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## Social Justice, Community Empowerment, and Constructive Muslim Theology

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper starts from a theoretical perspective on the shifting paradigm of community empowerment/development which positions religion as a crucial variable in socio-community change. Borrowing and utilizing decolonial perspectives as its theoretical framework and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its research method, this paper then traces the genealogy of Islamic discourses on justice and how they exercised within the practices of community development/empowerment in Muslim communities. While answering these two main questions, it also demonstrates power relations in religious interpretation and practice, as well as their relationship to community development/empowerment. The paper concludes with a critical reflection after analyzing several case studies of community empowerment efforts.*

**Keywords** : *Justice, Community Development, Modernization, Secularization, Coloniality, Constructive Muslim Theology*

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## INTRODUCTION

Conventional modernization theories believe that the more advanced and modern a society becomes, the smaller and weaker the role or influence of religious teachings and traditional values held by the community. Hence, what is commonly known as “secularization,” besides occurring in the academic world, its empirical symptoms are visible in the choices of empowerment or community development movements where activists, generally adherents of conventional modernization. Theory, often view religious teachings and traditional values as obstacles to progress—instead of making them as an integral part of empowerment practices (Tugrul Keskin, 2011: 6 -7).

The above tendency was a dominant phenomenon until the end of the 20th century and only began to experience radical changes when even sociologists of religion who originally was a proponent of the theory of secularization such as Peter L. Berger, for example, stated the error of his thesis in 1999 and stated firmly in the book he edited, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, that “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” (Peter L. Berger, 1999: 2).

With regard to community empowerment/development, awareness of a world experiencing desecularization (disenchanted world) emerges, for example, in the belief in the existence of "the nexus between religion and development". Without claiming that religion is the answer to all social problems, and neglecting the fact that religion can also become a social problem in itself, various theoretical and practical efforts have begun to emerge to bring religion into the spheres (discursive and practical) of community development (Matthew Clarke, 2013: 5). As will be shown in the subsequent part of this paper, the experiences of Indonesian Muslim community development are no exception.

By acknowledging the theoretical basis of the intersection between religion and community development/empowerment, this paper also sheds its light to link community development and social justice by investigating and explaining two main themes: the genealogy of the idea of justice in Islam and how community development practices work. In so doing, this paper deploys decolonial perspectives—informed by some theories proposed by decolonial scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (2018), Talal Asad (2009: 1-30), Ovamir Anjum (2007: 656-672), and Wael Hallaq (2012, 2019)—as its theoretical framework and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its research method (Haryatmoko, 2017).

## **METHOD**

Critical Discourse Analysis, as commonly known, constitutes an approach to discourse studies that puts special emphasis on the relationship between language, power and ideology. It sheds its light on how texts or discourses function in social and political contexts, and how language can influence and be influenced by power structures and social relationships. With regard to the text in Critical Discourse Analysis, it can be represented in various forms: writing, images, video, or audio, particularly when they convey a certain message or information. The Critical Discourse Analysis approach can be applied to these different types of texts to understand how they function in their social and cultural contexts (Haryatmoko, 2017). Throughout this research, however, the texts analysed are limited and focused on academic works having to do with the themes of social justice in Islam from its classical era to its contemporary ones. Particular emphasis are put on how the thoughts of Constructive Muslim Theology regarding social justice are brought into practices in a number of community development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

The development of Islamic thought on justice spans from classical antiquity to the contemporary era and has undergone radical changes following developments in both scientific disciplines and the ideological preferences behind them. Therefore, in the early modern era, when some Muslim scholars, particularly those in the Indonesian Muslim community, uncritically followed Western ideas on justice, their practical interpretations of the concept of justice also aligned with Western ideas. However, when the dominant paradigm on social justice underwent a radical shift, as the positivist-secularist paradigm was challenged, social empowerment movements that translated various Islamic thoughts on social justice also underwent a radical shift. In other words, a growing number of community empowerment activists conducted their activities using Constructive Muslim Theology as their reference. Various increasingly philanthropic activities in today Indonesian community development and faith-based education exercises are its examples par excellence.

### **Discussion**

#### **Genealogy of the Idea of Justice in Islam**

Justice is a crucial concept in human life, including in the context of Muslim society. Social justice is key to achieving prosperity, peace, and harmony in society. The Quran, as a source of law and a guide for Muslims, provides numerous "general guidelines" on how society should live

together in order to achieve social justice. Therefore, we find abundant literature on the topic of justice in academic works from both classical and contemporary eras. It is no exaggeration to say that justice is the single unifying ethical theme in the history of Islamic thought (Yamani, 2002: 5-34; Musallam, 1993: 52-70; Brockopp, 2003: 69-73; Hamka, 1951; Abou-Bakr, 2023; Harvey and Tutt, 2023; Harvey, 2017).

In Islamic literature, justice is generally understood as "I'tha'i kulli dzi haqqin haqqah" "giving/fulfilling each person or subject what is his or her right"—with its opposite being injustice: a condition when what is a legitimate right for a human or other subject cannot be fulfilled (Mas'udi, 2010: 152-154). Broadly speaking, the issue of justice, as noted by Ramon Harvey and Daniel Tutt, can actually be traced back to the early days of Islam, even to the events of the *hifl al-fudhul*. The Mu'tazilah group's claim that they were "ahl al-'adl wa al-tawhid" at the end of the political leadership of the al-Khulafa al-Rasyidun also represents an early epistemic debate related to the issue of justice, which later found debate partners from, for example, the Asy'ariyah and Maturidiyah epistemic communities (Harvey and Tutt, 2023: 1-25).

The discourse of justice increasingly gained its accentuation in the figure of the great Ash'ariyah theologian and Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) when in a chapter of his magnum opus, *Ihya 'Ulum al-Diin*, entitled "Kitab Aadaab al- Ma'isyah wa Akhlaq al-Nubuwwah" explicitly refers to the Prophet Muhammad as "the wisest man (ahlam), knight (asyja' ), just (a'dal ), and self-protective (a'aff)" (al-Ghazali, 2015: 480-481). Interestingly, although it can be traced in various hadiths, al-Ghazali's depiction of the Prophet's personality is in line with Plato's description of the four cardinal virtues in his *Republic*. What al-Ghazali did at first glance could be considered a coincidence; but, what is certain is that al-Ghazali received criticism from a scientist who emerged two centuries later, Ibn Taymiyah (d. 728/1328), who considered him to be involved in the wave of Hellenism.

As in the pre-modern era, the discourse of justice in Islam also continued—not to say its resonance grew stronger—in the colonial and post-colonial eras when injustice/oppression/exploitation befell Muslims due to contact with, and colonization by, the West; a condition that, whether acknowledged or not, became a precedent for the growth of the idea of the nation-state, and its birth in the former colonial region seemed to be a *conditio sine qua non*. Another paradox is that the political, social, and intellectual instability that befell Muslims due to colonization also contributed in its development in expanding various trajectories of new thought that influenced the struggle for liberation and freedom for the realization of justice.

Thus, colonialism, with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 as its most symbolic marker, has radically transformed Muslim societies. We can, therefore, draw a dividing line to distinguish the characteristics of pre-modern/pre-colonial Muslim societies from the colonial-postcolonial eras by emphasizing that, while in the former Muslim political leaders relied heavily on a network of qadis who were completely autonomous in implementing sharia and civil regulations (*qanun/civil code*); in the colonial-postcolonial period, this autonomy was shattered. Although it must be immediately added that, despite the fact that colonialism was the main cause, the ideology of capitalism, the birth of the nation-state, the separation of religion from the state (secularism)—as an integral part of the colonial project—and the advancement of science and technology were actively involved in eliminating the autonomy of Muslim societies, which ultimately contributed to the transformation of the idea of justice among Muslims.

Regarding this process, Wael Hallaq calls it "the major structural demolition of Islam's institutions"; a "structural genocide" that results in—to use Hallaq's words—"the death of a habitus, of a particular way of honing the self within a communal and a socio-epistemically shared environment, with its own doxa, and fairly unique assumptions" (Hallaq, 2019: 4-8). With this historical awareness, scholar like Wael Hallaq, for example, sees the primary cause of the instability in the relationship between the legal, social, and political spheres as a result of colonialism. Wael Hallaq firmly sees the incompatibility between the Syari'ah worldview and the

nation-state model that Muslim societies adopted from the West. In his view, colonialism has led Muslim societies in the colonial and postcolonial eras to an ontological problem because the sharia legal rules practiced by Muslims in the pre-modern/pre-colonial era were a phenomenon that is fundamentally social, rather than political (Hallaq, 2012: 186, 203-204).

In other words, colonialism, so Wael Hallaq argues, gave rise to serious issues concerning the political power of Muslim societies, their sovereignty, and their agency, through which encouraged Muslim intellectuals to develop ideas as a response and a form of dissatisfaction with it in the form of calls for the establishment of more just socio-political relations in Muslim countries, and even, not infrequently, invitations to establish states that were considered more Islamic. Meanwhile, at the same time, there was what is called a change or fragmentation in religious authority due to colonialism and its accompanying elements as mentioned above (Schmidtke, 2006: 2-3; Masooda Bano, 2018: 1-51; Eickelman and Anderson, 2003; Anderson: 45-59; Robinson, 1993: 229-251).

It was in this kind of socio-political conditions that the idea of justice emerged in the colonial and post-colonial eras, as seen in the idea of Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi's theo-democracy, Sayyid Qutb's *al-'Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Islam*, or Hamka's *Islam dan Keadilan Sosial* (Social Justice in Islam) must be understood; because, a contemporary reading of their ideas, stripped of their context, could potentially lead us to conclude that their thinking on social justice as academically implausible and utopian in nature. Yet, as Andrew F. March notes, the political views of Sayyid Qutb, as those also appear in *al-'Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Islam*, for example, is an idea that can be seen as a "realistic utopia" (Andrew F. March, 2010: 189-207).

Ramon Harvey and Daniel Tutt's explicit conclusions about Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi's political thought are also in line with Andrew F. March's assessment of Sayyid Qutb's ideas. In their views, "In the case of Mawdudi, justice was understood within the context of of the utopian political vision of a future Islamic state modeled on the rightly guided city of the Prophet, Medina." According to Ramon Harvey and Daniel Tutt, both the notions of theo-democracy and the "caliphate"—as trans-historical phenomena—should be read in this way (Harvey and Tutt, 2023: 8).

In his work *al-'Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Islam* (Social Justice in Islam), Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian mufassir and activist, argued that Islam not only provides solutions to social and economic problems but also a holistic system of life that can address the inequalities and injustices that exist in society. He emphasized that the Islamic teachings contained in the Quran are a highly relevant resource for creating a just and prosperous society. In addition, he also asserted that, "we cannot study the essence of social justice in Islam before we first examine the general outlines of Islamic theory regarding the universe, life, and humanity. For social justice is only one branch of the great science to which all Islamic doctrines must return." According to him, in essence, "Islam has a universal and unified theory that encompasses the universe, life, and humanity, a theory in which all the different issues are integrated. Islam summarizes all its beliefs, laws and regulations, and ways of worship and work. The treatment of all these issues stems from one universal and comprehensive theory, so that each issue is not treated individually, and each problem and its needs are not addressed separately from the others" (Sayyid Qutb, 1995: 20-21; Qutb, trans. John B. Hardie: 37-38).

Knowledge of this universal Islamic theory, according to Sayyid Qutb, is necessary because it enables Muslims to fully understand its principles and beliefs and to connect the specific with the general. This, he argued, is the best method for studying Islam: to begin by understanding its universal theory before delving into its views on politics or economics or the relationship between the community and the individual. This is because questions such as these arise from this universal theory and cannot be fully understood except through its lens.

Many Muslim modern exegetes paying close attention to the issue of social justice and demonstrate the breadth of the study of justice in the tradition of Islamic tafsir. Yet, rather than examining this important theme comprehensively, the paper only presents two interpretations

from two modern exegetes, Hamka and Abdallah Yousuf Ali, of three verses related to the issue of justice in Islam. In fact, verses about social justice, as we know, are mentioned dozens of times in various suras and verses of the Qur'an.

Apart from discussing the issue of justice in Tafsir Al-Azhar which will be explained below, Hamka also wrote a book entitled Social Justice in Islam which attracted the attention of Khairudin Aljunied to study it. In the chapter entitled "Muslims and Social Justice" in the book Hamka and Islam: Cosmopolitan Reform in the Malay World, (2018: 53-68) Khairudin Aljunied examines the core ideas put forward by Hamka regarding the relationship between Islamic teachings and the concept of social justice. He explores Hamka's thoughts on how Islam, as a universal religion, teaches social justice, emphasizing the importance of equal distribution of welfare and protection of individual rights in society.

Hamka, as a ulama and thinker, according to Khairudin Aljunied, recognized that in a social and political context, justice is a crucial principle in the lives of Muslims. He emphasized the need for the state and society to play a role in ensuring that resources and wealth are equitably accessible to all levels of society, while also paying attention to the weak and marginalized. In addition, Khairudin Aljunied also shows how Hamka integrated Islamic values with the Indonesian socio-political context, by striving to build a just and prosperous society through the implementation of inclusive Islamic teachings based on the principles of humanity and social justice.

Khairudin Aljunied emphasized that, as an Islamic thinker, Hamka believed that Islam has very strong teachings on social justice. According to him, Islam teaches the importance of equal rights and obligations in society, and this is closely related to the concept of adl (justice), a fundamental principle of Islamic teachings. In Hamka's view, social justice is not only related to the distribution of wealth and resources, but also encompasses respect for human dignity, protection of human rights, and the elimination of oppression and injustice in various forms. Hamka also emphasized the importance of the state's role in realizing social justice. He argued that the state must take responsibility for creating a just and equitable system that not only addresses economic well-being but also equity in education, health, and social matters. In Hamka's view, the state must protect the weak and marginalized, ensuring that the basic rights of every individual are respected and fulfilled.

Furthermore, Hamka believes that a just social system must reach all levels of society, including those below the poverty line. In the Indonesian context, Hamka criticized the social inequality that existed during colonial times and suggested that social justice be implemented to narrow the gap between rich and poor and improve the welfare of society as a whole. This aligns with Islamic teachings, which urge followers to help one another, give zakat (alms), and ensure that wealth does not circulate solely among the wealthy.

Hamka also considered Indonesia's socio-political context at the time, which experienced social inequality due to colonialism. He believed that Islam could offer solutions to social problems, particularly in addressing economic inequality and social injustice. In this regard, Hamka supported the use of Islamic teachings as a guide for building a more just and prosperous society, with an emphasis on liberation from the social and economic injustices still experienced by many Indonesians.

Finally, Khairudin Aljunied also shows how Hamka connects Islamic teachings with efforts to create social justice in Indonesia. In Khairudin Aljunied's view, Hamka is not only a theologian and mufassir, but also a thinker who seeks to integrate religious values with the social and political realities of the nation. In Hamka's view, Islam is not only relevant as a guide for worship, but also as a guide for building a just, democratic, and prosperous society.

According to Hamka, in his magnum opus, *Tafsir al-Azhar*, this verse contains two main commands: *first*, to fulfill the trust properly to the rightful person, and *second*, to decide cases fairly when judging or making decisions. Hamka's interpretation states that trust is not limited to

wealth, but also includes all kinds of responsibilities given by God, whether related to family, work, or society.

Hamka also emphasized that a just decision is one based on truth and justice, without bias or personal interests. Therefore, a judge or leader must strive to uphold the truth, as this is part of their mandate and must be fulfilled with full responsibility. Hamka connects this verse to the need to maintain peace and justice in society. In this context, God provides the best possible guidance so that humanity can maintain harmonious relationships and mutual respect (Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, V 1983: 115-127).

In a similar way, in *The Glorious Quran: Translation and Commentary*, Abdallah Yousuf Ali also provides an interpretation that underlines two main principles contained in this verse: *a mandate* and *justice*. Yousuf Ali explains that this verse commands Muslims to fulfill trusts properly, namely by handing over rights or trust to those who deserve them. Trusts refer not only to property, but also to broader responsibilities, including duties, social position, and other obligations. Regarding justice, Yousuf Ali also emphasizes the importance of fairness in decision-making, especially in legal matters or when serving as a judge. This verse commands that someone who decides a matter between people must do so fairly, without bias or malice. This is an important principle that leads to the formation of a harmonious and peaceful society (Abdallah Yousuf Ali, *The Glorious Quran: Translation and Commentary*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr: 197-198).

In his interpretation, Abdallah Yousuf Ali explains that this verse contains two important things: first, the obligation to uphold justice and second, a warning not to be influenced by hatred which can prevent someone from acting justly.

In the view of Abdallah Yousuf Ali, as upholders of justice, believers are commanded to be *qawwamiin*, that is, to be steadfast and impartial upholders of justice. Justice must be upheld for the sake of Allah, and a person who upholds this principle must be an objective witness in every situation. Abdallah Yousuf Ali also highlighted the importance of upholding the principle of justice despite feelings of hatred toward a group or individual. He argued that hatred should not prevent someone from acting justly. Therefore, this verse emphasizes that justice must be implemented regardless of personal feelings.

Furthermore, Abdallah Yousuf Ali also noted that justice is part of piety, which is the fear and respect for God. If someone acts justly, they will draw closer to piety. Finally, he also reminded that Allah knows all the deeds of His people, both visible and hidden, so that every action will receive an appropriate reward (Yousuf Ali: 243).

In his *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, Hamka interprets this verse as a command to firmly and consistently uphold justice, which is part of the character of a true believer. In his interpretation, Muslims must be upholders of justice (*qawwamiin*). This applies not only to major matters such as state law or social affairs, but also to every aspect of personal and community life. He believes that justice must be upheld for the sake of Allah, without expecting retribution or personal gain.

Hamka also emphasized that justice is undisturbed by hatred, meaning that hatred toward a group or individual should not prevent someone from acting justly. Even though someone may harbor negative feelings toward a group, justice must still be upheld. This encompasses various aspects of life, including relationships between groups and communities. Hamka also linked justice with piety (obedience to God). According to him, when someone acts justly, they become closer to piety, as justice is part of the basic principles of Islam commanded by God. This verse concludes with a reminder that God is All-Knowing of everything humans do, including what is hidden in their hearts. Therefore, according to Hamka, every action, good or bad, will be accounted for before Him (Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, VI. 1983: 154-157).

Al-Qur'an Surah al-Nahl (16) verse 90 is a verse that provides instructions about various moral and ethical values in the life of a Muslim. Abdallah Yusuf Ali provide an in-depth interpretation of this verse. Some of the main points of interpretation and explanation underlined by Abdallah Yousuf Ali regarding Surah al-Nahl verse 90 are regarding the command to do

justice, do good deeds (*ihsan*), help close relatives, as well as the prohibition against committing vile acts, unrighteousness and tyranny (Yousuf Ali: 681).

Regarding *the first thing, the order to apply is just*, Abdallah Yusuf Ali emphasized that justice is a basic value in Islam. This verse reminds us that Allah commands humanity to act fairly in all aspects of life. This justice is not only in relationships between humans, but also in relationships with God and all of His creation. The justice referred includes social, economic and political justice, as well as justice in everyday actions.

On *the second important question*, the command to do good deeds (*Ihsan*), Abdallah Yusuf Ali then emphasized the importance of Muslims doing good deeds (*ihsan*). Virtue, he argued, is more than ordinary goodness; because it is a form of action carried out with sincere intentions and full of attention, both towards fellow humans and towards God. *Ihsan* includes sincere kindness and self-sacrifice for the good of others without expecting anything in return. According to Abdallah Yusuf Ali, virtue also includes pious deeds carried out with love and attention to the needs of others.

Furthermore, *regarding kindness to relatives*, Abdallah Yousuf Ali emphasized that the command to give to relatives is part of a social obligation in Islam. Helping close relatives with wealth or attention is part of a pious deed that is highly recommended in Islam. Yusuf Ali emphasized the importance of maintaining good family relationships, as the family is the primary social unit in society. Giving to relatives can also include financial assistance, emotional support, or attention to their needs, and this is a way to maintain relationships and strengthen social ties.

Regarding *the fourth point*, the prohibition of vile acts, unrighteousness, and injustice, this verse, according to Abdallah Yusuf Ali, also provides a firm warning about things that must be avoided, namely vile acts, unrighteousness, and injustice. According to Abdallah Yousuf Ali, vile acts refer to actions or words that are immoral or contrary to ethical norms, such as actions that damage a person's self-respect and dignity. On the other hand, evil is anything that contradicts religious teachings and truth. Evil can be any act that destroys social or moral order, whether in the form of violence, deception, or deviation from religious teachings. Finally, injustice, he argues, means acting unfairly, whether to oneself, others, or God. It includes oppression, extortion, and any form of abuse of power or opportunity to harm others.

The purpose of the instructions given in this verse is to teach humanity so that they can learn lessons from their lives. Yusuf Ali stated that by following Allah's guidance in matters of justice, virtue, and social goodness, one can live a better and more moral life. This verse also reminds humanity that the right way of life is the way that brings us closer to Allah and a more just and prosperous society.

Furthermore, the relationship between moral and social aspects is also an important issue that Yusuf Ali emphasized firmly. He also highlighted that this verse connects moral aspects (doing good and being just) with social aspects (helping relatives). This shows that Islam not only teaches personal goodness but also encourages harmonious social relationships among members of society. Goodness and justice must be applied in social life, within the family, and in human relationships in general.

In his interpretation, therefore, the moral and ethical education contained in this verse is the core of Islamic teachings. This verse is not only a law applicable to individuals, but also a guideline for society to create a just, compassionate, and oppressive environment. According to Abdallah Yusuf Ali, Surah al-Nahl verse 90 provides a very comprehensive description of moral principles in Islam. This verse emphasizes the importance of justice, benevolence, and maintaining good social relationships, while also reminding us to shun all forms of evil and unjust actions. This is a call to build a society full of compassion, mutual assistance, and based on noble moral values.

Thus, Yousuf Ali's explanation provides a deeper perspective on the importance of applying moral principles in daily life, which is not only limited to the individual's relationship

with God, but also in building a just and harmonious society (Yousuf Ali: 681, especially footnote number 2127).

In *Tafsir Al-Azhar's* interpretation (Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, XIV, 1983: 351), on the other hand, Hamka also emphasized that this verse contains basic principles in human life: *first*, the command to be just. Allah commands mankind to be just in all things, both in personal, social, and governmental affairs. Justice means not distorting the truth and giving rights to those who are entitled. *Second*, the command to do good deeds. According to Hamka, after justice, Allah also commands mankind to do good, which includes all forms of goodness and good deeds that are beneficial to oneself, family, and society.

*Third*, the command to maintain relationships with relatives. This means that Allah reminds us of the importance of maintaining good relations and relationships with family. This shows that virtue and justice are not only for others, but must also be prioritized in relationships with relatives. *Fourth*, the prohibition against vile acts, evil, and injustice: Allah forbids mankind from committing all forms of evil, whether in the form of sinful acts or falsehood that harm oneself and others.

Hamka also linked this verse to the purpose of human life: maintaining harmony and well-being, both individually and socially. According to him, this verse is a highly relevant guideline for everyday life, both in personal and social matters. In other words, Islam teaches a balance between rights and obligations, justice and virtue, and requires its followers to avoid all forms of evil that could disrupt harmony in life.

### **Socially Engaged Islam and Community Development for Social Justice**

Efforts made in community empowerment and development to realize social justice in Muslim communities have taken various forms according to the socio-historical context and the ideological views of the actors. As stated at the very beginning of this paper, there was a time when community development activists, influenced by conventional modernization theory, attempted to separate their activities from the religious elements and traditional values held by the communities they advocated.

Over time, however, the pendulum of the community empowerment movement finally shifted in line with the latest developments in sociological (religious) theories: seeing the link between the interests of religious messages and the ideals of social justice. We see a kind of—what so-called—“socially engaged Islam” where many activities deeply motivated by religious or spiritual beliefs seriously focus on facilitating social change (Bagasra, 2021: 29).

In other words, the so-called Constructive Muslim Theology took its shape into daily practices where old theological perspective not only begun to be questioned but also eventually changed into its new and contextual senses. It is because, citing Ebrahim Moosa's words, “Theology, like every living discourse and tradition of knowledge that must contend with a changing and complex reality, demands revision, renewal, and recalibration.” By doing so, Islamic interpretations are expected to manage “to craft a narrative that speaks meaningfully to the challenges of our time—a narrative that expresses our commitments to the Divine through belief, action, and practice” (Moosa, 2025: 1-2).

What should also be kept in our mind during those revision, renewal, and recalibration is, so Ebrahim Moosa argues, that “Knowing is power, acting is power, questioning is power. All significant human acts are entangled with power in its many forms, since knowing and acting lie at the heart of performance. Power, in short, is an ‘ability:’ the capacity to learn, to command, to persuade, to sense and to produce, among many other acts” (Moosa, 2025: 3).

Moosa's above caveat, for example, appears in Amelia Fauzia's important note. According to Fauzia, her theoretical and practical experiences shows that the concepts of philanthropy—as one of the world's prevalent community development and empowerment movements—and social justice in Islam actually have a very strong basis, although, according to her, there are often discrepancies between the main concepts contained in Islamic teachings and the methods or

approaches generally adopted by Muslim communities. Traditional Islamic philanthropy, for instance, is generally often institutionalized as merely short-term charitable activities and lacks broad reach and long-term orientation. However, modern, non-charitable philanthropic efforts that have included issues of justice as an integral part of their activities have begun to emerge since at least the 1990s (Amelia Fauzia, 2017: 223-236; Amelia Fauzia, 2010: 31-32).

Research conducted in six countries in 2004-2005 (Indonesia, India, Egypt, Tanzania, Turkey, and the United Kingdom) showed that even Muslims living in developed countries like the United Kingdom generally still prefer to fulfil their zakat and shadaqah obligations in mosques rather than through philanthropic institutions. Interestingly, modern philanthropic institutions in countries like Turkey have actually shown significant contributions to social justice-oriented activities. Waqf institutions have transformed into modern foundations with philanthropic concepts that have replaced the traditional charitable orientation of philanthropy and are usually oriented towards personal piety.

As in Turkey, Egypt is also seeing the emergence of philanthropic institutions focused on conflict resolution. Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country, is also showing interesting developments in social justice-oriented philanthropic efforts. Dompot Dhu'afa, for example, collaborates with the Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) in an anti-corruption program; in addition to other programs, it also provides research scholarships, organizes conferences, publishes academic journals on campus, and collaborates with secular NGOs in environmental conservation and healthy food provision programs (Amelia Fauzia, 2010: 32).

In addition to the examples of philanthropic practices as an effort to develop a society oriented towards social justice above, in Indonesia, Islamic philanthropic institutions are also starting to grow, such as the Yasmin Foundation with its main program in the form of empowering the mustah'afun; Amal Khair Yasmin which seeks to optimize the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of the Mizan Publishing Group; also the School Research Center and health advocacy programs. Amelia Fauzia's research also notes the Social Trust Fund as a philanthropic institution for social justice founded and developed by the academic community of UIN Jakarta; in addition to AKIM (Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance for Myanmar) and the World Zakat Forum (Amelia Fauzia, 2017: 228-230).

The examples drawn from Amelia Fauzia's research are of course case-by-case and likely represent only the tip of the iceberg: many more social justice philanthropic movements escape the attention of researchers due to their remote locations and the spotlight of media and research coverage. The successful development of waqf by Pondok Modern Gontor Waqf Agency, for example, or the Fethullah Gulen movement's socio-religious da'wah movement, are two examples par excellence of empowerment and community development movements that deserve high credit. The important point here is that the problem of interpreting religious texts must be recognized as having a decisive role in community empowerment efforts. The approach or method in interpreting religious texts, in short, is influential and crucial in the practice of community empowerment.

A clear example to refer to here is the meaning/interpretation of the eight groups entitled to receive alms— *al-ashnaf al-tsamaniyah*. QS al-Tawbah (9) verse 80 shows that the eight groups entitled to receive alms are: the poor, the needy, the amilin, the converts, to free slaves, the debtors, for the cause of Allah, and the *ibn sabil*. The basic message of this verse, in its new reading, can actually be placed as an ethical benchmark, a moral reference, both in the context of modern state administration, and when referred to in community development work.

Contrary to conventional interpretations, the group of converts, for example, is usually limited to those who have recently embraced Islam; *riqab* is understood and interpreted as slaves; and *ibn sabil* is usually interpreted as someone who has run out of money on a journey. However, in an interpretation with an emancipatory perspective and a vision of social justice, the scope of the meaning of converts could be groups of people who need social rehabilitation; the *Riqab*

group is anyone who experiences oppression; and those considered the Ibn Sabil group are the homeless or street children (Masdar Farid Mas'udi, 2010: 111-128).

At this point, it's crucial to emphasize that based on constructive theological perspective, besides believing in the nexus between religion and development, new meanings and interpretations with an emancipatory vision must be an integral part of the practice of developing a socially just society without which all social justice-oriented community empowerment activities will only repeat the failures of their predecessors: both movements with a secular orientation and charitable religious-personal piety movements. In this regard, the need of constructive Muslim theology—as exercised by some groups of Muslim community development—sounds louder its relevance.

## **CONCLUSION**

When discussing the issue of social justice, we are often faced with the simplistic question of which world ideology is considered appropriate for the current era: socialism, which glorifies collectivism, or capitalism, which upholds individual rights. Consequently, religious interpretations that emphasize the urgency of social justice as a priority are often accused of being socialistic and leftist interpretations of Islam. Conversely, interpretations of Islam that prioritize the importance of individual rights are often accused of being capitalistic and bourgeois. And, as if mediating between these two extreme accusations, some Muslim scholars, such as Mohammad Hatta and M. Dawan Rahardjo, for example, have proposed a middle path that attempts to "row between the two rocks": religious socialism. The distance between the ideal of social justice and real life is a common phenomenon worldwide, and it is not unique to Muslims and solely the responsibility of the Muslim community. It is a perpetual global concern, and it is not surprising that scholars from various backgrounds continue to conceptualize their ideas about justice and how they can translate them into reality. In the light of Constructive Muslim Theology, when justice is essentially believed to be something that also includes the issue of individual and social rights, then there is no doubt that justice is a general goal of the objectives of the Qur'an that can be fulfilled by paying attention to it and expressing the legal intent regarding legislation in general. Finally, a rather lengthy *verbatim* quote from an article written by Ahmad Zaky Yamani, a thinker and former Saudi Arabian oil minister, in the mid-1960s, is therefore perhaps still relevant and could be a good conclusion to this paper.

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