nizām al-Qur'ān* approach in analysing the interrelationship between the verses and the central theme of Surah al-Kāfirūn. The methodology adopted is qualitative library research, applying the analytical framework of *nizām al-Qur'ān*, which comprises three principal elements: *tartīb* (arrangement), *tanāsub* (interconnection), and *waḥdānīyah* (unity). The findings, grounded in the *nizām al-Qur'ān* theory, indicate that the primary theme of Surah al-Kāfirūn is not pluralism but rather a resolute rejection of disbelief. This conclusion emerges from a comprehensive examination of the surah's structure, tracing the "movement of the text" from the first to the final verse. Verses two to five depict the context of dialogue and debate concerning the object and procedures of worship between the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Quraysh polytheists. The sixth verse functions as a definitive affirmation that no compromise is possible in matters of creed and faith. This study contributes to reinforcing a holistic reading of the Qur'an while simultaneously critiquing the utilisation of Surah al-Kāfirūn as a theological justification for religious pluralism.

### Abstrak

Eksistensi surah al-Kāfirūn kerap dipahami oleh sebagian kalangan sebagai manifesto Al-Qur'an tentang pluralisme agama, terutama pada ayat keenam yang dianggap merepresentasikan pengakuan Islam terhadap keberagaman keyakinan. Pemahaman ini berkembang luas dalam wacana keislaman kontemporer dan sering dijadikan basis argumentatif bagi legitimasi pluralisme. Penelitian ini bertujuan menguji validitas pandangan tersebut melalui pembacaan ulang terhadap surah al-Kāfirūn dengan menggunakan teori *nizām al-Qur'ān*. Kajian ini penting dilakukan karena banyak penafsiran mengenai pluralisme cenderung bersifat parsial dan tidak memperhatikan kesatuan struktur surah secara menyeluruh. Di sinilah letak kesenjangan penelitian, yakni belum optimalnya penggunaan pendekatan *nizām al-Qur'ān* dalam menelaah relasi antarayat dan tema sentral surah al-Kāfirūn. Metode yang digunakan adalah penelitian kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan analisis *nizām al-Qur'ān* yang mencakup tiga unsur utama: *tartīb* (susunan), *tanāsub* (keterkaitan), dan *waḥdānīyah* (kesatuan). Hasil analisis berdasarkan teori *nizām al-Qur'ān* menunjukkan bahwa tema utama surah al-Kāfirūn bukanlah pluralisme, melainkan penegasan penolakan terhadap kekufuran. Kesimpulan ini diperoleh melalui pembacaan menyeluruh terhadap struktur surah dengan memperhatikan "gerak teks" dari ayat pertama hingga ayat terakhir. Ayat kedua sampai kelima merepresentasikan konteks dialog dan perdebatan mengenai objek serta tata cara penyembahan antara Nabi Muhammad saw. dan kaum musyrik Quraisy. Sementara itu, ayat keenam hadir sebagai penegasan akhir yang menunjukkan tidak adanya ruang kompromi dalam persoalan akidah dan keyakinan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dalam memperkuat pembacaan holistik terhadap Al-Qur'an sekaligus mengkritisi penggunaan surah al-Kāfirūn sebagai legitimasi teologis bagi pluralisme agama.

### Keywords:

Surah al-Kāfirūn; pluralism; *nizām al-Qur'ān*; thematic interpretation; creed (*'aqidah*)

### Kata kunci:

Surah al-Kāfirūn; Pluralisme, *nizām al-Qur'ān*; Tafsir tematik; akidah

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## Introduction

Currently, issues related to religious pluralism remain a prominent area of study and discourse that attracts the attention of many Islamic scholars. The term “pluralism” in English originally derives from the Latin word *plures*, meaning “several, with the implication of difference.”<sup>1</sup> When viewed from the etymology of the term, it becomes clear that religious pluralism does not require uniformity in religious forms. For when uniformity has occurred, there is no longer any religious plurality. Nurcholish Madjid, in agreement with Diana L. Eck, asserts that pluralism not only implies a willingness to acknowledge the right of adherents of other religions to exist, but also entails a willingness to treat those other groups fairly on the basis of peace and mutual respect.<sup>2</sup> In other words, pluralism requires adherents of different religions to get to know one another, interact with one another, and actively cooperate in a shared endeavor known as the nation. Although the concept of pluralism itself is not monolithic—since its proponents do not propose a single body of knowledge—a common thread can be drawn pluralism views diversity as something to be celebrated, honored, and appreciated as a divine design.<sup>3</sup>

In April 2016, the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held an international conference involving 57 Islamic countries to discuss this issue. The conference with the title 'Ten Years of Action' was deliberately held with the hope of realizing the values of solidarity and tolerance in Islam.<sup>4</sup> One of the OIC's objectives in organizing the conference is to eliminate Islamophobia—a fear of Islam—which in recent decades has been subject to extremely negative stereotypes due to acts of radicalism committed by certain groups in the name of religion.<sup>5</sup> Last September (2024), Indonesia was also visited by Pope Francis, the supreme leader of the Catholic faithful, on his 2024 Asia-Pacific Apostolic Tour.<sup>6</sup> The presence of Pope Francis was considered by many as a hope and an effort to build a joint commitment in realizing the principles of religious moderation among religious communities in Indonesia, in particular, and all religious believers in the world, in general.<sup>7</sup> This, of course, demonstrates that pluralism is an inescapable reality in the context of religious life today.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, “Kebebasan Beragama Dan Pluralisme Dalam Islam,” in *Passing Over: Melintasi Batas Agama*, ed. Komaruddin Hidayat and Ahmad Gaus AF (Jakarta: Gramedia-Paramadina, 1998), 184.

<sup>2</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam, Doktrin, dan Peradaban: Sebuah Telaah Kritis tentang Masalah Keimanan, Kemanusiaan dan Kemoderenan* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1995), 602; Jeffrie Geovani, *The Pluralism Project: Potret Pemilu, Demokrasi, dan Islam di Amerika* (Jakarta: Exposé, 2013), 220–222.

<sup>3</sup> Mun'im Sirry, *Think Outside The Box: Membebaskan Agama dari Penjara Konservatisme*, cet. 1 (Yogyakarta: Suka Press, 2024), 291.

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "OIC Ten Year Action," 2016, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/OIC.en.mfa>. Accessed October 10, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Husein Muhammad, 'Pluralism as a Theological Imperative', in Prologue Abd. Moqsih Ghazali, *Argumen Pluralisme Agama: Membangun Toleransi Berbasis Al-Qur'an*, cet. 2 (Depok: KataKita, 2009), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Puji Raharjo, "The Pope, the Second Vatican Council, and Religious Moderation: A Muslim's Note on the Presence of Pope Francis in Indonesia," Ministry of Religious Affairs of Lampung Province, 2024, <https://lampung.kemenag.go.id/home/artikel/paus-konsili-vatikan-ii-dan-moderasi-beragama-catatan-seorang-muslim-atas-kehadiran-paus-fransiskus-di-indonesia>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Muchlis Fadjarudin, "Muhaimin Iskandar Mentions the Presence of Pope Francis Proves Indonesia is a Symbol of Interfaith Friendship", *Suarasurabaya.Net*, 2024 <<https://www.suarasurabaya.net/kelanakota/2024/muhaimin-iskandar-calls-pope-fransiskus-presence-proves-indonesia-is-a-symbol-of-interfaith-friendship/>>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Sajjad H. Rizvi, 'A Primordial *e Pluribus Unum*? Exegeses on Q. 2:213 and Contemporary Muslim

In constructing the argument for pluralism—which is regarded as an inevitability—Islamic scholars specializing in this field have sought to identify verses in the Qur'an that serve as justification for pluralism. One verse considered particularly relevant in legitimizing the inevitability of pluralism is the final verse of Surah al-Kāfirūn: *Lakum dīnukum wa liya dīn* (For you your religion, and for me my religion). Most Muslims even consider this verse to be the Qur'anic manifesto of Islam's tolerant attitude towards followers of other religions.<sup>9</sup> In recent developments regarding pluralism and issues of religious tolerance, this verse continues to serve as the basis for arguments by researchers. Muhammad Taufiqurrohmah, for example, claims that the ethics of pluralism began to emerge after the revelation of surah al-Kāfirūn.<sup>10</sup> The same thing was also stated by Abdul Basir. According to him, the last verse of surah al-Kāfirūn reflects the attitude of Islam that upholds the values of religious tolerance. This view indicates that the anti-pluralism attitude is a form of denial of the teachings of the Qur'an itself.<sup>11</sup> Even more radical arguments are found in Ramlan Abdul Gani's research. Gani's view assumes that surah al-Kāfirūn is a verse that contains a message of freedom (*liberty*) for religious people to embrace and express their religious teachings.<sup>12</sup>

The three patterns of reasoning above, although with different analyses, produce the same conclusion, which is to position surah al-Kāfirūn as a verse of pluralism. In this article, the author tries to present a “different” idea as a form of re-infiltration as well as a rebuttal to this view by referring to critical reasoning based on surah-based thematic studies (*mawḍū'ī suwarī*) through the theory of *niẓām* Al-Qur'an initiated by Iṣlāhī. Therefore, it must be emphasized here that this study does not seek to question the existence of pluralism in the Qur'an's perspective in general, but rather focuses primarily on verifying the basis of the argument for pluralism as derived from Surah al-Kāfirūn. Some of the research questions to be addressed in this study include: First, how can Surah al-Kāfirūn be repositioned within the discourse on religious pluralism? Second, why should Surah al-Kāfirūn be considered as an argument for pluralism?

The two questions above will guide a more extensive discussion in this article. The main hypothesis to be developed in this study is how to reposition Surah al-Kāfirūn in a balanced manner. The author argues that Surah al-Kāfirūn does not, in fact, address religious pluralism in the sense described above. Historically, the emergence of this surah was not related to the context of social-religious relations, but rather appeared as a firm

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Discourses on Religious Pluralism', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2004), 25 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25728126>>; Justine Howe, 'Interpreting the Qur'an in the US: Religious Pluralism, Tradition, and Context', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2016), 35 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44031093>>; Moh. Akib and Moh. Ghundar Najih, “Dimensi Teologis-Praktis Prinsip Al-Asma' dalam Surah Hud Ayat 123: Upaya Kontekstualisasi Moderasi Beragama di Indonesia,” *Al-Qudwah: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 3, no. 2 (2025): 186–204, <https://doi.org/10.24014/alqudwah.v3i2.36156>.

<sup>9</sup> Mun'im Sirry, *Kontroversi Islam Awal: Antara Mazhab Tradisionalis dan Revisionis*, cet. I (Bandung: PT Mizan Pustaka, 2015), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Taufiqurrohmah and Sofan Rizqi, “Konsep Pluralisme Agama dalam Al-Qur'an,” *Manarul Qur'an: Jurnal Ilmiah Studi Islam*, 2022, 234, <https://doi.org/10.32699/mq.v21i2.2171>.

<sup>11</sup> Abdul Basir, 'Isu Pluralisme dalam Al-Qur'an', *Jurnal Mimbar: Media Intelektual Muslim dan Bimbingan Rohani*, 2021, 224, doi:10.47435/mimbar.v7i2.819.

<sup>12</sup> Ramlan Abdul Gani, 'Toleransi Menurut Al-Qur'an dan Hadits', *Alashriyyah*, 2020, 140, doi:10.53038/alashriyyah.v6i02.134.

response to the theological pluralism agenda of the disbelievers of Quraysh during the time of Prophet Muḥammad. Thus, the selective citation of portions of Surah al-Kāfirūn to justify the inevitability of religious pluralism has flaws in several respects. *First*, there is a lack of “careful” attention to the socio-historical context (*sabab al-nuzūl*) surrounding the revelation of that verse. *Second*, detaching the context of the verse from its central theme and failing to consider the purpose (*maqṣad*) of the surah. *Third*, a lack of understanding of what the author refers to as the “logical flow of the text” or (borrowing Abdul Mustaqim’s term) the ‘textual movement’ (*ḥarakiyyah al-naṣṣ*)<sup>13</sup> of a verse, thereby overlooking the essence of the meaning concealed behind the literal text. *Fifth*, relying too heavily on the popular translation of the word ‘*dīn*’ as ‘religion’ in that verse, thereby reinforcing the assumption that the verse is discussing religious pluralism. These five aspects form the basis of the argument that the positioning of Surah al-Kāfirūn within the discourse on pluralism must be revitalized.

The material object of this research is surah al-Kāfirūn which will be analyzed and interpreted using the theory of *nizām* Al-Qur’an. As for the research method, the author uses a qualitative approach because the process of collecting data is generated through a system of documentation and textual analysis.<sup>14</sup> This research is also built on the basis of *library research*,<sup>15</sup> where the data and information presented are obtained through extracting various sources of literature such as; books of tafsir, books of ‘*Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, scientific journals, as well as books and other literature relevant to the theme discussed.

## Results and Discussion

### *Paradigm and Basic Principles of Theory Nizām Al-Qur’ān*

Amīn Aḥsan, known as al-Iṣlāhī, was one of the brilliant students of al-Farāhī.<sup>16</sup> He was born in 1324/1906 in Bumhore, a village in the Azamgarh region. Regarding the principles of interpretation (*wasāil*)<sup>17</sup> that he constructed, he basically referred to what his teacher had previously initiated above. However, Iṣlāhī’s reconstruction is more methodical than his.<sup>18</sup> Iṣlāhī divides the principles of Qur’ānic interpretation into two types: internal principles and external principles. The first type consists of three elements, including *Qur’ānic language*, *nazā’ir* (similarities, *parallels*), and Qur’ānic *nizām*.<sup>19</sup> As for the second type, there are six elements, namely the *mutawātirah* sunnah, Prophetic hadiths, *asbāb al-nuzūl* history, the interpretations of previous mufassirs, pre-Qur’anic scriptures, and ancient Arabic history.<sup>20</sup> Of these principles, the author focuses on the *nizām* Al-Qur’ān theory, which will be used to analyze surah Al-Kāfirūn in this study.

<sup>13</sup> Abdul Mustaqim, “Argumentasi Keniscayaan Tafsir Maqashidi sebagai Basis Moderasi Islam,” in *Inaugural Speech of Professor* (State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2019), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Arikunto, *Metodologi Penelitian* (Jakarta: PT. Rineka Cipta, 2002), 136.

<sup>15</sup> Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2008), 3-10.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Abd al-Ḥamid Al-Farāhī, *Majmū’aj-Yi Tafāsīr-i Farāhī* (Lahore: Anjuman-I Khuddām al-Qur’ān, 1973), 9 et seq.

<sup>17</sup> Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān*, Volume I (Lahore: Dār al-Ishā’at al-Islāmiyyah, 1971), i.

<sup>18</sup> Mustansir Mīr, *Coherence in the Qur’an: A Study of Iṣlāhī’s Concept of Nazm* (USA: American Trust Publications, 1986), 25.

<sup>19</sup> Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān*, 1971, i.

<sup>20</sup> Iṣlāhī, Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān*, i; Al-Farāhī, *Majmū’aj-Yi Tafāsīr-i Farāhī*, 35–40.

*Nizām* or *nazm*<sup>21</sup> linguistically means ‘structure/systematics’. In the context of the Qur’ān, the meaning of *nizām* as stated by Farāhī, which is also adopted by Iṣlāhī, is as follows:

*In brief, by nizām we mean that a surah be a totality, and also be related to the surah that precedes and the one that follows it, or with that which precedes or follows it at one remove. . . . On the score of this principle, the entire Qur'an will be seen to be a single discourse, all of its parts, from start to finish, being well-ordered and well-knit.*<sup>22</sup>

Farāhī and Iṣlāhī—with reference to the above definition—underline three main elements of *nazm* or *nizām*: *tartīb* (arrangement),<sup>23</sup> *tanāsub* (connection),<sup>24</sup> and *waḥdāniah* (unity).<sup>25</sup> It is clear that Iṣlāhī's concept of *nizām* is broader than the *munāsabah* and *tanāsuq* introduced by al-Biqā’ī and al-Suyūṭī.<sup>26</sup> This is because these two concepts are only part of the overall structure of the Qur’ān which is bound by (Iṣlāhī's term) the ‘*amūd*’ (‘axis’) or central theme of the Qur’ān.<sup>27</sup>

Iṣlāhī even reveals that the significance of *nizām* theory is not only that it can reveal the subtleties of thought and the niceties of expression in the Qur’ān,<sup>28</sup> but it also forms an integral part of the *essential* meaning of the Qur’ān. Iṣlāhī also claims that a person who reads the Qur’ān without the knowledge of *nizām* will certainly gain a partial understanding of the Qur’ān. *Nizām* is like a chemical compound, which consists of its constituent particles and blends together into a unified whole. Likewise with the Qur’ān, if the interpretation project ignores the principle of *nizām*, then the Qur’ān is nothing more than a collection of verses and chapters.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Abdul Jalil, “‘Abd Al-Hamid Al-Farahi dan Sumber-sumber Sekunder dalam Tafsir Berbasis Surat,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur’an dan Hadis*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2014, 278-279. <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2014.15205>.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Abd al-Ḥāmid Al-Farāhī, *Dalā’il Al-Nizām* (Azamgarh, India: al-Dā’irah al-Ḥamīdiyyah wa Maktabatuhā, 1968), 75; Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur’an*, .32

<sup>23</sup> See, Al-Qāḍī Abū al-Faḍl ‘Iyāḍ Al-Yaḥṣībī, *Al-Syifā Bi Ta’rīfi Ḥuqūq Al-Muṣṭafā*, Vol. I (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1988), 258; Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq Ar-Rifā’ī, *I’jāz Al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 227; Abū Zahrah, *Mu’jizāt Al-Kubrā Fi Al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr ‘Arabī, n.d.), 99.

<sup>24</sup> See, Amīr Faiṣal Faṭḥ, *Naẓariyyah al-Wiḥdah al-Qur’āniyyah ‘Inda Ulamā’ al-Muslimīn wa Dauruhā fi Fikr al-Islāmī* (Fakistan: al-Jamī’ah al-Islāmīyyah al-‘Ālamīyyah, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Al-Farāhī, *Dalā’il al-Nizām*, 77; Mir, *Coherence in the Qur’an*, 33. “Unity” in Arabic is called وحدة.

<sup>26</sup> Ḥāfiẓ Jalāluddīn Al-Suyūṭī, *Tanāsuq al-Durar fi Tanāsuq al-Suwar* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1986), 1-158.

<sup>27</sup> Mir, *Coherence in the Qur’an: A Study of Iṣlāhī’s Concept of Nazm*.

<sup>28</sup> Sa’īd Ramaḍān Al-Būṭī also says in his book, *Min Rawā’i’ al-Qur’ān*, the Qur’ān does not use traditional poetic models and styles, either in its composition or lyrics. It also does not use the rules of prose and rhyme that are well known in Arabic literature, whether it is the arrangement of words or sentences. Also, it does not use the literary laws commonly used by the Arabs. However, if we pay attention to the content of the Qur’an such as the verses in it, we will find a very beautiful harmony and harmony. It is also found in the rhythm and form of the Qur’anic sentences. The letters create an amazing interplay between the soft and the hard, between the high and the low, between the long and the short, all creating a harmonious and beautiful composition of tones, resulting in a sentence structure that perfectly suits the character of the reader’s voice, using any style of song, especially if he recites correctly. See, Muḥammad Sa’īd Ramaḍān Al-Būṭī, *Min Rawā’i’ al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Maktabah Al-Farabi, 1977), 132.

<sup>29</sup> Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān*, Vol. 1: viii-ix; Al-Farāhī, *Dalā’il al-Nizām*, .17-19, 75

However, a question arises: how does this *nizām* function, as Iṣlāhī describes above? How can one attain a “proper understanding” of the Qur’an based on the principle of *nizām*? Iṣlahi offers a solution, which includes interpreting Qur’anic verses within their contextual framework. The emergence of diverse—and even contradictory—interpretations of the Qur’an—in other words, interpretations that do not align with the intended meaning of the Qur’anic text—is actually caused by a disconnect between the understanding of a verse and the reality of its context. For this reason, the presence of the *nizām* principle can at least shift the possibility of interpretive bias or controversial views regarding Qur’anic verses toward what Iṣlāhī calls “make for a definitive interpretation of the Qur’an”.<sup>30</sup>

In the *nizām* Al-Qur’an Iṣlāhī framework, the fundamental approach to interpretation is to focus on the surahs. These surahs revolve around what Iṣlāhī refers to as ‘*amūd*—that is, the central axis or theme within individual surahs or groups of surahs in the Qur’an. It is this ‘*amūd* that serves as the binding that unifies the content of the surah. And the surahs must be interpreted with reference to it.<sup>31</sup> For example, when Iṣlāhī discusses aspects of the life and mission of Prophet Ibrāhim in sūrah al-An‘ām. The ‘*amūd* of sūrah al-An‘ām, according to him, is: Islam as the religion of Ibrāhim. Because this surah explains the existence of Islam before the pagan traditions of the Meccan Arabs, and what the Prophet Muhammad brought was a teaching that was no different from that brought by the Prophet Ibrāhim, there was no reason for them to hesitate to accept Islam.<sup>32</sup>

Verses 74–83 of the same surah also, according to Iṣlāhī, describe how Prophet Abraham rejected the sun, the moon, and the stars as objects of worship and adoration. Since this surah also contains an order to Prophet Muḥammad to declare Islam to the people of Mecca, the logic and historical flow of the above verses are used as a paradigm to bring understanding to them so that they can easily accept Islam.<sup>33</sup> In short, the concept of the unity of the sūrah proposed by Iṣlāhī can simply be understood as the idea that each sūrah is a perfectly systematized *kalām*, as evidenced by its coherent structural framework. The arrangement of the verses in the sūrah is such that they can be accepted without alteration in any context. This constitutes the most fundamental aspect of the *nizām* of a sūrah in the Qur’an.<sup>34</sup>

### **Surah Al-Kāfirūn According to Pro-Pluralism Groups**

It must be recognized that the response to the issue of pluralism, especially in the context of religion in Indonesia, is not monolithic. The attitude of the clergy is divided into two camps, between those who firmly reject pluralism and those who accept and even seek the expansiveness of the ideas of pluralism. The author will not address the first point here, as it is not the focus of this article. However, it is important to highlight how the second

<sup>30</sup> 'Abd al-Ḥamid Al-Farāhī, *al-Takmil fi Uṣūl al-Ta'wīl* (Azamgarh, India: al-Dā'irah al-Ḥamīdiyyah wa Maktabatuhā, 1968), 20; Al-Farāhī, *Dalā'il al-Nizām*, 25; Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, Vol. I, x; Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an*, 34

<sup>31</sup> Al-Farāhī, *Dalā'il al-Nizām*, 73, 77, 82

<sup>32</sup> Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, Volume II (Lahore: Dār al-Ishā'at al-Islāmiyyah, 1971), 385-387.

<sup>33</sup> Iṣlāhī, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i...*, Vol. II, 460-461 and so on.

<sup>34</sup> Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an...*, 19.

group—the pro-pluralism group—uses verses from the Qur'an to legitimize their arguments. The question is, are these verses really talking about pluralism? The mistake that often occurs is sometimes when a researcher discusses a certain issue/theme and then looks for (borrowing Prof. Mustaqim's term) “cantolan” verses in the Qur'an, but the verses used are not in accordance with the issues studied or the verses are used out of context.

Abd. Moqsith Ghazali, a tafsir expert and Indonesian Muslim scholar, cites one of the verses often referenced by groups sympathetic to pluralism: the last verse of Surah Al-Kāfirūn: *lakum dīnukum wa liyadīn* (For you your religion, and for me my religion).<sup>35</sup> This verse, according to Moqsith, has the same substance as several other verses, for example: (1) “For us our deeds, and for you your deeds” (QS. al-Qaṣaṣ [28]: 55; QS. al-Baqarah [2]: 139; QS. al-Syūrā [42]: 15; (2) “If they deny you, then say: ‘To me is my work, and to you is your work. You are free from what I do, and I am free from what you do’” (QS. Yūnus [10]: 41).<sup>36</sup>

Ibn Kaṣīr and al-Zamakhsharī recorded the context in which surah al-Kāfirūn was revealed. They mention that this surah was revealed when a group of disbelievers from the Quraysh of Mecca came to the Prophet and invited him to worship their gods (idols). So this surah was revealed to strongly rebuke their actions.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, according to al-Ṭabarī, the pagans in question include: al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, al-‘Āṣ ibn Wā’il, al-Aswad ibn al-Muṭṭalīb, Umayyah ibn Khalaf. The arrival of these figures initially wanted to establish negotiations with the Prophet regarding the polemic of ritual worship which was later questioned after the emergence of Islam. One form of their offer to the Prophet, they invited him to worship their version of God for a year and they also worshiped the Prophet's version of God for a year. If it turned out that one of the two “camps” of God was better than the other, then as a consequence, the best one should be followed. The Prophet in this context rejected their offer and this surah was revealed.<sup>38</sup>

In recent studies that the author has observed in several scientific journals, some researchers understand this verse as a form of the Qur'an's affirmative attitude towards other religions. For example, Abdul Basir, citing Al-Marāghī's view, claims that the Qur'an through this verse wants to recognize pluralism. This verse also gives other religions the right to worship the God they believe in without imposing equality in religion. Therefore, rejecting pluralism, according to Basir, is an attitude that does not reflect the teachings of Islam itself.<sup>39</sup> Taufiqurrahman also stated that the verse: *Lakum dīnukum wa liyadīn* is an acknowledgment of the existence of harmonious mutual relations with other religions, and at the same time, does not absolutize opinions and ignore each other's beliefs. In this case, Taufiq understands the statement “For you your religion and for me my religion” to imply a statement: “Please believe and practice your religion, and let me believe and practice my religion”.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ghazali, *Argumen Pluralisme Agama.*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ghazali, *Argumen Pluralisme Agama.*, 224.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Kaṣīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azhīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), Juz IV, 632; Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kasysyāf 'an Haqāiq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujuh al-Ta'wīl* (Egypt: Maktabah Mishriyyah, n.d.), Juz IV, 642.

<sup>38</sup> Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' Turās al-'Arabī, n.d.), volume XVI, 403. Compare with, Al-Qurṭūbī, *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2002), volume XX, 434.

<sup>39</sup> Basir, “Isu Pluralisme dalam Al-Qur'an” ..., 224.

<sup>40</sup> Taufiqurrahman and Rizqi, “Konsep Pluralisme Agama dalam Al-Qur'an” ..., pp. 235.

### Critical Reflection: Rereading the Idea of Pluralism in QS. Al-Kāfirūn

At this point, the question that needs to be answered is why surah al-Kāfirūn becomes a problem in the discourse of pluralism, and how to reposition it back to its proper context? If we read the previous arguments of pro-pluralism groups, there is actually a serious problem that makes this question arise. The author calls it “opportunistic-scripturalism”, an attitude that cuts the Qur'anic text opportunistically (pragmatically, selfishly) to support certain views without paying attention to the context in which it is used. If we refer to the prescriptions of Iṣlāḥī's *nizām* theory which consists of: *tartīb* (order), *tanāsub* (interconnection), and *waḥdāniyyah* (unity),<sup>41</sup> then the cutting of the sixth verse of surah al-Kāfirūn claimed as an argument for pluralism is clearly unjustified. The author argues that the verse cannot be separated from the *tartīb* of the previous verses that form an organic and coherent unity in the *nizām* of surah al-Kāfirūn. Removing a verse from the ‘main axis’ (*‘amūd*) in the *nizām* of the surah has the potential to give birth to disproportionate hermeneutical biases.

As a revitalization step, the author sees four spectrums that must be addressed so that the above question can be answered. *First*, let's revisit the central theme of surah al-Kāfirūn. This is very important so that all the verses studied from the first to the last verse refer to or do not get out of the theme. *Second*, exploring the symbolic meaning behind the name attribute of the surah. Why is the surah called al-Kāfirūn? Why not another name? This stage requires a critical analysis of whether the attribute has an appropriate relation to the issue of pluralism as the pro-prularism group claimed earlier or if it is contrary to pluralism. *Third*, rationalizing the *tanāsub* (connection) between one verse and another. The purpose is not only to see the intense relationship of each verse that forms a complete meaning structure, but this step is also important to understand the ‘movement of the text’ (*ḥarakiyyah al-nasṣ*) of surah al-Kāfirūn. *Fourth*, reconstructing the meaning of *dīn* in the sixth verse of surah al-Kāfirūn, which has been interpreted as ‘religion’ in Indonesian translations of the Qur'ān. The author argues that the interpretation of *dīn* with *religion* has major implications, especially in the case we are discussing. In reality, *religion* is not the only translation of the word *dīn*. If *dīn* turns out to be more accurately interpreted with a meaning other than *religion*, can the claim of pluralism still be maintained?

### The Symbolism of ‘Kāfirūn’ and the Central Theme (‘Amūd) of Surah al-Kāfirūn

The majority of scholars of tafsir say that Sūrah al-Kāfirūn was revealed in Mecca before the Prophet's migration to Medina.<sup>42</sup> A number of commentaries mention several names

<sup>41</sup> Al-Farāhī, *Dalā'il Al-Nizām*, 77 ; Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an*, .33

<sup>42</sup> The scholars of tafsir actually differed in their opinions regarding this matter. Some call it a Makkiyah surah absolutely without explaining the difference of opinion, but some explain it from a different angle by explaining the narration. If it is based on the narrations of Ibn Mas'ūd, al-Ḥasan, and 'Ikrimah, then this surah is Makkiyah, but if it is based on the narrations of Ibn 'Abbās, Qatādah, and al-Ḍaḥḥāk, then this surah is Madaniyyah. The first view can be found in a number of commentaries, among others: Nāshiruddīn Abī al-Khair 'Abdillāh ibn 'Umar Al-Baiḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' Turās al-'Arabī, n.d.), volume V, 343; Muḥammad Jawad Mughniyah, *al-Tafsīr al-Kāshif* (Beirut: Dār al-Anwār, n.d.), volume VII, 618.; volume VII, 618; Sayyid Quṭb, *Fi Zilāl al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Syurūq, 2003), volume VI, 3990; Abī Muḥammad 'Abd al-Mun'im Al-Andalusī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2006), 631; Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, volume XVI, 403; Al-Ḥusayn ibn Mas'ūd Al-Baghāwī, *Ma'ālim Al-Tanzīl*

attributed to this surah, including: *al-munābāzah*, *sūrah al-Ikhlās*, *sūrah al-'Ibādah*, *al-Dīn*. Some have also named it surah *al-Muqasyqisyah* (*healer*), meaning that its contents cure and eliminate the disease of polytheism.<sup>43</sup> M. Quraish Shihab in his commentary *al-Mishbah* states that the main theme of surah al-Kāfirūn is the rejection of the polytheists' proposal for religious unification in reaching a compromise, while inviting each to carry out the teachings of their religion and beliefs without disturbing each other.<sup>44</sup> According to Wahbah al-Zuhailī, this surah contains the recognition and exemption from all the actions of the polytheists, and a clear and unequivocal acknowledgment that the Prophet (peace be upon him) has his own worship that is different from the worship of the polytheists. Has a separate worship that is different from the worship of the disbelievers.<sup>45</sup>

If we refer to Shihab's argument above, then the conclusion of the theme of surah al-Kāfirūn is that there is a spirit of compromise from the disbelievers of Quraysh to the Prophet. If this claim is true, then the question is what are the indicators of the compromise in question? And what is the evidence that the disbelievers actually intended to do so? The author argues that, the disbelievers of Quraysh in this context actually did not want to offer a compromise to the Prophet, but to deceive the Prophet with a narrative that seemed compromising. This argument is supported by the information that after the Prophet responded to the seduction of the disbelievers by reciting surah al-Kāfirūn, they increasingly disturbed and attacked the Prophet and his companions.<sup>46</sup> Such an attitude does not in the least reflect the tolerant and compromising nuances that the above view suggests. Thus, the central theme (*'amūd*) of this surah is best understood as the surah having been revealed to protect the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, from the "sinister" schemes and subtle temptations of the disbelieving Quraysh, as well as to issue a firm command to the Prophet to reject any invitation that leads to disbelief.

The two elements of *'amūd* above, namely the protection of the Prophet and the firm rejection of *kufir*, are confirmed through the narration of the verses of surah al-Kāfirūn. The first part of the *'amūd* is confirmed by the first verse, while the second part is confirmed by the second to the fifth verses. In the first verse: *Qul yā ayyuhal kāfirūn* ('Say! O disbelievers!') there are two key words that refer to the meaning of 'guarding', namely the expression *qul* (say!) and *al-kāfirūn* (disbelievers). Some mufasirs explain that the word *qul* ('say!'), which is repeated 332 times in the Qur'an, generally relates to issues that should become clear and obvious to the parties concerned so that they can adjust their attitudes to those of the Muslims.<sup>47</sup> The word *al-kāfirūn* is derived from the word *kafara*, which means to *close*.

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(Riyād: Dār Ṭayyibah, n.d.), volume VIII, 563, including al-Zamakhsharī and others. As for the second opinion, it can be seen in several works of tafsir such as: Abī 'Abdillāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī Al-Qurṭūbī, *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Maktabah al-'Aṣriyyah, 2016), volume C, 335; Abī al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Muḥammad Al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa al-'Uyūn Tafsir al-Māwardī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n. d.), volume VI, n. d.), volume VI, 357, and others.

<sup>43</sup> See, Wahbah Az-Zuhailī, *Al-Tafsir Al-Munir fi al-'Aqidah wa al-Shari'ah wa al-Manhaj* (Dimasyq: Dār al-Fikr, 2003), volume XV, 837; M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah; Pesan, Kesan dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an*, fourth printing (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2005), vol. XV, 573; Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Ashūr, *Al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* (Tūnis: Dār Suḥnūn, n.d.), vol. XXXI, 579.

<sup>44</sup> Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah*, Vol. XV573–74.

<sup>45</sup> Az-Zuhailī, *Al-Tafsir al-Munir*, volume XV, 437-438.

<sup>46</sup> Husein Al Kaff, *Tafsir Qur'an, Tafsir Juz 'Amma* (Bandung: Al-Hayat, 2004), 244.

<sup>47</sup> Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah*, Vol. XV, 576; M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Karim: Tafsir atas*

Shihab mentions that this word is used by the Qur'an for a variety of meanings, including: denying the oneness of Allah and the apostolate of Muhammad (QS. Saba' [34]: 3); not being grateful for Allah's blessings (QS. Ibrahim [14]: 7); not practicing divine guidance even though they believe in it (QS. al-Baqarah [2]: 85). Although the meaning of *kafir*/*kufir* is not limited to these three examples, some scholars have concluded that the word *kufir* found in the Makkiyah verses all refer to polytheists or their attitudes that do not recognize Muhammad's apostleship or abandon the basic teachings of Islam.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the word *qul* here implies a straightforward attitude, agility, and firmness on the issue being conveyed—in this case the issue of 'aqidah. And, the *mukhaṭab* of this verse is "*al-kāfirūn*" i.e. the disbelievers who wanted to trick the Prophet with seduction under the guise of compromise. Coupled with historical evidence that *khīṭab al-kāfirūn* refers to a handful of Makkah polytheists, not the generality of the Makkah polytheists. Here the question arises, why does the Qur'an use the term *al-kāfirūn* and not others? Theologically, of course, the answer is because Allah knew that the polytheist leaders had bad intentions behind their efforts, and the meaning of *kafir* above makes it clear about their attitude that they never and/or will recognize Muhammad's prophethood. In fact, just by looking at the narration of the conversation between the Prophet and the polytheists we would know that what they compromised on was only the object of worship without even mentioning the recognition of the truth of Muhammad as a Prophet. This is at least a strong reason for the above alleged circumvention.

### Upholding Tawḥīd and Antipathy to Kufr

The second element of 'amūd is the emphatic rejection of *kufir*. This is confirmed by the second to the fifth verses of Surah al-Kāfirūn as follows:

لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عِبُدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ

This editorial shows the coherence of the verse that consistently voices the rejection. The narrative structure of the second to fifth verses is always preceded by the word *lā* which means negation. The mufasirs mention this negation not only illustrates the strong rejection of the polytheists' proposal, but also emphasizes the disbelief of any common ground between the Prophet Muḥammad PBUH and the polytheists, because *kufir* has become part of them, and their stubbornness has reached its climax so that there is not the slightest hope or possibility, either now or in the future, to cooperate with them.<sup>49</sup>

According to Islaḥi's theory, the *nizām* aspect of the wording of verses two through five of Surah al-Kāfirūn is evident in two distinctive features, each of which—despite similarities in wording, such as between verses three and five—points to a different meaning yet reinforces the other, thereby revealing the logical rationale behind that firm stance of

*Surat-Surat Pendek Berdasarkan Urutan Turunnya Wahyu* (Bandung: Pustaka Hidayah, 1997), 635- 636.

<sup>48</sup> Maḥmūd Syaltut (1893-1963) distinguished two terms that constitute the dimensions of the teachings introduced by Islam, namely what he called the 'amalī dimension and the *nazarī* dimension. The 'amalī dimension is that which relates to *practice* in the real world, which is called *shari'ah*. Meanwhile, the *nazarī* or theoretical dimension relates to the mind and soul so that it must be understood as well as believed. This makes this side of the teaching *inward*, not *outward*. If the source and interpretation of this teaching is confirmed, then it is called 'aqidah. See, Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Karim*, 635–36; *Tafsir Al-Mishbah*, Vol. XV, 576-577.

<sup>49</sup> Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah ...*, Vol. XV, 578; *Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Karim ...*, 638–39.

rejection. The first distinctive feature is shown by the expression of the word *lā* at the beginning of each verse as mentioned above, and the second distinctive feature is the insertion of the word *mā* which falls at the second to last word of each verse. The word *lā* meaning “not” in the second to fifth verses all lead to the same meaning of negation of something that has been (*māḍī*) and will come (*istiqbāl*). However, the role of the word *mā* here forms two verse structures. The first structure is the second and third verses: *walā ana ‘ābidun mā ‘abadtum – walā antum ‘ābidūna mā a‘bud* where the word *mā* in this verse is referred to by Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh as *mā mausūlah* meaning “that which” which suggests a reference to an object of worship.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the meaning of the second and third verses is “I will not worship *what* you are worshipping; and you will not be worshipers of *what* I am and will be worshipping.”

In the second structure, the word *mā* refers to the mechanism of worship. This can be seen in the fourth and fifth verses: *lā a‘budu mā ta‘budūn – walā antum ‘ābidūna mā a‘bud* where the word *mā* here is *mā maṣdariyyah* which functions to transform the word it is attached to so that the word becomes a conjugate word.<sup>51</sup> So the meaning is: “I have never been a worshipper of your worship; nor will you be worshipers of my worship.” However, the question that arises is this: if the four verses above assert that the disbelievers will never worship the deity whom the Prophet Muhammad worshipped, does this not contradict the historical fact that the people of Mecca—who were once disbelievers—eventually flocked to Islam and began to worship what the Prophet worshipped? Here Shihab gives an affirmative answer. He says, it certainly does not show a contradiction, because the verse is indeed addressed to the pagan figures of Mecca who at that time came to the Prophet proposing a theological compromise, and who in historical fact did not embrace Islam, even some of these figures such as Abū Jahl, Abū Lahab, Umayyah ibn Khalaf and others were killed in their disbelief.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, this verse is a record of events in a specific context, or a *khitab* that is not intended to be universal.

### **The Meaning of Dīn is Not ‘Religion’**

The highlight of the pro-pluralism group’s mistake is when they use the last verse of Surah al-Kāfirūn as an argument for the validity of pluralism. Of the many studies on pluralism, there is almost no extensive explanation accompanied by philosophical arguments about why this last verse is considered as an argument for pluralism. Most scholars simply list it and do nothing more than justify that the verse is evidence of the Qur’an’s acceptance of pluralism. The author argues that their mistake here is the partial use and understanding of surah al-Kāfirūn. This kind of mistake often occurs when someone cuts off a particular verse for a specific purpose without knowing whether the verse is a stand-alone verse or part of the structure of the surrounding verses, whose meaning cannot be fully understood except by reading and understanding them holistically.

In the context of surah al-Kāfirūn, the verse: *lakum dīnukum wa liyadīn* cannot be separated from the main axis (*‘amūd*) of the surah, which is the mecca of its meaning. Not

<sup>50</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm; Juz ‘Amma* (Egypt: Syirkah Musāhamah Miṣriyyah, n.d.), 169-170.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm ...*, 170.

<sup>52</sup> Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Qur’ān Al-Karīm ...*, 638.

only is this verse non-autonomous from the corpus of the surah, but it is also bound to its structure. Therefore, it must be understood in its entirety without detaching the other parts. It has been previously mentioned that the *'amūd* of surah al-Kāfirūn is the protection of the Prophet and the strong rejection of disbelief, so the meaning of *lakum dīnukum wa liyadīn* must also refer to the *'amūd*. Meanwhile, some mufassirs including Shihab still consider this verse as a form of recognition of mutual existence, where each party can carry out what it considers right and good, without absolutizing the opinion of others and without ignoring their respective beliefs.<sup>53</sup> The author is among those who disagree with this view. Because, if this verse is associated with its main axis above, the nuance that arises should not be a tolerant attitude, but a logical affirmation of rejection of the polytheists' agenda.

Moreover, the claim that the last verse of Sūrat al-Kāfirūn is tolerant cannot be justified. The reason is not only that this verse does not speak in the context of religious relations, but moreover, such an attitude contradicts the normative-fundamental doctrine of Islam which simultaneously fights shirk and upholds tawhid. From here it seems that the fallacy of the pro-pluralism group is born from the first assumption, that the last verse is a Qur'anic solution to establish peaceful relations with religious communities outside Islam. Indeed, there are many Qur'anic verses that emphasize peace with *ahl al-kitāb* (Jews and Christians),<sup>54</sup> but the question is, does surah al-Kāfirūn lead to such a context? The answer is certainly no. Because surah al-Kāfirūn was revealed to respond to an agenda of a group of Meccan polytheists who in reality did not adhere to a particular religious system, this verse is not appropriate if it is understood as a peaceful solution in interreligious relations.<sup>55</sup>

Another crucial issue that needs to be highlighted critically is the meaning of the word *dīn* which is commonly understood to mean 'religion'. To what extent can this understanding be sustained? And how should we understand the meaning of *dīn* in the context of surah al-Kāfirūn? The English word '*religion*' has developed a variety of meanings, and the word *dīn* in Qur'anic terminology is no different. The term 'religion' is derived from Sanskrit, which originally referred to the beliefs of Hinduism and Buddhism in India. Religion is composed of the words 'a' meaning "not", and 'gama' meaning "chaos". Religion here can be understood as a rule that prevents humans from chaos, and leads humans to order and order.<sup>56</sup> In English, *religious* means piety, piety, or something very deep.<sup>57</sup> Hornby formulates the meaning of *religion* in terms of elements, namely (1) belief in God or supernatural powers that are worshipped as the creator and ruler of the

<sup>53</sup> Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm ...*, 642–43.

<sup>54</sup> See QS. Al-'Ankabūt [29]: 46; Āli 'Imrān [3]: 64, 199. Ibn 'Arabī in his commentary *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, when interpreting QS. Al-Mumtaḥanah [60]: 8, he says that the Qur'ān does not make religious differences a reason for not establishing cooperative relations, let alone taking an unfriendly attitude. In fact, the Qur'ān does not prohibit a Muslim from doing good and giving some of his wealth to anyone as long as they do not fight Muslims for religious reasons or expel Muslims from their lands. Ibn 'Arabī, *Aḥkām Al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Al-Halabi, 1957), volume IV, 1773.

<sup>55</sup> Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Razī *al-Jaṣāṣ*, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān li al-Jaṣāṣ* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' Turās al-'Arabī, 1992), volume V, 377.

<sup>56</sup> Zāinal Arifin Abbas, *The Development of Thoughts on Religion* (Medan: Firma Islamiah, 1957), 19. Compare Parisadha Hindu Dharma, *Upadea* (Denpasar: PT Upada Sastra, 1968), 8; Seyyed Ḥossein Naṣr, *The Heart of Islam* (Bandung: Mizan, 2003), 355.

<sup>57</sup> Munīr Al-Ba'labakki, *Al-Mawrid: An Injilīzī-Arabī Dictionary* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li al-Malayīn, 1995), 774.

universe; (2) a certain system of belief and worship.<sup>58</sup>

The word *dīn* in Arabic has several meanings. According to Ibn Manẓūr, the word *dīn* means ‘piety and piety’ (*al-warā’ wa al-taqwā*), ‘retribution’ (*al-jazā’ wa al-mukāfa’ah*), and ‘obedience’ (*al-tā’ah*).<sup>59</sup> When referring to the Qur’ān, the word *dīn* can mean system or rule,<sup>60</sup> as found in QS. Yūsuf [12]: 76; Āli ‘Imrān [3]: 73, and al-Mā’idah [5]: 3. What about in the context of surah al-Kāfirūn? Here there are two versions of meaning. *First*, *dīn* is translated with *religion*. This translation is very popular in Indonesia, such as the translation of the Qur’an by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019),<sup>61</sup> Mahmud Yunus, Hamka, Mohammad Said and others.<sup>62</sup> *Second*, *dīn* is translated as *retribution, reward, or path*. This understanding is held by several well-known mufasirs such as Maulana Muhammad Ali and Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali. The former, quoting Edward William Lane in *his Lane Lexicon*, believes that the word *dīn* in the last verse of surah al-Kāfirūn is more accurately understood as ‘retribution’ and ‘reward’. This is because the verse, according to him, is a Qur’ānic prediction that those who worship Allah will definitely be rewarded with good, while those who worship idols will definitely never get any help from their false God.<sup>63</sup>

Shihab in *his nuzūlī* tafsir work, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, points out the fluidity of the meaning of *dīn* in the last verse of surah al-Kāfirūn. This is due to the differing opinions among the mufasirs regarding the religion of the pagans of Mecca. The first opinion denies that the disbelievers of Mecca had or embraced a particular religion. From here the word *dīn* is then translated with *retribution*, so that *lakum dīnukum wa liyadīn* means “The retribution or reward for your actions is specific to you, and the reward or retribution for our actions is also specific to us”. The second opinion is that of those who interpret *dīn* with ‘religion’, provided that the word religion here is not understood in its full sense, as religion is in the view of scholars of comparative religion.<sup>64</sup> Although Shihab is very open in this context, he still chooses the second meaning as the translation for the word *dīn*. But the question is, what kind of incomplete sense of religion does Shihab mean above? He does not even explain how religion manifests in the context of the theological struggle of the pagans of Mecca in his tafsir. So this weakens his own view when using the term religion as the meaning of the word *dīn*. Thus, the author sees that the understanding of *dīn* with *religion* in this context is very problematic, because in fact the pagans of Mecca did not embrace a religious system.

<sup>58</sup> AS Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 713. Compare with Paul Edward, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (USA: Macmillan Reference, n.d.), Vol. VII, 140; Knight Dunlop, *Religion, Its Functions in Human Life* (New York, 1946), 9; Jalaluddin Rakhmat, *Psikologi Agama: Sebuah Pengantar* (Bandung: Mizan, 2003), 50.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2003), Volume III, 466-468. Compare Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqīdah al-Wasaṭiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Da’wah al-Islāmiyah, 2001), 22; Muḥammad Ḥusain Ṭabaṭaba’ī, *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasah al-‘Ālami li al-Maṭbū’at, 1991), Volume V, 385-389.

<sup>60</sup> Abd. Moqsiṭh Ghazali, *Argumen Pluralisme Agama...*, 47-48

<sup>61</sup> Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur’an RI, *Al-Qur’an dan Terjemahannya (Edisi Penyempurnaan)*, (Jakarta: Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur’an RI), 2019), 911.

<sup>62</sup> See for example, Mujamma’ al-Malik Fahd ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āli Su’ūd, *Le Saint Coran: Et La Traduction En Langue Française Du Sens de Ses Versets* (Madinah: Mujamma’ al-Malik Fahd li Tabā’ah al-Mushaf al-Syarīf, 1415), 603.

<sup>63</sup> Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary* (Jakarta: Darul Kutubil Islamiyah, 2007), 1453.

<sup>64</sup> Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Qur’ān Al-Karīm...*, 641-42.

By understanding *dīn* in the sense of *retribution*, or *reward*, at least Muslims when reading surah al-Kāfirūn are no longer trapped in the perception that the Qur'ān acknowledges the existence of kufr. The rejection of kufr is clearly seen through the message of the first verse to the last verse of surah al-Kāfirūn. The verses are related to each other and coherently demonstrate this rejection. When one understands this verse in relation to the context of religious relations, misperceptions arise which then give birth to inaccurate interpretations. This error arises from detaching certain parts of the verse from the central theme of the surah. Therefore, it is not surprising that most Muslims view the last verse of surah al-Kāfirūn as a manifesto of Islamic tolerance towards other religions. In fact, the *khiṭāb* of this surah clearly does not refer to a specific religious community such as Yahūdī and Naṣrānī, but rather a group of disbelievers who have no religion. Thus, interpreting *dīn* with retribution or reward not only reduces misunderstanding and misinterpretation, but is also very relevant to the main purpose of the surah.

## Conclusion

This study addresses the interpretative challenges associated with Surah al-Kāfirūn, which is frequently invoked as a theological basis for religious pluralism, particularly through a selective reading of its sixth verse detached from the surah's broader contextual framework. Employing the theory of *nizām al-Qur'ān*, the analysis yields several key findings. *Firstly*, the principal theme of Surah al-Kāfirūn does not primarily pertain to socio-religious relations, as posited by some mufassirs; rather, it underscores the affirmation of the theological mission conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). *Secondly*, the interpretative error of proponents of pluralism lies in their utilisation of the surah's final verse without sufficient consideration of its context and the textual progression that underpins the surah's coherent structure. *Thirdly*, while mufassirs recognise the semantic plurality of the term *dīn* within this surah—encompassing meanings such as religion, way of life, and recompense or reward—this study demonstrates that interpreting *dīn* as “religion” in the concluding verse engenders several hermeneutical difficulties. Moreover, this research contends that understanding *dīn* as “religion” in the final verse is not entirely appropriate when evaluated against the historical context and the surah's central theme. Instead, interpreting *dīn* as “recompense” or “reward” aligns more consistently with the interrelation of the verses and the coherent semantic trajectory established throughout the surah.

The findings of this study hold considerable significance for the advancement of Qur'anic exegesis, particularly in promoting a holistic approach that considers the structure, interrelation of verses, and thematic coherence within a surah. In this context, the study also critiques the propensity for partial readings that may lead to disproportionate theological conclusions. However, the study is subject to certain limitations, as it exclusively focuses on the *nizām al-Qur'ān* approach and does not undertake a comprehensive comparison with other exegetical methodologies, such as hermeneutics, semiotics, or historical-sociological analysis. Future research is therefore encouraged to expand the scope of inquiry by incorporating a broader range of methodological perspectives to achieve a more thorough understanding of the relationship between Qur'anic texts and the issue of religious pluralism. Ultimately, this study affirms that a

holistic, contextual, and methodologically rigorous reading of the Qur'an is essential to ensure that the meanings derived remain consistent with the maqṣad and the internal structure of the Qur'anic text itself.

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