



Theology from Marginalized Experience: Humanistic Islam and Transgender Muslim Subjectivity in Indonesia

Muhammad Arif^{1*} , Robby Habiba Abror² , H. Zuhri³

¹²³Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Thought, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Correspondence: ✉ muhammad.arif@uin-suka.ac.id

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Abstract

This article examines how *Santri Waria* represents the negotiation of religious subjectivity, dignity, and religious legitimacy among *waria santri* and what this negotiation reveals about humanistic Islam. Existing studies of Pesantren Waria al-Fatah have primarily approached the institution through social identity, religious space, education, embodiment, lived religion, and social precarity, while its implications for Islamic theological reflection have been examined less systematically. This study employs a qualitative critical-hermeneutic analysis of a published narrative-textual corpus, drawing primarily on Masthuriyah Sa'dan's *Santri Waria* (2020). Religious subjectivity is used as the central analytical unit and examined through religious practice, identity, piety, moral reasoning, self-understanding, communal participation, and religious agency. These dimensions are interpreted in relation to religious space, mentorship, authority, legitimacy, and epistemic exclusion. Asghar Ali Engineer provides an ethical-emancipatory lens centered on dignity, justice, and liberation, while Mohammed Arkoun offers an epistemological lens to examine the boundaries of legitimate religious knowledge and the "unthought." The analysis shows that the *waria santri* represented in the corpus negotiate Muslim belonging through religious practice, moral reasoning, communal participation, and claims to religious recognition rather than through institutional inclusion alone. The article argues that marginalized religious experience can function as a locus of theological questioning without replacing scripture, Islamic tradition, or established theological reasoning. It offers an empirically grounded account of transgender Muslim religious subjectivity and formulates Humanistic Islam as an ethical-epistemological analytical framework that connects dignity and agency through a critical examination of religious authority, legitimacy, and epistemic exclusion.

Keywords

Humanistic Islam,
religious subjectivity,
religious legitimacy,
transgender Muslim,
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Introduction

In contemporary Indonesia, *waria*—a locally specific term commonly used for transgender women—occupy a contested position at the intersection of gender identity, Islamic morality, and social recognition. This tension is visible both in authoritative

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religious discourse and in concrete institutional conflicts. In 1997, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) issued a fatwa on the status of *waria* that classified *waria* as male and prohibited forms of behavior it defined as deviant.¹ In February 2016, Pesantren Waria al-Fatah in Yogyakarta was forced to close following pressure from the Islamic Jihad Front (FJI), an episode documented by Human Rights Watch within a wider context of anti-LGBT rhetoric and restrictions.² These developments point to a question that is simultaneously social, religious, and theological: under what conditions can marginalized persons be recognized as legitimate Muslim religious subjects?

Pesantren Waria al-Fatah is significant because it provides a religious space in which *waria* engage in Qur'anic learning, prayer, religious study, and communal worship.³ Scholarship has consequently examined the pesantren in terms of social identity, religious space, institutional formation, and religious practice. Gelarina analyzes the formation of *waria* social identity at the pesantren, while Sari, Alimi, and Robinson examine its emergence as a religious space for transgender Muslims.⁴ Other studies emphasize the pesantren's social function and the development of religious practices within the community.⁵ Collectively, this scholarship establishes Pesantren Waria as an important site for understanding how marginalized transgender Muslims negotiate religious belonging.

Previous studies of Indonesian Muslim queer experience further complicate any simple opposition between transgender identity and religious commitment.⁶ Thajib demonstrates that Muslim queer religious experience is shaped through affective nego-

¹ Majelis Ulama Indonesia, "Kedudukan Waria," Fatwa MUI No. 2, October 11, 1997, <https://mui.or.id/public/storage/fatwa/449af354a2b97076de8671a0dcdb9eb2-lampiran.pdf>.

² Kyle Knight, Andreas Harsono, and Shayna Baucher, "'These Political Games Ruin Our Lives': Indonesia's LGBT Community Under Threat," Human Rights Watch, August 10, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/08/10/these-political-games-ruin-our-lives/indonesias-lgbt-community-under-threat>.

³ Masthuriyah Sa'dan, *Santri Waria: Kisah Kehidupan Pondok Pesantren Waria al-Fatah Yogyakarta* (Yogyakarta: Diva Press, 2020).

⁴ Diyala Gelarina, "Proses Pembentukan Identitas Sosial Waria di Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta," *Jurnal Kajian Islam Interdisipliner* 1, no. 1 (2016): 31–59, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jkii.v1i1.1057>; Maesa Nila Sari, Moh Yasir Alimi, and Kathryn Robinson, "Pesantren Al-Fattah: The Struggle of an Ascetic Waria to Create a Religious Space for Transgender Muslims in Indonesia," *Komunitas* 14, no. 2 (2022): 129–45, <https://doi.org/10.15294/komunitas.v14i2.37900>.

⁵ Sari, Alimi, and Robinson, "Pesantren Al-Fattah," 129–45; Isti'annah, Wibowo, and Faizin, "Santri Waria Social Space," 951–60, <https://doi.org/10.37899/journal-la-sociale.v5i4.1220>; Ahmad Zainul Asyhar, "Pendidikan Islam di Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta dalam Mengembangkan Religious Practice," *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Education Journal* 2, no. 1 (2024): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.63321/miej.v2i1.38>; Sylvia Tidey, "Requiem for a Waria: Piety and the Political Potentiality of Ironic Experience," *Social Analysis* 63, no. 1 (2019): 83–102, <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2019.630106>; Astrid Syifa Salsabila, "Examining Peacebuilding Strategies Amid Socio-Religious Conflicts: The Case of Pesantren Waria in Yogyakarta," *Jurnal Sosiologi Reflektif* 18, no. 2 (2024): 471–490, <https://doi.org/10.14421/5s2qy84>.

⁶ Tom Boellstorff, "Between Religion and Desire: Being Muslim and Gay in Indonesia," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 4 (2005): 575–85, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.4.575>; Anan Bahrul Khoir, "LGBT, Muslim, and Heterosexism: The Experiences of Muslim Gay in Indonesia," *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama dan Sosial Budaya* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jw.v5i1.8067>.

tiations among religious norms, spirituality, embodiment, and everyday life.⁷ Toomistu similarly examines how *waria* negotiate bodily experience, belonging, and religious sensitivities, while Rodríguez situates queer Muslim experience within broader negotiations of gender, sexuality, Islam, and social recognition.⁸ Fadhlina further shows that worship among trans women in Yogyakarta is intertwined with welfare, health, employment, food security, community support, and conditions of precarity.⁹ In addition, Widyantoro also examines the localization of Islamic liberation theology in relation to transgender Muslims and Pesantren Waria.¹⁰ Together, this scholarship demonstrates that religious practice, identity, embodiment, social conditions, and communal belonging are deeply interconnected.

Yet these approaches leave a more specific analytical question insufficiently developed: how are marginalized Muslims represented as religious subjects within contested religious environments, and what are the theological implications of such representation? Existing studies have generated substantial knowledge about Pesantren Waria as a social and religious space and about transgender Muslims as subjects of lived religion, but they have less often placed religious subjectivity at the center of an analysis connecting religious practice, dignity, authority, and legitimacy. It is significant with Rodríguez, because institutional inclusion does not necessarily entail recognition as a legitimate religious subject.¹¹ A person may have access to religious space while remaining positioned as an object of correction, classification, or suspicion.¹² This article addresses this gap by examining how *Santri Waria* represents *waria santri* as subjects who worship, learn, interpret religious norms, make moral judgments, participate in communal life, and articulate Muslim belonging.

The concept of *humanistic Islam* used in this article requires a distinction from related formulations of Islamic humanism, liberation theology, progressive Islam, and

⁷ Ferdiansyah Thajib, "Kaleidoscopic Feelings: Faith Narratives among Indonesian Muslim Queers," *Emotion, Space and Society* 25 (2017): 127–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2016.11.007>; Ferdiansyah Thajib, "The Making and Breaking of Indonesian Muslim Queer Safe Spaces," *Borderlands e-journal* 17, no. 1 (2018): 1–24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48782588>

⁸ Terje Toomistu, "Thinking through the S(k)in: Indonesian Waria and Bodily Negotiations of Belonging across Religious Sensitivities," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 50, no. 146 (2022): 73–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2022.2015187>; Diego García Rodríguez, *Gender, Sexuality and Islam in Contemporary Indonesia: Queer Muslims and Their Allies* (London: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003302490>.

⁹ Amirah Fadhlina, "Waria, Worship, and Welfare: Exploring Trans Women's Conditions of Precarity Amidst COVID-19 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 12, no. 1 (2024): 78–94, <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2024.1>.

¹⁰ Hary Widyantoro, "Global Islamic Liberation Theology in the Local Context of Transgendered Indonesian Muslims," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 19, no. 2 (2019): 235–59, <https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v19i2.1677>.

¹¹ Diego García Rodríguez, "Queer Religious Geographies? Qu(e)rying Indonesian Muslim Selves," *Gender, Place & Culture* 27, no. 9 (2020): 1326–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1693343>.

¹² Agung Wijianto and Farah Kholida Wahid, "Negotiating Islamic Hegemony: A Case Study of Muslim LGBT in East Java, Indonesia," *Humaniora* 13, no. 2 (2022): 119–26, <https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v13i2.7631>; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

lived religion.¹³ Here, humanistic Islam does not designate a pre-existing theological school or a doctrinal position associated with Pesantren Waria. Nor is it used simply as a synonym for religious tolerance or human rights discourse. Rather, the concept is formulated analytically through the intersection of two dimensions visible in the corpus. The first is ethical: how religious interpretation responds to dignity, exclusion, and the conditions of marginalized persons. The second is epistemological: how religious authority determines whose experience can be recognized as meaningful religious knowledge. Engineer's liberation-oriented reading of Islam provides the principal ethical lens, while Arkoun's critique of epistemic closure provides the epistemological lens. Humanistic Islam is consequently developed here as an analytical formulation that connects the ethical question of how marginalized religious subjects are treated with the epistemological question of how they become recognizable within religious discourse.

Masthuriyah Sa'dan's *Santri Waria* offers a particularly productive corpus for addressing this question because it provides an extended narrative account of Pesantren Waria al-Fatah, including its history, religious activities, teachers, and *santri*.¹⁴ The text allows religious practice, piety, identity, communal participation, and religious learning to be examined as interconnected dimensions of religious subjectivity. To interpret these representations, the article employs two complementary theoretical lenses. Asghar Ali Engineer provides an ethical-emancipatory lens concerned with justice, equality, human dignity, and liberation from oppression and dehumanization.¹⁵ Mohammed Arkoun provides an epistemological lens for examining the boundaries of legitimate religious knowledge, epistemic closure, and the "unthought" within Islamic thought.¹⁶ Neither thinker is treated as a theorist of transgender Muslims; rather, their distinct approaches are used to interpret different dimensions of the empirical findings: Engineer primarily illuminates the ethical consequences of exclusion, while Arkoun illuminates the epistemological processes through which particular subjects and experiences may be rendered marginal within religious discourse.

From this interaction, the article develops humanistic Islam as an operational analytical framework rather than as a pre-existing doctrine attributed to Pesantren Waria, Engineer, or Arkoun. Its central analytical unit is religious subjectivity, examined through religious practice, identity, piety, moral reasoning, self-understanding, communal participation, and religious agency. These dimensions are analyzed in relation to religious space, mentorship, authority, legitimacy, and epistemic exclusion. Dignity

¹³ Lenn E. Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, trans. Jonathan Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

¹⁵ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990).

¹⁶ Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, trans. Martin H. Kerr (London: Saqi, 2002).

constitutes the principal ethical dimension,¹⁷ while authority, legitimacy, and epistemic exclusion constitute the principal epistemological dimensions through which religious subjectivity is enabled, mediated, or contested. Accordingly, the article examines how *Santri Waria* represents the negotiation of religious subjectivity, dignity, and religious legitimacy among *waria santri* and what it reveals about humanistic Islam. Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis: (1) How are religious subjectivity and dignity represented through the religious practices, identities, and experiences of *waria santri*? (2) How are religious authority and legitimacy negotiated in the representation of Pesantren Waria? (3) What does this negotiation reveal for the formulation of humanistic Islam as an ethical-epistemological analytical framework?

The article argues that the *waria santri* represented in *Santri Waria* are not merely recipients of religious inclusion but active religious subjects who negotiate Muslim belonging through worship, religious learning, moral reasoning, communal participation, and claims to recognition within a contested religious environment. Their experience reveals tensions between religious dignity and dehumanization, and between religious agency and the epistemic boundaries that govern legitimate religious knowledge. Marginalized experience does not replace Qur'anic tradition, Islamic scholarship, or established theological reasoning; rather, it becomes a locus of theological questioning from which the ethical and epistemological consequences of exclusion can be examined. The article contributes, first, an empirically grounded interpretation of Pesantren Waria through the lens of religious subjectivity and, second, a conceptual formulation of humanistic Islam as an ethical-epistemological framework that connects dignity and agency and critically examines religious authority and legitimacy.

Method

This study employs a qualitative critical-hermeneutic analysis of a published narrative-textual corpus to examine how religious subjectivity, dignity, and religious legitimacy are represented in *Santri Waria*. A qualitative interpretive approach is appropriate because the study is concerned not with measuring variables or testing causal relationships, but with interpreting meanings, experiences, narratives, and constructions of religious subjectivity within a specific textual context.¹⁸ The study does not involve direct observation, interviews, or interaction with members of Pesantren Waria al-Fatah. Instead, its empirical object is the representation of the pesantren and its *waria santri* in a published narrative. This distinction is important because the study makes claims about what the corpus represents rather than about the contemporary experiences of all transgender Muslims or about the present condition of the pesantren beyond the evidence contained in the selected sources. The primary source is Masthuriyah Sa'dan's

¹⁷ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London: One-world, 2016).

¹⁸ Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>.

Santri Waria: Kisah Kehidupan Pondok Pesantren Waria al-Fatah Yogyakarta. Sa'dan is not being treated as a representative of all *waria* Muslims; the book is selected because it constitutes a sustained narrative corpus that specifically documents the institutional history, religious practices, teachers, and experiences within Pesantren Waria al-Fatah.¹⁹ Secondary sources, consisting of scholarly books, journal articles, and relevant research reports, are used primarily to contextualize the findings and support the theoretical interpretation rather than to substitute for the primary corpus.

Textual units were selected when a narrative passage explicitly described or attributed to the *waria santri* an act, reflection, interaction, or experience concerning religious practice, identity, piety, moral reasoning, communal participation, religious agency, stigma, dignity, authority, or religious legitimacy. Passages were then compared across the corpus to identify recurring patterns and significant differences rather than being treated as representative of all *waria santri*. The central analytical unit of the study is religious subjectivity, understood operationally as the ways in which the *waria santri* represented in the corpus understand, practice, negotiate, and inhabit their Muslim identity. Religious subjectivity is examined through several interconnected dimensions: religious practice, identity, piety, moral reasoning, self-understanding, communal participation, and religious agency. These dimensions provide the analytical basis for identifying how the *santri* appear in the corpus not merely as objects of religious instruction or social exclusion, but as subjects who learn, worship, interpret religious norms, make moral judgments, participate in communal practices, and articulate their relationship with God.

At the same time, religious subjectivity is not treated as an isolated or purely individual phenomenon. Its formation and recognition are examined in relation to the conditions within which religious life takes place, particularly religious space, religious mentorship, religious authority, religious legitimacy, and epistemic exclusion. Dignity functions as the principal ethical dimension connecting these processes, because the corpus repeatedly presents access to worship, recognition, and participation as questions concerning the status of marginalized persons as morally responsible religious subjects. In this study, religious legitimacy refers to the recognition of a person or community as entitled to participate, interpret, and appear as a valid subject within a religious tradition and its institutional spaces.

The analysis proceeds through four interpretive stages. First, the primary corpus is read closely and repeatedly to identify passages directly relevant to the research questions, particularly passages concerning religious practice, identity, piety, moral reasoning, religious learning, communal participation, stigma, exclusion, dignity, authority, and claims to religious legitimacy. Second, the selected passages are organized into analytical categories corresponding to the study's conceptual architecture.²⁰ Religious practice, identity, piety, moral reasoning, self-understanding, communal participation, and

¹⁹ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

²⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (London: SAGE, 2021).

agency are examined as dimensions of religious subjectivity, while religious space, mentorship, authority, legitimacy, and epistemic exclusion are treated as relational and institutional conditions through which that subjectivity is enabled, mediated, or contested. This thematic organization follows the logic of qualitative thematic analysis, in which recurring patterns of meaning are systematically identified and organized into analytically meaningful categories.²¹

The hermeneutic dimension concerns the interpretation of meanings within the narrative and its contextual relationships, whereas the critical dimension concerns the examination of the relations of authority, legitimacy, and exclusion through which those meanings are enabled, constrained, or contested. Third, the categories are subjected to critical-theological interpretation through two complementary theoretical lenses. Engineer functions as the ethical-emancipatory lens, directing attention to justice, equality, human dignity, and the ethical consequences of religious interpretation for marginalized persons.²² Arkoun functions as the epistemological lens, directing attention to the boundaries of legitimate religious knowledge, mechanisms of epistemic closure, and experiences rendered marginal or “unthought” within dominant Islamic discourses.²³ Neither thinker is treated as a direct theorist of transgender Muslim experience, nor is either framework used to predetermine the empirical findings. Rather, the two lenses are applied after the relevant patterns have been established in the corpus.

Fourth, the findings are brought together through conceptual synthesis. The synthesis moves from marginalized experience to religious space, from religious space to religious practice, from practice to religious subjectivity, and from subjectivity to contestation over religious recognition and legitimacy. The ethical significance of these processes is interpreted through Engineer, while their epistemological implications are examined through Arkoun. The resulting formulation of humanistic Islam is an analytical synthesis developed from the interaction between the empirical corpus and these two theoretical perspectives, rather than a pre-existing doctrinal category attributed to Pesantren Waria, Engineer, or Arkoun. The study consequently does not claim that *Santri Waria* presents a systematic “humanistic theology,” nor that the experiences represented in the book invalidate established Islamic theological positions. Instead, it argues that marginalized religious experience can function as a locus of theological questioning: a site from which questions of dignity, agency, religious belonging, authority, and legitimacy become visible and can be critically reconsidered. The methodological scope is deliberately situated and interpretive; the findings concern the representation contained in Sa’dan’s narrative corpus and are not intended as generalizations about all transgender Muslims or all forms of Islamic theology.

²¹ Bowen, “Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method,” 27–40.

²² Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*.

²³ Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

Result and Discussion

Pesantren Waria as a Contested Religious Space

Pesantren Waria al-Fatah emerged from a concrete problem of religious access: the difficulty waria experienced in participating safely in ordinary Muslim spaces. Sa'dan's account traces its formation to the aftermath of the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, when KH Hamrolie recognized that existing religious gatherings had not adequately addressed the spiritual needs of *waria*. The initiative was subsequently taken up by Maryani and members of the *waria* community and developed from a religious study group into a pesantren. Its emergence cannot be reduced to the establishment of another Islamic educational institution; it represented an attempt to create a religious space in which *waria* could participate in Qur'anic learning, congregational prayer, religious study, and collective worship without the fear and shame associated with exclusion from public religious spaces.²⁴ The formation of the pesantren consequently reveals that spatial access is itself a condition of religious participation: when existing religious spaces become inaccessible or threatening, the creation of an alternative space becomes part of the struggle to sustain Muslim belonging.

The contested character of this space was evident from the beginning. Sa'dan describes how some *waria* had experienced rejection or discomfort when attempting to pray in public mosques, while their social identities were frequently reduced to stereotypes associated with nightlife and sex work.²⁵ Pesantren Waria consequently functioned as a protected religious environment in which worship could be performed without the immediate pressure of such stigmatizing classifications. This function is consistent with Sari, Alimi, and Robinson's characterization of Pesantren Al-Fattah as a religious space created through the struggle of transgender Muslims to secure a place for worship.²⁶ The significance of the pesantren lies not simply in its physical separation from mainstream religious institutions but in the creation of conditions that make religious practice possible. The spatial dimension is important because exclusion operates not only through theological statements; it can also be experienced materially through the inability to enter, remain in, or worship in a recognized religious space.

The history of Pesantren Waria also demonstrates that the creation of religious space did not eliminate contestation over its meaning and purpose. In 2009, a conflict emerged when KH Hamrolie advanced a position that the *santri* understood as seeking to return *waria* to a male identity. This position conflicted with the *santri*'s understanding of their *waria* identity and contributed to Hamrolie's withdrawal from the pesantren.²⁷ The episode is analytically important because it shows that religious

²⁴ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

²⁵ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

²⁶ Maesa Nila Sari, Moh Yasir Alimi, and Kathryn Robinson, "Pesantren Al-Fattah: The Struggle of an Ascetic Waria to Create a Religious Space for Transgender Muslims in Indonesia," *Komunitas* 14, no. 2 (2022): 129–45, <https://doi.org/10.15294/komunitas.v14i2.37900>.

²⁷ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

authority within the pesantren was neither homogeneous nor uncontested. The central question was not whether *waria* should receive religious instruction, but what religious instruction was expected to accomplish: identity correction or sustained access to religious learning and worship. Following the conflict, Maryani rebuilt the network of teachers and supporters, including Ust. Abdul Muiz Ghazali and KH Abdul Muhaimin, enabling the pesantren's activities to continue.²⁸ Continuity thus emerged through negotiation over the institution's religious purpose.

External pressure subsequently intensified the contestation surrounding Pesantren Waria. In 2016, the Front Jihad Islam (FJI) targeted the pesantren and forced the suspension of its activities amid a wider escalation of anti-LGBT hostility in Indonesia. Human Rights Watch documents the closure and identifies Shinta Ratri's role in maintaining a space of worship for *waria* within this hostile environment.²⁹ Reuters subsequently reported that the pesantren remained empty for several months after the attack before gradually becoming active again as a place of refuge for transgender women.³⁰ The trajectory from formation, internal conflict, external closure, and subsequent continuation indicates that Pesantren Waria should be understood as a contested religious space whose existence depends upon continuing social and institutional work.³¹ Its continuity is not evidence that contestation has disappeared; rather, continuity itself constitutes an empirical indication of how marginalized religious subjects negotiate access to space, community, and religious life.

Religious Practice and the Restoration of Dignity

Religious practice at Pesantren Waria al-Fatah is understood not simply as a collection of ritual activities but as a means of restoring access to Muslim religious life. Sa'dan documents a range of practices, including learning to read the Qur'an and *iqra*, congregational prayer, religious study, collective supplication, *mujahadah*, repentance prayer, voluntary fasting, *tadarus*, and Yasinan.³² These activities were organized through regular communal gatherings and, particularly in the early period, could extend through the night. The diversity and continuity of these practices indicate that the pesantren was constituted as a serious site of religious formation rather than merely a social gathering for *waria*.³³ Its significance lies in the conditions it created for religious participation: practices that could otherwise be difficult to perform in public settings became part of

²⁸ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

²⁹ Knight, Harsono, and Bauchner, "These Political Games Ruin Our Lives."

³⁰ Kanupriya Kapoor, "In Indonesia, Transgender Women Find Haven in Islamic Boarding School," *Reuters*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/indonesia-transgender-women-find-haven-islamic-boarding-school-n920631>.

³¹ Sharyn Graham Davies, "Gender and Sexual Plurality in Indonesia: Past and Present," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018): 322–34, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315628837-26>.

³² Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

³³ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

an ordinary communal rhythm. Religious belonging was consequently made tangible through repeated acts of worship, learning, and participation.

The restorative dimension of these practices is particularly evident in narratives about how *waria santri* experience worship at the pesantren. Sofia, for example, was attracted to the pesantren because she could pray comfortably while wearing a *mukena*, something she found difficult to do in a *musala* or public mosque. Yunisara similarly described the pesantren as a space where she could worship according to her comfort level, while reducing her fear of being expelled from public religious spaces. Arum understood the pesantren as a place to return to worship when exhausted by everyday life.³⁴ These accounts suggest that dignity is experienced through concrete conditions of worship rather than through abstract recognition alone. The ability to pray without humiliation, anxiety, or immediate suspicion allows religious practice to become a source of security and belonging. Therefore, the pesantren restores not only access to ritual but also the affective conditions necessary for religious participation.

This restoration can be observed in the relationship between worship and religious agency. Inul's role as a *muadzin*, for instance, emerged because no one else was willing to perform the *adhan*, yet she interpreted the practice as a way to remind herself not to neglect the five daily prayers. Arum associated learning the Qur'an with changes in her everyday conduct, including a reduced desire to drink beer and a stronger commitment to avoid what she regarded as religiously prohibited behavior.³⁵ Such narratives complicate an understanding of marginalized Muslims as merely recipients of religious accommodation. The *santri* actively participate in practices through which they discipline themselves, interpret religious obligations, and cultivate particular forms of piety. Religious practice thus operates as a process of self-formation. Thajib's study of Indonesian Muslim queer experience similarly demonstrates that religious life is shaped through affective negotiations among piety, social pressure, embodiment, and everyday experience.³⁶ In the Pesantren Waria corpus, dignity is consequently connected to the capacity to practice religion and to exercise agency within that practice.

The restoration of dignity also involves the possibility of maintaining Muslim identity without accepting the assumption that *waria* identity automatically negates religious commitment. Sa'dan records narratives in which participation in the pesantren provides comfort, inner peace, and solidarity, while continued religious practice enables the *santri* to maintain their relationship with God and their community.³⁷ This is consistent with Toomistu's analysis of *waria* experiences, which shows how bodily presentation, religious sensitivity, and social belonging intersect in everyday life.³⁸ The importance of the pesantren lies not in removing difference, but in creating conditions in which dif-

³⁴ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

³⁵ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

³⁶ Thajib, "Kaleidoscopic Feelings," 127–35.

³⁷ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

³⁸ Toomistu, "Thinking through the S(k)in," 73–95.

ference does not automatically result in exclusion from worship. Religious dignity here is relational: it is sustained through a community that recognizes the *santri* as persons capable of worship, learning, moral reflection, and participation.

From an ethical perspective, this restoration can be read through Engineer's emphasis on justice, human dignity, and resistance to dehumanization. Engineer's framework is not a direct theological interpretation of *waria*; rather, it provides an analytical lens for asking what happens when access to religious practice is constrained by social stigma and exclusion.³⁹ In this case, creating a space where marginalized Muslims can learn, worship, and participate without humiliation can be interpreted as an ethical response to conditions that undermine human dignity. The point is not that every practice at Pesantren Waria constitutes a theological enactment of Engineer's thought, but that the empirical material makes visible an ethical relationship between religious access and dignity. Religious practice consequently becomes significant not only because it expresses faith, but because the conditions under which faith can be practiced affect whether marginalized persons can participate in religious life as dignified subjects.

The relationship between religious practice and dignity also extends beyond ritual to forms of communal solidarity. Studies of Pesantren Waria indicate that religious activities have developed alongside forms of social support responding to vulnerability, including food security, health-related assistance, and employment initiatives.⁴⁰ Fadhlina's study further situates worship among trans women in Yogyakarta within broader conditions of precarity, demonstrating that religious life cannot be analytically separated from material circumstances.⁴¹ This evidence indicates that the capacity to sustain religious life is connected to the social conditions in which people live. In this sense, the restoration of dignity at Pesantren Waria operates at two interconnected levels: access to worship and the conditions that enable continued participation in communal life. The finding provides a transition to the next analytical question—how these practices shape the *waria santri* not merely as participants in a religious space, but as religious subjects who exercise agency, negotiate identity, and articulate their own forms of piety.

Table 1 clarifies that religious subjectivity is the analytical category that connects these dimensions, rather than a single dimension among them. Religious practice provides the observable form of participation; identity and self-understanding indicate how the subject interprets that participation; piety and moral reasoning demonstrate processes of self-formation; communal participation establishes a social context; and agency captures the capacity to act within religious life. This multidimensional structure provides the basis for examining how the *santri* represented in *Santri Waria* negotiate their Muslim identity rather than simply receive religious recognition from others.

³⁹ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*.

⁴⁰ Fadhlina, "Waria, Worship, and Welfare," 78–94.

⁴¹ Fadhlina, "Waria, Worship, and Welfare."

Table 1. Representation of Religious Subjectivity in *Santri Waria*

Dimension	Representation in the Corpus	Interpretive Focus
Religious Practice	Qur'anic learning, <i>salat</i> , fasting, <i>mujahadah</i> , <i>tadarus</i> , <i>Yasinan</i> , and <i>pengajian</i>	Participation in Islamic devotional life
Identity	Negotiation of <i>waria</i> and Muslim identities	Muslim belonging and self-understanding
Piety	Worship, spiritual aspiration, discipline, and moral self-formation	Religious commitment under conditions of stigma
Moral Reasoning	Reflection on identity, conduct, responsibility, and religious norms	Agency in negotiating Islamic morality
Self-understanding	Interpretations of being <i>waria</i> , being Muslim, and relating to God	Formation of religious selfhood
Communal Participation	Collective learning, worship, religious functions, and community activities	Recognition as an active religious participant
Religious Agency	Learning, worshipping, interpreting, and contributing to communal religious life	Active formation of religious subjectivity

Source: Compiled from Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

Transgender Muslims as Religious Subjects

The narratives in *Santri Waria* represent the *waria santri* not merely as recipients of *dakwah* or beneficiaries of religious inclusion, but as active religious subjects who interpret, practice, and negotiate their Muslim belonging. Religious subjectivity in this corpus is not reducible to gender identity. It emerges through the interaction of religious motivation, worship, piety, moral reasoning, self-understanding, communal participation, and religious agency.⁴² Desi Tampi, for example, understands studying at the pesantren as a basic need as a Muslim rather than as an optional activity. The pesantren also broadens her social and religious horizon through encounters with *ustaz*, *ustazah*, and other religious figures. Arum similarly returns to the pesantren with the specific intention of learning religion, particularly reading the Qur'an.⁴³ These accounts indicate that religious participation is grounded in intentional engagement with Islamic learning rather than simply in the institutional availability of a religious space.

Religious practice further functions as a process through which the *santri* cultivate and regulate themselves. Inul assumes the role of *muadzin* when no one else is willing to perform the *azan*. For her, calling the prayer is simultaneously a service to the community and a means of disciplining herself to maintain the five daily prayers. Arum likewise associates Qur'anic learning with changes in everyday conduct, including a reduced desire to drink beer and a stronger commitment to avoid practices she considers religiously prohibited.⁴⁴ These narratives suggest that piety is represented as an ongoing

⁴² Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁴³ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁴⁴ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

process of self-formation rather than as a fixed condition uniformly achieved by all *santri*. This is important for understanding religious subjectivity because agency here operates through ordinary practices of learning, discipline, and moral adjustment. The *santri* are neither portrayed simply as conforming to a predetermined religious ideal nor as rejecting Islamic norms; rather, they negotiate religious expectations in light of their own circumstances and understandings.

The negotiation becomes particularly explicit in the relationship between *waria* identity and Muslim identity. Desi's formulation, "I am waria, I am Muslim," directly challenges the assumption that these identities are mutually exclusive.⁴⁵ Her position also rejects the broader social judgment that *waria* are inherently sinful or destined for hell. Marimas articulates a more differentiated moral position by distinguishing *waria* identity from particular sexual behaviors that she considers sinful. Rully similarly understands her *waria* identity as a destiny or gift from Allah and connects this understanding to an ethical responsibility toward family and society.⁴⁶ These accounts should not be interpreted as a uniform theological position among *waria santri*. Rather, they demonstrate different forms of moral reasoning through which religious subjects interpret identity, responsibility, and religious norms. Subjectivity consequently emerges through the capacity to articulate a position within an existing moral and theological vocabulary.

Religious subjectivity is also relational and affective. Sofia describes the *pesantren* as a place where she can pray comfortably in a *mukena*, while Yunisara emphasizes the freedom to worship without the fear of being expelled from public religious spaces. Gayatri associates regular attendance with inner peace and mutual support among *waria*.⁴⁷ Such experiences show that religious belonging is constituted not only through doctrinal affirmation or ritual performance but also through embodied feelings of safety, recognition, and communal connection. This observation is consistent with Thajib's account of Indonesian Muslim queer experience, in which religious life is negotiated through the interaction of spirituality, embodiment, affect, and everyday social conditions.⁴⁸ Toomistu likewise demonstrates that questions of bodily experience and belonging are closely connected to religious sensitivities in the lives of *waria*.⁴⁹ The *santri* appear in the corpus as embodied and relational religious subjects whose understanding of Islam develops through both religious practice and lived social experience.

Taken together, these narratives indicate that religious subjectivity among the *waria santri* is best understood as situated agency. Their agency does not mean unrestricted freedom from religious norms, nor does it imply that every individual narrative constitutes a coherent theological doctrine. Instead, agency appears in their decisions to

⁴⁵ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁴⁶ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*; Sari, Alimi, and Robinson, "Pesantren Al-Fattah," 129–45.

⁴⁷ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁴⁸ Thajib, "Kaleidoscopic Feelings," 127–35.

⁴⁹ Toomistu, "Thinking through the S(k)in," 73–95.

learn the Qur'an, participate in worship, assume religious roles, regulate conduct, interpret identity, and articulate claims to Muslim belonging within conditions of stigma and contested recognition. This distinction is crucial: Pesantren Waria does not simply make religious inclusion possible; it provides conditions in which marginalized persons can appear and act as religious subjects.⁵⁰

Religious Mentorship as Ethical Mediation

The narratives of religious teachers in *Santri Waria* indicate that religious mentorship at Pesantren Waria operates not simply as the transmission of established Islamic knowledge, but as a process of mediating religious knowledge within the social circumstances of marginalized Muslims. The teachers represented in the corpus respond to the *santri* not only as learners who require instruction, but as persons whose access to religious life has been constrained by stigma and exclusion.⁵¹ Religious mentorship becomes an important relational condition for the formation of religious subjectivity: it connects Islamic learning with the concrete experiences of those seeking to participate in Muslim religious life. This mediation does not necessarily produce a single theological position; rather, it creates a space in which Islamic teachings can be interpreted and communicated in relation to the needs and circumstances of the *santri*.

One important example is Ust. Murtejo, who became involved in teaching Qur'anic studies to marginalized groups through his relationship with Maryani and the pesantren community. His involvement illustrates a form of religious education grounded in accompaniment rather than institutional distance.⁵² Religious instruction in this context serves a dual function: transmitting basic Islamic knowledge while simultaneously affirming the possibility of marginalized persons participating in religious learning. The importance of such mentorship lies not only in what is taught but also in the relational conditions under which learning takes place. When religious teachers regard *waria santri* as legitimate learners, Qur'anic instruction becomes a means of sustaining religious participation. Religious authority is consequently exercised through an interpersonal relationship in which knowledge, recognition, and ethical responsibility intersect.

This mediating function becomes more explicit in Ust. Abdul Muiz Ghazali's position. In Sa'dan's account, Muiz questions a model of *dakwah* in which the primary objective is to make its audience resemble the preacher. Instead, he emphasizes a form of religious guidance that accompanies people within their existing circumstances.⁵³ This distinction is analytically important because it shifts the function of religious authority from correcting the religious subject toward enabling the subject to engage with Islamic knowledge. Read through Engineer's ethical-emancipatory perspective, such mediation foregrounds human dignity as a condition of religious engagement: Islamic teaching

⁵⁰ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁵¹ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁵² Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁵³ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

becomes meaningful when it addresses persons as moral subjects rather than reducing them to objects of correction.⁵⁴ The point, however, is not that Muiz explicitly formulated Engineer's theology, but that his pedagogical orientation can be interpreted through an ethical framework concerned with dignity and liberation from dehumanizing forms of religious exclusion.

Other teachers represented in the corpus articulate a similar emphasis on freedom, humanity, and the right to worship. For example, Ust. Maulidi al-Hasani and Ust. Muzayin Ahyar frame religious engagement with *waria* by recognizing their humanity and capacity to participate in religious life.⁵⁵ Such positions complicate an understanding of religious authority as inherently synonymous with identity correction. Within the *pesantren*, authority is negotiated through different interpretations of what religious guidance should accomplish: whether it should primarily regulate identity or facilitate religious learning, worship, and moral development. The coexistence of these orientations demonstrates that religious authority is internally differentiated. It is constituted not only by possession of religious knowledge but also by the ethical way that knowledge is mediated to religious subjects.

The account of Ust. Arief Nuh Safri further illustrates this mediating role. His distinction between gender identity, sexual orientation, and behavior challenges the tendency to treat *waria* identity as equivalent to a single category of religious or moral transgression.⁵⁶ His explanation of the distinction between identity and conduct creates conceptual space to discuss Islamic morality without collapsing the person into the behavior being evaluated. This does not eliminate disagreement over gender, sexuality, or Islamic norms; rather, it demonstrates how religious mentorship can introduce distinctions that enable more differentiated forms of religious reasoning. Taken together, these narratives show that mentorship is a key mechanism through which religious authority becomes relational and interpretive. The teachers do not simply transmit knowledge downward; their interactions with the *santri* mediate how Islamic knowledge is encountered, understood, and applied. This leads directly to the question of religious legitimacy: if marginalized Muslims can learn, worship, reason morally, and participate in religious community, on what basis are they nevertheless denied recognition as legitimate religious subjects?

Contesting Religious Legitimacy and Epistemic Exclusion

The existence of *Pesantren Waria al-Fatah* demonstrates that religious legitimacy cannot be determined solely by the presence of recognizable Islamic practices. The *santri* represented in Sa'dan's narrative engage in Qur'anic learning, prayer, *pengajian*, fasting, *mujahadah*, and communal worship, yet their position as legitimate Muslim subjects remains contested. The issue concerns not only whether *waria* practice Islam,

⁵⁴ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*.

⁵⁵ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁵⁶ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

but also who possesses the authority to define, recognize, and regulate legitimate Muslim religious life. In this context, religious legitimacy operates across several interconnected levels: normative classification, religious pedagogy, social recognition, and access to religious space. The case consequently reveals a distinction between religious participation and religious recognition: a person may participate actively in Islamic practices while remaining contested within dominant categories of Muslim identity.⁵⁷

One important source of this contestation is the 1997 fatwa issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) concerning the status of *waria*. The fatwa classifies *waria* within a male/female binary framework, treating *waria* as male rather than as a separate sex category, and distinguishes the condition of being *waria* from behaviors it considers religiously prohibited. It also frames religious guidance as a return to *waria*'s "original nature" and recommends the dissolution of *waria* communities.⁵⁸ For this study, the importance of the fatwa does not lie in treating it as a comprehensive representation of Indonesian Islamic thought, but in examining it as a formal instance of authoritative religious discourse that establishes categories through which *waria* can be interpreted. Such categorization has epistemological consequences: when *waria* are primarily constituted as subjects in need of correction, their experiences of worship, Qur'anic learning, moral reflection, and religious belonging may become secondary to the normative category imposed upon them. Sa'dan's account instead represents *waria santri* as persons who continue to inhabit Islamic practices and articulate Muslim belonging from within their own lived circumstances.⁵⁹

The internal conflict surrounding KH Hamrolie in 2009 reveals that religious authority itself is neither singular nor internally uniform. Hamrolie's orientation toward returning *waria* to their socially recognized male identity conflicted with the *santri*'s understanding of the *pesantren* as a place for learning, worship, and religious companionship without making identity correction a precondition for participation.⁶⁰ The conflict is better understood as a contest over the purpose and mode of religious authority than simply as a disagreement between religious and non-religious positions. Both orientations operated within an Islamic vocabulary, but they differed over what *dakwah* should accomplish: whether religious guidance should normalize the subject according to a prescribed identity or facilitate continued engagement with religious knowledge and worship. The subsequent reorganization of the *pesantren* demonstrates that its religious legitimacy was negotiated through relationships among *santri*, teachers, and wider Muslim networks rather than secured by a single authority.⁶¹

The contestation subsequently acquired a more explicit spatial dimension in 2016. Human Rights Watch documented the pressure exerted by the Front Jihad Islam (FJI)

⁵⁷ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁵⁸ Majelis Ulama Indonesia, "Kedudukan Waria."

⁵⁹ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁶⁰ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁶¹ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

against Pesantren Waria al-Fatah, including demands for its closure and the forced interruption of its activities. The episode occurred amid a broader escalation of anti-LGBT rhetoric and hostility in Indonesia during that period.⁶² The significance of this episode extends beyond the temporary disruption of an institution. It demonstrates how disputes over religious and social legitimacy can become struggles over who may occupy and maintain religious space. When the legitimacy of waria as religious subjects is questioned, the physical spaces where they learn and worship can themselves become vulnerable. Religious legitimacy is thus not merely discursive; it can have material consequences for access to collective worship, education, and community formation.

This dynamic can be interpreted cautiously through Arkoun's critique of epistemic closure. Arkoun draws attention to the ways established structures of religious knowledge delimit what can be legitimately thought, discussed, or recognized within an intellectual tradition. His concept of the "unthought" is useful here not because Arkoun directly addressed transgender Muslims, but because it provides a framework for examining how certain experiences may remain outside the recognized horizon of theological reflection.⁶³ Applied to the present corpus, the question is not whether the religious experience of *waria* is automatically theologically valid, but whether that experience is permitted to become an object of serious religious inquiry before it is classified as illegitimate. It means that epistemic inclusion does not require prior theological agreement; it requires that an experience be available for examination within the field of legitimate inquiry.

The contestation surrounding Pesantren Waria consequently operates through several mutually reinforcing layers. At the normative level, waria are categorized through established religious classifications; at the pedagogical level, the purpose of *da'wah* is contested between correction and accompaniment; at the social and institutional level, stigma and coercive action can restrict access to religious space; and at the epistemological level, the case raises the question of whose religious experience can enter legitimate theological reflection.⁶⁴ Yet the persistence of the pesantren also shows that exclusion does not automatically eliminate religious agency. Its activities were reorganized following internal conflict, leadership transition, and external disruption, allowing the community to continue its religious and social functions. This continuity should not be interpreted as evidence that the underlying theological disputes have been resolved. Rather, it indicates that marginalized Muslims may continue to negotiate religious belonging even when recognition by dominant religious discourse remains unsettled.⁶⁵

⁶² Knight, Harsono, and Bauchner, "These Political Games Ruin Our Lives."

⁶³ Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

⁶⁴ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁶⁵ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*; Dony Arung Triantoro and Ardiansyah, "Negotiation and Contestation of Islamic Religious Practices of the Transvestites in Yogyakarta," *Cakrawala: Jurnal Studi Islam* 13, no. 2 (2018): 88–101, <https://doi.org/10.31603/cakrawala.v13i2.2303>.

The findings suggest that epistemic inclusion should not be equated with the automatic validation of every theological claim made by marginalized subjects. The narratives in *Santri Waria* do not, by themselves, invalidate established Islamic positions or establish a universal theological position concerning transgender identity. Their significance is more specific: theological reflection becomes analytically incomplete when the experiences of marginalized Muslims are excluded before the theological questions themselves are formulated. The *waria santri* represented in Sa'dan's corpus are not merely objects upon whom religious categories are imposed; they learn, worship, interpret, make moral judgments, negotiate identity, and participate in communal religious life. Their experiences consequently expose two interconnected problems—an ethical problem of exclusion and an epistemological problem of recognition. These two dimensions provide the basis for the final synthesis of Humanistic Islam as an ethical-epistemological analytical framework.⁶⁶

Table 2. Negotiating Religious Authority and Legitimacy

Dimension	Empirical/Discursive Expression	Interpretive Focus
Religious Space	Formation and continuity of Pesantren Waria amid exclusion	Access to legitimate religious space
Religious Authority	Competing approaches to <i>dakwah</i> and religious teaching	How religious guidance is mediated
Religious Legitimacy	Contestation over <i>waria</i> identity and Muslim belonging	Recognition of <i>waria</i> as legitimate Muslim subjects
Normative Discourse	MUI classification of <i>waria</i>	Construction of normative religious categories
Epistemic Exclusion	Marginalized religious experience challenged by dominant discourse	Whose religious experience can enter legitimate knowledge?
Communal Persistence	Continuation of worship and religious community after disruption	Negotiation of belonging despite contested legitimacy

Sources: Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*; Majelis Ulama Indonesia, "Kedudukan Waria"; Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*; Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*; Knight, Harsono, and Bauchner, "These Political Games Ruin Our Lives."

Table 2 summarizes the study's second analytical movement. Religious authority and legitimacy are not treated as abstract theological categories detached from practice. They become visible through the interaction of religious space, teaching, normative classification, communal persistence, and the recognition—or non-recognition—of *waria santri* as legitimate religious subjects.

From Marginalized Experience to Humanistic Islamic Reflection

The preceding findings indicate that the religious experience represented in *Santri Waria* is not adequately understood as either a simple demand for inclusion or a rejec-

⁶⁶ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

tion of dominant religious norms. The narratives show a community that creates and sustains religious space, participates in established Islamic practices, develops forms of piety and moral reasoning, engages religious teachers, and continues to negotiate its legitimacy within contested religious discourse.⁶⁷ The analytical movement across these findings is from space to practice, from practice to subjectivity, and from subjectivity to contestation. Marginalized experience becomes significant at the point where these processes expose questions that are simultaneously ethical and epistemological: how should marginalized Muslims be treated within religious communities, and whose experience can become recognizable as religious knowledge? Humanistic Islam is formulated here as an analytical response to these questions rather than as a doctrinal description of Pesantren Waria.

The ethical dimension of this formulation is most clearly illuminated by Engineer's concern with liberation, justice, and human dignity.⁶⁸ In the corpus, dignity is not presented as an abstract principle detached from religious life. It becomes visible through access to prayer, Qur'anic learning, communal worship, religious participation, and the ability to exercise moral agency without being reduced entirely to a stigmatized identity. The significance of Pesantren Waria lies partly in its capacity to restore access to religious practices through which marginalized persons can participate as worshippers, learners, and members of a Muslim community. This does not mean that the pesantren resolves broader theological disagreements concerning gender or sexuality. Rather, it demonstrates how exclusion from religious participation produces an ethical problem inseparable from questions of dignity and human agency. Humanistic Islam, in this ethical sense, directs theological reflection toward the consequences that religious interpretations have for the lives and capacities of marginalized persons.

The findings further indicate that dignity cannot be separated from agency. The *waria santri* represented in the corpus do not merely receive religious accommodation from teachers or institutions; they interpret their own Muslim belonging, distinguish identity from conduct, cultivate piety, perform communal religious functions, and negotiate Islamic norms through their lived circumstances.⁶⁹ Religious agency is better understood as situated interpretive agency rather than as simple resistance to religious authority.⁷⁰ This distinction prevents two opposite reductions: treating *waria santri* as passive objects of religious classification, or romanticizing them as subjects whose experience automatically overrides established Islamic reasoning. Their agency instead operates within an inherited Islamic vocabulary of worship, morality, responsibility, and belonging. Humanistic Islam consequently treats marginalized religious subjects

⁶⁷ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁶⁸ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*.

⁶⁹ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁷⁰ Febi R. Ramadhan, "Of Agency, Allah, and Authority: The Making of a Divine Trial among Muslims with Same-Sex Attraction in Indonesia," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 30, no. 1 (2024): 150–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.14053>; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

as participants in theological questioning while retaining the distinction between lived experience and doctrinal authority.

The epistemological dimension becomes visible through the contestation over religious legitimacy.⁷¹ The MUI classification of *waria*, internal disagreement over the purpose of *dakwah*, and external pressure against Pesantren Waria demonstrate that religious categories do not merely describe subjects; they can also determine the conditions under which subjects become recognizable as legitimate participants in religious life.⁷² Arkoun's critique of epistemic closure is useful here because it highlights the boundaries through which particular questions, experiences, and forms of knowledge become difficult to articulate or recognize.⁷³ The present study does not claim that *waria* experience constitutes Arkoun's "unthought" in a literal historical sense. Rather, his framework helps identify an analogous epistemological problem in the corpus: religiously active subjects may remain difficult to recognize within dominant categories of religious knowledge. Humanistic Islam requires an epistemological concern with who can appear not merely as an object of religious judgment but as a subject capable of knowing, interpreting, and articulating religious meaning.

This epistemological point clarifies the meaning of marginalized experience as a locus of theological reflection. The argument is not that experience replaces the Qur'an, Islamic tradition, *fiqh*, or theological reasoning, nor that the experience of a marginalized group automatically constitutes theological truth. Rather, experience provides a hermeneutical location from which established categories can be examined in relation to concrete human conditions.⁷⁴ The narratives in *Santri Waria* raise questions about the relationship between religious dignity and access to worship, between *dakwah* and identity correction, between religious authority and recognition, and between normative classification and lived religious experience. These questions emerge from the tensions documented in the corpus itself. Marginalized experience thus does not function as a substitute for tradition but as a site from which the ethical and epistemological consequences of existing religious arrangements can become visible.⁷⁵

Therefore, humanistic Islam can be formulated as an ethical-epistemological framework with two mutually related dimensions. Its ethical dimension, informed principally by Engineer, asks whether religious interpretation protects dignity, enables agency, and resists forms of exclusion and dehumanization.⁷⁶ Its epistemological dimension, informed by Arkoun, asks whose experience can enter legitimate religious discourse and how established categories may restrict the range of religious subjects and

⁷¹ Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*.

⁷² Majelis Ulama Indonesia, "Kedudukan Waria"; Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*.

⁷³ Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

⁷⁴ Sa'dan, *Santri Waria*; Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

⁷⁵ Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).

⁷⁶ Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*.

questions that can be recognized.⁷⁷ The two dimensions converge in Pesantren Waria because the exclusion of marginalized Muslims operates simultaneously through material conditions, social recognition, religious authority, and knowledge categories. Humanistic Islam does not simply add “human dignity” to an existing theological system; it connects the ethical consequences of exclusion with the epistemological processes through which exclusion becomes intelligible and legitimate.

Table 3. From Marginalized Experience to Humanistic Islam

Empirical Finding	Ethical Dimension	Epistemological Dimension	Implication for Humanistic Islam
Restricted access to religious space	Dignity as access to worship	Who can legitimately inhabit religious space?	Religious inclusion requires meaningful participation
Qur’anic learning and communal worship	Restoration of religious agency	<i>Waria santri</i> appear as religious practitioners and knowers	Religious subjectivity cannot be reduced to identity
Moral reasoning about identity and conduct	Moral agency and responsibility	Marginalized subjects interpret Islamic norms	Experience becomes a locus of theological questioning
Religious mentorship	Ethical mediation and recognition	Authority is relational and contested	Religious authority can mediate rather than simply normalize
Contestation over religious legitimacy	Exclusion, stigma, and dignity	Boundaries of legitimate religious knowledge	Epistemic closure becomes an object of critical reflection
Persistence after exclusion and disruption	Human flourishing and communal continuity	Continued religious presence challenges exclusionary classifications	Dignity relates to conditions of religious belonging
Marginalized experience as a theological locus	Liberation from dehumanization	Expansion of what can enter theological reflection	Humanistic Islam connects ethical dignity with epistemological recognition

Source: Compiled from Masthuriyah Sa’dan, *Santri Waria*; Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*; and Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

The contribution of this formulation is consequently both empirical and conceptual. Empirically, the study places religious subjectivity at the center of an analysis of Pesantren Waria, showing how worship, piety, moral reasoning, communal participation, and religious agency interact with contested conditions of religious legitimacy. Conceptually, it connects these experiences to an ethical-epistemological framework in which dignity, agency, authority, and recognition are analyzed together.⁷⁸ The formulation remains deliberately situated: it derives from the representation of Pesantren Waria in Sa’dan’s text and does not claim to represent all transgender Muslims in Indonesia or to resolve wider Islamic theological debates concerning gender and sexuality. Its

⁷⁷ Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

⁷⁸ Sa’dan, *Santri Waria*; Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology*; Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

broader implication is methodological and theological: marginalized religious experience can be taken seriously as a locus from which Islamic theology examines the ethical consequences and epistemological boundaries of its own categories. In operational terms, humanistic Islam in this study consists of two interrelated commitments: an ethical commitment to dignity and agency, and an epistemological commitment to examining authority, legitimacy, and the boundaries of recognizable religious knowledge.

Conclusion

This study examined how *Santri Waria* represents the negotiation of religious subjectivity, dignity, and religious legitimacy among *waria santri* and what this negotiation reveals about humanistic Islam. The findings show that religious subjectivity is represented through an interconnected set of practices and experiences rather than through identity alone. Pesantren Waria provides a religious space in which marginalized Muslims participate in Qur'anic learning, prayer, fasting, *pengajian*, and communal worship. These practices make religious belonging visible as an embodied and communal form of participation. The santri further exercise religious agency through moral reasoning, piety, self-understanding, communal participation, and religious functions. Therefore, religious subjectivity is not simply a status granted by institutional inclusion but an ongoing process of inhabiting, interpreting, and practicing Muslim belonging. The study also demonstrates that this subjectivity is mediated and contested through relations of religious authority and legitimacy. Religious teachers play different roles in negotiating whether *da'wah* should operate through identity correction, religious accompaniment, moral guidance, or by creating access to worship. At the same time, the MUI classification of *waria*, internal disagreement within the pesantren, and external pressure against the institution demonstrate that recognition as a legitimate Muslim subject is shaped by normative and epistemological boundaries. Engineer's ethical-emancipatory perspective illuminates the implications of these boundaries for dignity and agency, while Arkoun's epistemological critique helps identify how established categories can restrict whose experiences become recognizable within religious discourse.

On this basis, the article formulates Humanistic Islam as an ethical-epistemological analytical framework rather than as a pre-existing doctrine attributed to Pesantren Waria, Engineer, or Arkoun. Its ethical dimension concerns dignity, agency, justice, and the consequences of exclusion; its epistemological dimension concerns authority, legitimacy, recognition, and the boundaries of legitimate religious knowledge. The conceptual contribution is not to propose marginalized experience as a replacement for scripture or Islamic tradition, but to demonstrate that marginalized religious experience can function as a legitimate locus of theological questioning. Such a locus allows theological categories to be examined in relation to the concrete conditions under which religious subjects worship, interpret, participate, and experience exclusion.

The study remains empirically situated in Sa'dan's narrative representation of Pesantren Waria and does not claim to generalize its findings to all transgender Muslims or to resolve wider Islamic theological debates concerning gender and sexuality. Its contribution is instead to provide an empirically grounded account of transgender Muslim religious subjectivity and to connect that subjectivity with ethical and epistemological questions of dignity, agency, authority, and legitimacy. Further research using ethnographic, interview-based, and comparative materials could examine how the forms of religious subjectivity identified here are negotiated in contemporary Muslim communities beyond the textual representation analyzed in this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Muhammad Arif: Conceptualization (lead); writing – original draft (lead); formal analysis (equal); writing – review and editing (equal). Robby H. Abror: writing – review and editing (equal); formal analysis (supporting); methodology (equal); conceptualization (supporting). H. Zuhri: writing – review and editing (equal); formal analysis (supporting); methodology (equal); conceptualization (supporting). All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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The authors used Grammarly for grammar checking and language refinement. The final content, interpretation, and conclusions are entirely the authors' own responsibility."

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