

BEING 'MUSLIM WARIA':
Gender Nonconformity, Spiritual Belonging, and Ethical
Ambiguity in a Javanese Pesantren

Agus Danugroho
Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia
E-mail: agus.danugroho-2023@fisip.unair.ac.id

Rustinsyah
Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia
E-mail: rustinsyah@fisip.unair.ac.id

Muhammad Adib
Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia
E-mail: moh.adib@fisip.unair.ac.id

Tuhfatul Mubarakah Assalamah
Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia
E-mail: tuhfatul.mubarakah.assalamah-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id

Corresponding Author: Agus Danugroho

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Abstract: This article investigates how young transgender Muslims at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah in Yogyakarta cultivate religious devotion through what is conceptualized as "sacred disobedience," a mode of piety that reconciles obedience to God with nonconformity to gendered norms. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, the study demonstrates that acts of worship among *waria* are not merely forms of resistance but expressions of sincere faith that transform marginality into moral creativity. Integrating perspectives from Islamic ethics and postcolonial queer theory, the article illustrates how ambiguity, belonging, and devotion constitute an alternative theology grounded in compassion. The *pesantren* is shown to function as a spiritual community in which love, sincerity, and faith reconfigure prevailing understandings of purity, sin, and personhood. Through this lived religiosity, *waria* Muslims contribute to a renewed vision of Islam that embraces human plurality as a manifestation of divine mercy and ethical possibility. "Sacred

disobedience” operates as a lived and embodied theology, wherein devotion emerges through ethical ambiguity rather than mere conformity. Their lived religious practice challenges binary frameworks of orthodoxy and deviance, revealing that piety may arise precisely through tension. Consequently, Islamic boarding schools appear as microcosms of a more inclusive Islam grounded in compassion.

Keywords: *Waria*; queer Islam; politics of belonging; moral ambiguity; sacred disobedience.

Introduction

In the humid interior of Yogyakarta, far from the national stage of political debates on religious morality and sexual deviance, a quiet transformation is taking place. At Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah, a group of *waria* transgender women in Indonesia gathers not to contest religion but to embody it. They pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, memorize Qur’anic verses, and cultivate spiritual discipline. However, their very presence within the Islamic boarding school system defies conventional expectations of who belongs in the moral and sacred space of the *pesantren*. This ethnographic study of Al-Fatah opens a window onto a form of queer religiosity that is neither secular nor oppositional but grounded in what I term ‘sacred disobedience,’ a relational ethics that embodies God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and sincerity (*ikhlas*) while reinterpreting gendered boundaries.¹

Much of the global scholarship on queer subjectivity continues to rely on binaries between transgression and conformity, visibility and erasure, liberation and oppression. These binaries, rooted in liberal and secular paradigms, often fail to capture the moral complexity of queer life in postcolonial Muslim societies.² In Indonesia, *waria* Muslims are not merely excluded from the moral order; they are hyper-visible in media discourse, simultaneously

¹ Nira Yuval-Davis, “Theorizing Identity: Beyond the ‘us’ and ‘Them’ Dichotomy,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 3 (2010): 261-280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2010.489736>; Husein Muhammad, *Fiqh Al-Rahmah: Islam Yang Ramah Terhadap Perempuan* (Yogyakarta: LKis, 2018); Judith Butler, “Thinking with Saba Mahmood,” *Critical Times* 2, no. 1 (2019): 5-9, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-7769710>.

² Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997); Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Judith Butler, “Thinking with Saba Mahmood,” *Critical Times* 2, no. 1 (2019): 5-9.

eroticized and condemned.³ This paradox complicates attempts to frame queer identity through Western liberal rights or secular citizenship.⁴ Instead, *waria* at Al-Fatah enact a distinctive form of spiritual belonging, seeking moral legibility within their own ethical universe in what Saba Mahmood conceptualized as piety-as-agency.⁵ This embodied submission redefines agency through devotion rather than resistance.

To situate this ethnography within a broader terrain of Islamic thought, this study engages in dialogue with global discourses on queer piety in Islam⁶ and with Indonesian traditions of compassionate *fiqh*.⁷ These perspectives illuminate how love (*mahabba*), brotherhood (*ukhūmma*), and natural disposition (*fiṭra*) are reinterpreted in queer Muslim devotion. Within Pesantren Al-Fatah, such religious concepts are lived through daily acts of prayer, fasting, and Qur'anic recitation practices that affirm spiritual personhood beyond gender binaries. Their understanding of *fiṭra*, rooted in the Qur'anic injunction that all humans are created from a single soul (Q.S. al-Nisā': 1), situates queerness not as deviation but as part of the diversity inherent in

³ Argyo Demartoto, "The Representation of Hybrid Identity through Performance and Symbol of Transgender Santri Resistance at Al-Fatah Islamic Boarding School of Yogyakarta, Indonesia," *Society* 8, no. 1 (2020): 147-162, <https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v8i1.167>; Lauren B. McInroy and Shelley L. Craig, "Transgender Representation in Offline and Online Media: LGBTQ Youth Perspectives," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 25, no. 6 (2015): 606-617, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.995392>. Jamilul Latif and Moh Asror Yusuf, "Digital Power and Religious Resistance: Analyzing LGBT Content on Ragil Mahardika's YouTube Channel through Michel Foucault's Framework," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy and Contemporary Thought* 1, no. 2 (December 2023): 253-74, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jipct.2023.1.2.253-274>.

⁴ Meredith G.F. Worthen, "Queer Identities in the 21st Century: Reclamation and Stigma," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 49, no. 101512 (2023): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101512>.

⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶ S. Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010); S. Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

⁷ Husein Muhammad, *Fiqh Al-Rahmah: Islam Yang Ramah Terhadap Perempuan* (Yogyakarta: LKis, 2018); S. Mahfudz, *Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah dan Aktualisasinya dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2015).

creation.⁸ Similarly, intention (*nīya*) and repentance (*tawba*) are experienced not as juridical obligations but as affective acts of self-realization and intimacy with God.⁹

Drawing on Nira Yuval-Davis's work on politics of belonging, this article conceptualizes 'belonging' as both a moral and theological negotiation, an affective process that traverses identity, devotion, and spiritual community. For the *waria*, being accepted into the *satria* community of the *pesantren* is not simply social inclusion but an enactment of *ukhūmma* that transcends normative boundaries of gender and piety. This moral negotiation resonates with Islamic humanism and the principal objectives (*maqāṣid*) of the Shari'ah, where compassion (*rahma*) and the protection of life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*) are central.¹⁰ By integrating these concepts, the analysis moves beyond descriptive ethnography to articulate a theological ethics that aligns with both classical Islamic thought and contemporary postcolonial theory. At the same time, this study maintains a dialogical approach to Western theory rather than a hegemonic one. The works of Judith Butler, Stuart Hall, and Anjali Arondekar are positioned as interlocutors rather than authorities, in conversation with scholars like Scott Kugle.¹¹

This dialogical stance reflects an epistemological pluralism that foregrounds Islamic categories of meaning, *taqwā*, *ikhlaṣ*, *fiṭra*, and *mahabbah* as frameworks for understanding moral agency and queer

⁸ Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010).

⁹ Nabilah Nuraini, Nana Najatul Huda, and Eni Zulaiha, "Women Issues Discussed by Feminist Muffasirs in Indonesia," *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas* 1, no. 1 (2021): 14-19; Suparto and Khoerun Nisa, "Pembinaan Keagamaan Santri Transpuan pada Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta," *Dakwah: Jurnal Kajian Dakwah dan Kemasyarakatan* 27, no. 1 (2023): 69-87, <https://doi.org/10.15408/dakwah.v27i1.33329>.

¹⁰ S. Mahfudz, *Maqāṣid al-Shari'ah dan Aktualisasinya dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2015); Stella Eme Osim and Nzeyo Gabriel Eteng, "Women and Ritual Purity in Islam," *Indonesian Journal of Social and Educational Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 117-127, <https://doi.org/10.26858/ijses.v2i1.22956>.

¹¹ Judith Butler, "Thinking with Saba Mahmood," *Critical Times* 2, no. 1 (2019): 5-9. <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-7769710>; Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Anjali Arondekar, *Queering Archives: A Roundtable Discussion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

devotion. Through this integration, waria religiosity emerges not as an anthropological anomaly but as a legitimate expression of Islamic moral reasoning rooted in affect, humility, and relational obedience to God.¹² By bridging postcolonial queer theory with Islamic ethics and Indonesian *pesantren* traditions, this article contributes to the global discourse on queer religiosity in Islam. It advances a conceptual framework that repositions Islamic boarding schools as laboratories of ethical reimagination where *waria* Muslims cultivate a 'fiqh of compassion' (*fiqh al-rahma*) grounded in sincerity, love, and the Qur'anic vision of equality (Q.S. al-Nisā': 1). In doing so, it extends the intellectual conversation on Islam, gender, and spirituality beyond anthropology, proposing a theological paradigm in which 'sacred disobedience' serves as an embodied pathway to divine proximity and moral transformation.

Conceptual Clarification: Sacred Disobedience and Ethical Ambiguity

The concept of 'sacred disobedience' emerges as a theoretical intervention that situates queer religiosity not in opposition to Islam but within its ethical interiority. This concept departs from the assumption that resistance must always manifest through transgression or secular autonomy. Instead, it proposes that piety itself can become a site of subversion when reinhabited through non-normative subjectivities. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's framework of piety-as-agency, sacred 'disobedience' encapsulates how embodied devotion and ritual submission can reconfigure moral hierarchies from within. However, unlike Mahmood's emphasis on disciplined submission, sacred disobedience carries a paradoxical charge; it acknowledges the impossibility of complete conformity while affirming one's devotion to divine authority. In this sense, it resonates with Judith Butler's notion of ambivalent subversion, where agency arises through reiteration and displacement rather than negation.¹³ Within the Islamic context, this dual movement mirrors the dialectic between *taqwā* (God-conscious restraint) and *ikhtilāf* (productive

¹² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*; Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹³ Judith Butler, "Thinking with Saba Mahmood," *Critical Times* 2, no. 1 (2019): 5-9.

difference), both of which allow moral agency to be articulated through devotion rather than rebellion.¹⁴

Sacred disobedience, as observed among *waria* Muslims at Pesantren Al-Fatah, signifies a relational piety, a mode of ethical being that harmonizes obedience to God with disobedience to social norms marginalizing their personhood. It is 'sacred' not because it sanctifies rebellion, but because it transforms the act of nonconformity into an expression of divine proximity. This process embodies what Islamic mystics describe as *mahabba* (love for God), a disposition that prioritizes compassion and sincerity over legalistic conformity.¹⁵ Through everyday acts of prayer, fasting, and Qur'anic recitation, *waria* participants enact a form of pious dissonance, a conscious inhabitation of the ethical tension between law (*shari'ah*) and mercy (*rahma*). This lived paradox extends Mahmood's and Butler's discussions into the terrain of Islamic theology, where moral agency is measured not by individual autonomy but by the sincerity (*ikhlas*) of one's striving to please God. In this reconfiguration, 'sacred disobedience' becomes a theological grammar of selfhood, one that reframes queerness as a moral effort of the self (*jihad al-nafs*) in the pursuit of divine intimacy.¹⁶

The relationship between 'sacred disobedience' and ethical ambiguity is neither hierarchical nor oppositional; rather, ethical ambiguity constitutes the existential condition through which sacred disobedience unfolds. For *waria* Muslims, ambiguity is not moral confusion but a lived awareness of competing ethical grammars, the doctrinal demand for conformity, and the experiential truth of divine acceptance. This tension reflects what Gayatri Gopinath identifies as the queer temporality of ethics, where non-linear modes of belonging

¹⁴ S. Mahfudz, *Maqasid Al-Shari'ah Dan Aktualisasinya Dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2015); Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Scoot Siraj al-Haq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010); Husein Muhammad, *Fiqh Al-Rahmah: Islam yang Ramah terhadap Perempuan* (Yogyakarta: LKis, 2018).

interrupt normative teleologies of moral progress.¹⁷ Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, such ambiguity finds resonance in the Sufi discourse of *hayra*, a state of bewildered wonder before the divine.¹⁸ In this affective state, uncertainty is not a failure of faith but the very condition of encountering divine transcendence. By embodying ethical ambiguity, *waria* practitioners articulate a form of a 'humanist mysticism' (*taṣawwuf al-insāniya*), in which moral clarity is not abandoned but reconfigured into a mode of compassionate uncertainty in ethical responsibility and spiritual sincerity. Their lived experiences, therefore, transform ethical ambiguity into an epistemic virtue, aligning with the objective of preserving human dignity, while sustaining spiritual sincerity.¹⁹

In theoretical terms, 'sacred disobedience' and ethical ambiguity operate as overlapping analytical lenses that bridge postcolonial queer theory and Islamic theology. Together they invite a reconceptualization of piety, not as submission to fixed norms but as a dynamic negotiation of divine intimacy, social belonging, and moral uncertainty. This synthesis opens a new horizon in Islamic thought, one that situates queer piety as both interpretive struggle (*ijtihad*) and devotional affirmation (*tasbih*). In the lives of *waria* Muslims at Pesantren Al-Fatah, sacred disobedience thus becomes a theology of embodied contradiction, to obey is to disobey, to submit is to transform, and to love God is to live ethically within the ambiguity of being human.

'Sacred Disobedience' as Lived by the *Waria* at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

At Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah, 'sacred disobedience' manifests as a lived theology that reconciles devotion and difference. The *waria* community enacts religious discipline in the form of daily

¹⁷ Naisargi N Dave, "Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures by Gayatri Gopinath," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 4 (2008): 4090-4094, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00128.x>.

¹⁸ Bianca J. Smith & Mark Woodward, *Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam: Leaders Feminists, Sufis and Pesantren Selves* (London: Routledge, 2013) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203797518>.

¹⁹ Mahfudz, *Maqāsid Al-Shari'ah Dan Aktualisasinya Dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2015); Stella Eme Osim and Nzeyo Gabriel Eteng, "Women and Ritual Purity in Islam," *Indonesian Journal of Social and Educational Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 117-127.

prayers, fasting, and Qur’anic recitation while affirming their gendered subjectivity. In doing so, they transform obedience to God into a moral practice that resists exclusion without defying faith. This relational form of piety embodies what Husein Muhammad describes as humanist God-consciousness (*taqwā al-insāniyya*) that prioritizes sincerity (*ikhhlās*) and compassion (*rah̄ma*) over conformity.²⁰ Through this synthesis, ‘sacred disobedience’ functions as a mode of spiritual agency, aligning with Mahmood’s notion of piety-as-agency,²¹ yet extending it toward an Islamic ethic of affective resistance.

The ethnographic findings (see Table 1) illustrate how *waria* Muslims reinterpret acts of worship through their own embodied experiences. They do not perceive their gender variance as a deviation from the divine law. However, as part of their *fiṭra*, the primordial human disposition toward faith (Q.S. al-Rūm: 30). One participant stated, “I pray, I fast, I worship, but I am also a woman. This is part of my faith,” revealing how devotion becomes a site of identity affirmation. This articulation resonates with Sa’diyya Shaikh’s reading of Sufi ethics, where *mah̄abba* and *n̄iya* are the foundation of moral legitimacy.²² In this framework, obedience is not reduced to external conformity but extends to the affective sincerity that animates one’s relationship with God.

Table 1. Findings on Sacred Disobedience at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

Theme	Description of Findings	Related Concept/Theory
Religious Practice & Gender Identity	<i>Waria</i> perform Islamic rituals with piety while maintaining gender authenticity.	<i>Politics of Belonging</i> (Yuval-Davis, 2011); <i>Piety-as-Agency</i> (Mahmood, 2005)
Religion & Gender Tension	Persistent conflict between normative piety and social rejection of <i>waria</i> identity.	Postcolonial Queer Theory (Butler, 2019; Arondekar, 2015)

Source: Field Data and NVivo Analysis (2025).

The dual movement of faith and resistance in these findings underscores that *waria* religiosity is not an act of rebellion but a form of ethical interpretation. By engaging in ritual worship as a means of reclaiming spiritual personhood, they perform what Kugle identifies

²⁰ Husein Muhammad, *Fiqh Al-Rahmah: Islam Yang Ramah Terhadap Perempuan* (Yogyakarta: LKis, 2018).

²¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

²² Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*.

as 'queer piety,'²³ a form of devotion that is not interpreted as a rejection of orthodoxy but as reinhabitation. This praxis redefines disobedience not as sin (*ma'siyah*) but as a reflective act of devotion that confronts social norms while remaining loyal to divine authority. Such reinterpretations echo the inclusive spirit of the Shari'a, particularly the principles of *hifz al-nafs* (protection of life) and *hifz al-din* (protection of religion), which aim to uphold both spiritual integrity and human dignity.²⁴

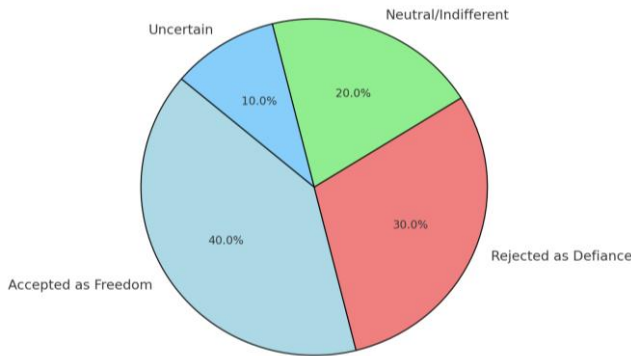


Figure 1. Distribution of Views on Disobedience in Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah (Source: NVIVO Analysis, 2025)

The visual distribution in Figure 1 presents how members of the *pesantren* community conceptualize 'disobedience' across moral and spiritual registers. Approximately 40 per cent of participants regard 'disobedience' as personal freedom within faith, aligning with an interpretive view of sincerity and intention as intrinsic virtues of moral autonomy before God. This orientation parallels Kugle's argument that queer Muslims often reconstruct divine law through an ethics of sincerity.²⁵ Meanwhile, 30 per cent perceive 'disobedience' as a threat to religious order, an interpretation rooted in juridical Islam emphasizing external conformity over internal devotion. The remaining 30 per cent who express neutrality or uncertainty embody what Shaikh terms 'spiritual ambivalence,'²⁶ a productive ethical space

²³ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*.

²⁴ Osim and Eteng, "Women and Ritual Purity in Islam"; Hary Widyantoro, "Global Islamic Liberation Theology in the Local Context of Transgendered Indonesian Muslims," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 19, no. 2 (2019): 235-259, <https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v19i2.1677>.

²⁵ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*.

²⁶ Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*.

where conflicting truths coexist. Within Islamic moral philosophy, this ambivalence mirrors the Sufi notion of *ḥayra*, where the believer’s confusion becomes a path toward deeper divine awareness.²⁷

The moral negotiations reflected in Figure 1 above demonstrate that ‘sacred disobedience’ operates along a spectrum ranging from conscious theological reinterpretation to internalized tension between social acceptance and spiritual conviction. In the *pesantren* context, this spectrum functions as a site of ethical experimentation, where *waria* Muslims construct moral intelligibility through emotional labor and ritual precision. Their negotiation between normative Islam and lived experience redefines the *pesantren* as an epistemic locus of *fiqh al-rahma*, a compassionate jurisprudence that situates faith within human vulnerability.²⁸

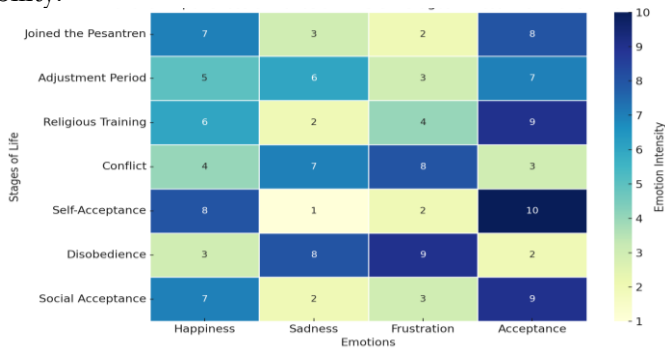


Figure 2. Emotional Experiences of Waria at Different Stages in Pesantren Al-Fatah (Source: NVIVO Analysis, 2025)

The emotional heatmap shown in Figure 2 complements the preceding findings by mapping affective fluctuations during key spiritual stages: conflict, religious training, and self-acceptance. High

²⁷ Demartoto, “The Representation of Hybrid Identity through Performance and Symbol of Transgender Santri Resistance at Al-Fatah Islamic Boarding School of Yogyakarta, Indonesia”; Muhammad Novan Leany and Ramadhanita Mustika Sari, “Social Solidarity and Waria Religiosity: A Netnographic Study of Al-Fatah Islamic Boardingschool Yogyakarta,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Ranshan Fikir* 11, no. 1 (2022): 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.24090/jimrf.v11i1.6477>.

²⁸ Widyantoro, “Global Islamic Liberation Theology in the Local Context of Transgendered Indonesian Muslims”; Ida Susanti, “Shifting Paradigms: The Controversy and Complexity of LGBTI Protection in Indonesia as the Biggest Muslim Country,” *Athens Journal of Law* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 2024): 497-518, <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajl.10-4-4>; Achmad Yazid, “Dinamika Ketahanan Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta 2006-2018 M,” *Journal of Islamic History* 2, no. 1 (2022): 63-91, <https://doi.org/10.53088/jih.v2i1.319>.

intensities of happiness and acceptance during the self-acceptance phase indicate the transformative potential of religious participation in affirming gendered faith. This pattern reflects Jaspal's theory of identity coherence.²⁹ It parallels Qur'anic accounts of tranquility (*sakīna*) as a divine response to steadfast belief (Q.S. al-Fath: 4). Conversely, heightened sadness and frustration during conflict stages signal the psychic strain of navigating doctrinal rejection. However, these adverse effects should not be read as spiritual failure. Within the ethics of patience (*sabr*), such emotional turbulence signifies perseverance as an expression of devotion, reaffirming that spiritual growth emerges through struggle.³⁰

Collectively, the collected and analyzed data demonstrate that *waria* Muslims engage with Islam not as an abstract doctrine but as a living ethical discourse. Their practices of sacred disobedience exemplify what may be termed a 'queer *fiqh*' of compassion, a theological praxis that transforms moral contradiction into divine intimacy. Through this lens, obedience and disobedience cease to be opposites; they become intertwined expressions of ethical being and becoming. The *pesantren*, historically an institution of conformity, evolves into a sanctuary of reinterpretation, where the paradox of gender and piety generates new theological possibilities for understanding Islam as a moral horizon of inclusion and mercy.

Belonging and Community at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

The experience of belonging among *waria* Muslims at Pesantren Al-Fatah is not grounded in institutional recognition but in affective, spiritual, and communal ties that emerge through shared practices of worship and care. Within the framework of Yuval-Davis's politics of belonging,³¹ inclusion is understood not as static membership but as an ongoing negotiation of emotional attachment and ethical solidarity.

²⁹ Rusi Jaspal, "Social Psychological Aspects of Gay Identity Development," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 48, no. 5 (2022): 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101469>.

³⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*; María Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, (New York: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003206255-16>; Jessica N. Fish and Stephen T. Russell, "Queering Methodologies to Understand Queer Families," *Family Relations* 67, no. 1 (2018): 12-25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12297>.

³¹ Nira Yuval-Davis, "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging," *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 197-214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>.

For *waria* Muslims, this process transcends the binary of inclusion and exclusion, embodying what Shaikh terms spiritual relationality,³² a form of belonging cultivated through compassion and devotion. Their daily lives within the *pesantren* demonstrate that spiritual brotherhood is not determined by gender conformity³³ but rather by shared participation in faith and mutual affirmation of divine love.³⁴ In this sense, the *pesantren* becomes a moral community of mercy, where humanity precedes normativity.³⁵

Table 2. Findings on Belonging at Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah

Theme	Description of Findings	Related Concept/Theory
Existence within the Community	Sense of acceptance and mutual support among <i>waria santri</i> , forming emotional and spiritual bonds.	<i>Politics of Belonging</i> (Yuval-Davis, 2006); <i>Ukhuwwah Islamiyyah</i> (Mahfudz, 2015)
Identity Strengthened through Ritual	Collective prayer and religious study reinforce belonging and spiritual identity.	<i>Mahabbah</i> and <i>Jama'ah</i> (Shaikh, 2019; Husein Muhammad, 2018)

Source: Field Data and NVivo Analysis (2025).

The findings summarized in Table 2 highlight that belonging within Pesantren Al-Fatah is sustained by affective intimacy and shared ritual practice. The *waria santri*'s expressions "We pray together, support each other" reflect what Mahmood defined as ethical cultivation,³⁶ the embodiment of virtue through repetition and discipline. These practices signify belonging-as-piety, where the

³² Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*.

³³ Mahfudz, *Maqasid Al-Shari'ah dan Aktualisasinya Dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer*.

³⁴ Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*; Husein Muhammad, *Fiqh Al-Rahmah: Islam Yang Ramah Terhadap Perempuan*.

³⁵ Arif Nuh Safri, "Penerimaan Keluarga terhadap Waria atau Transgender (Studi Kasus Atas Waria/Transgender di Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta)," *NIZHAM: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 4, no. 1 (2016): 27-41; Chisa Belinda Harahap, Anwar Ibrahim Triyoga, and Denti Titisia, "Dynamics of the Deviant Subculture Klitih Gang and Al-Fatah Transgender Boarding School in Yogyakarta," *Social Impact Journal* 2, no. 1 (2023): 65-75, <https://doi.org/10.61391/sij.v2i1.29>; Maya Sandra Rosita Dewi, "Communication and Subculture Identity: A Case Study of Transgender Students at a Waria (Transgender) Boarding School Al Fatah Yogyakarta," *Asian Journal of Media and Communication* 6, no. 2 (2022): 161-180, <https://doi.org/10.20885/asjmc.vol6.iss2.art4>.

³⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

community (*jama'ā'a*) becomes the locus of ethical transformation.³⁷ Such relational belonging reflects Qur'anic injunctions that faith manifests not only through individual belief but through communal solidarity (Q.S. al-Ḥujurāt: 10). In this frame, *waria* participation in religious collectivity is a theologically grounded claim to moral personhood, not an act of defiance.

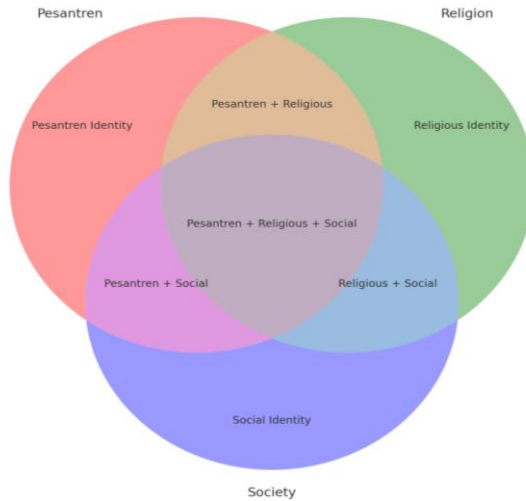


Figure 3. Overlapping Identities in the Pesantren Waria Community

Source: NVIVO Analysis, 2025

Figure 3 depicts the intersection of religious, social, and gender identities as overlapping circles of belonging.³⁸ This visualization illustrates how *waria* negotiate their sense of self within multiple moral domains: Islamic piety, social identity, and *pesantren* life. Drawing on Hall's notion of cultural identity as becoming,³⁹ their belonging is fluid and processual rather than fixed. However, within Islamic

³⁷ Isaac Kim et al., "Social Determinants of Health in Urban Transgender Patients: A Case Report," *Cureus* 15, no. 8 (2023): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.42941>; Thomas J. Billard et al., "Rethinking (and Rethorizing) Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion," *International Journal of Communication* 14, (2020): 4494-4507; Gilly Hartal and Sari Geiger, "Oriented Sexual Subjectivity: Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Women's Sexual Subjectivity in Israeli Rural Space and Periphery," *Gender, Place & Culture* 31, no. 4 (April 2, 2024): 464-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2022.2131742>.

³⁸ Leyla H. Tajer and Andy Hickson, "Transgender Inclusivity in Iranian Shia Tradition: Rethinking Sex and Gender Dynamics". *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 15, no. 1 (2025): 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2025.15.1.1-35>.

³⁹ Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

epistemology, this fluidity aligns with the Sufi idea of the spiritual path (*sulūk*), where the believer continually traverses moral thresholds in pursuit of divine proximity.⁴⁰ The negotiation of these overlapping identities embodies the Qur'anic concept of *ta'aruf*, mutual recognition among diverse human beings (Q.S. al-Ḥujurāt: 13). Hence, rather than representing theological instability, the multiplicity of *waria* identities signifies a dynamic spiritual striving that mirrors the pluralism inherent in Islam itself.⁴¹

The pesantren community functions as a microcosm of Islamic inclusivity, where the relational dimensions of faith, love, brotherhood, and recognition redefine belonging beyond juridical or gendered limitations. In this context, *waria* participants become both recipients and agents of compassion, constructing an alternative *ummah* rooted in shared ethical care. This communal reconfiguration resonates with Mahfudz's idea of social *fiqh*,⁴² where jurisprudence is grounded in human experience and collective well-being. Thus, the *pesantren* does not merely accommodate gender nonconformity; it theologically legitimizes it as part of Islam's broader moral project of preserving dignity and fostering solidarity.

⁴⁰ Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*; Ara Wilson, "Queer Anthropology," *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, (2019), <https://doi.org/10.29164/19queer>; Iolanda Tortajada et al., "Lost in Transition? Digital Trans Activism on Youtube," *Information Communication and Society* 24, no. 8 (2021): 1091-1107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1797850>.

⁴¹ Dyaloka Puspita Ningrum, "Penguatan Solidaritas Sosial Melalui FGD Pada Santri di Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Kotagede Yogyakarta," *Jurnal Surya Masyarakat* 4, no. 1 (2021): 122-129, <https://doi.org/10.26714/jsm.4.1.2021.122-129>; Patrick Parkinson, "Gender Identity Discrimination and Religious Freedom," *Journal of Law and Religion* 38, no. 1 (2023): 10-37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2022.45>; Javier Ignacio Fattah Jeldres and Patricia Lorena Sequeiros, "Feminism and Islam," *Revista de Letras* 62, no. 2 (2022): 41-49, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118474396.wbept0364>.

⁴² Mahfudz, *Maqāsid al-Shari'ah dan Aktualisasinya dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer*.

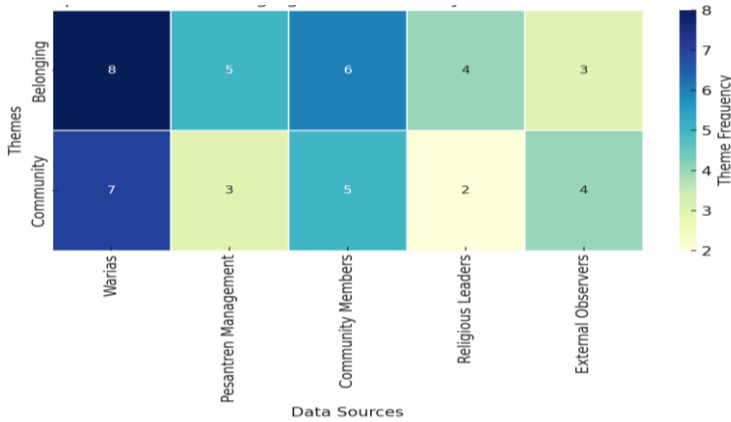


Figure 4. Belonging and Community Across Different Sources
Source: NVIVO Analysis, 2025

The heatmap in Figure 4 reveals that discourses of belonging are articulated most strongly by waria and lay community members, while institutional leaders engage less frequently with this theme. This disparity underscores the difference between lived theology and institutional discourse. As Yuval-Davis and Ryan suggested, ‘belonging’ is experienced affectively before it is articulated politically.⁴³ Within Islamic contexts, this experiential dimension parallels the Sufi distinction between outer (*ẓāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) faith, illustrating the contrast between formal doctrine and embodied spirituality. The high emotional resonance of ‘belonging’ among the transgender participants thus signifies a deep inner awareness of connectedness to divinity. Their emphasis on collective prayer, emotional support, and shared learning transforms the *pesantren* into a spiritual ecology where *maḥabba* and *ikhlās* function as the moral currency of inclusion.

The patterns indicated in Figure 4 above affirm that community and belonging at Pesantren Al-Fatah are sustained by the circulation of affective and spiritual care rather than by institutional validation. This resonates with contemporary discussions of Islamic humanism,⁴⁴ which center on compassion and mutual recognition as the foundation of moral life. The *pesantren*, therefore, serves as a locus of

⁴³ Nira Yuval-Davis and Louise Ryan, “Talking about Bordering,” *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 9, no. 1 (2020): 13-27, <https://doi.org/10.17467/ceemr.2020.02>.

⁴⁴ Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*; Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*.

‘social mysticism’ (*taṣawwuf ijtimā’i*), where worship, solidarity, and emotional healing converge. Through these dynamics, *waria* Muslims articulate a form of belonging that is both resistant and devotional: resistance not to faith but to exclusion; devotion not to conformity but to divine love.⁴⁵

In theological perspective, ‘belonging’ in Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah exemplifies an embodied hermeneutic of mercy (*ta’wil al-rahma*). The community’s affective bonds transform marginality into spiritual fellowship, demonstrating that inclusion in Islam need not rely on legal reclassification; instead, but can emerge through ethical relation and shared *dhiker* (remembrance of God). This moral reorientation shifts the discourse from identity politics to spiritual experiences within the continuum of Islamic spirituality. Through the convergence of brotherhood, love, and sincerity, the pesantren becomes a compassionate microcosm of divine mercy that transcends the gendered limits of orthodoxy.

Moral Ambiguity in Religious Practices and Transgender Identity

The moral life of *waria* Muslims at Pesantren Al-Fatah unfolds within a dense field of ethical tensions between devotion and deviance, purity and stigma, conformity, and authenticity.⁴⁶ Rather than conceiving these tensions as contradictions, the *waria* interpret them as sites of spiritual trial (*ibtīlā*) and ethical striving (*mujahada*). Their lived experiences reveal that moral ambiguity is not the absence of moral clarity but a dynamic process through which faith is constantly tested, negotiated, and reaffirmed. Within this space, ambiguity becomes an epistemic mode of approaching the divine, an acknowledgment that human understanding of moral truth is always

⁴⁵ Safri, “Penerimaan Keluarga Terhadap Waria Atau Transgender (Studi Kasus Atas Waria/Transgender Di Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta)”;

Dita Pratiwi and Lala M Kolopaking, “Leaders Influence on Productivity of Migrant Transvestites Community and Transvestites Did in Rural Development,” *Jurnal Sains Komunikasi dan Pengembangan Masyarakat (JSKPM)* 1, no. 3 (2017): 379-396;

Ningrum, “Penguatan Solidaritas Sosial Melalui FGD Pada Santri di Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Kotagede Yogyakarta.”

⁴⁶ Yazid, “Dinamika Ketahanan Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah Yogyakarta 2006-2018 M”;

Siti Munifah, “Solidaritas Kelompok Minoritas dalam Masyarakat (Studi Kasus Kelompok Waria Di Pondok Pesantren Waria Al Fatah Yogyakarta),” *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 11, no. 1 (2018): 109-118, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jsa.2017.1101-07>.

partial before God's ultimate knowledge.⁴⁷ As one informant stated, "They say I am wrong, but I feel this is my path", a statement that encapsulates what Gopinath (2008) calls the temporal dissonance of queer ethics.⁴⁸

Table 3. Findings on Moral Ambiguity in Religious Practices and Transgender Identity

Theme	Description of Findings	Relevant Concept/Theory
Moral Challenges in Religion	<i>Waria</i> navigate rejection and piety simultaneously, affirming faith despite nonconformity.	Moral Ambiguity (Gopinath, 2008); <i>Ikhlās</i> (Mahfudz, 2015)
Reinterpretation of Worship	Rituals redefined as expressions of queer devotion and divine intimacy.	<i>Maḥabba</i> (Shaikh, 2019); Queer Theology (Kugle, 2010)
Conflict with Society	Persistent social exclusion contrasts with inner peace and divine closeness.	<i>Fiqh al-Raḥma</i> (Husein Muhammad, 2018); <i>Sabr</i> (Mahmood, 2005)

Source: Field Data and NVivo Analysis (2025).

The ethnographic evidence in Table 3 articulates the coexistence of moral conflict and spiritual serenity in *waria* religiosity. While normative religious discourse frames their identities as morally deviant, their devotional acts reinterpret this judgment through *ikhlās* and *maḥabba*. For them, moral ambiguity is not a sign of confusion but an existential awareness of divine compassion that transcends human judgment. Their redefinition of worship as a space of freedom mirrors the Sufi idea that love of God (*maḥabba li-llāh*) often begins with the experience of estrangement (*ghurba*). Within the language of Islamic ethics, this ambiguity is a form of *iḥsān* to worship God "as if you see Him," even when social recognition is denied. It is precisely through their contested moral position that *waria* believers rediscover Islam's universal principle of mercy (Q.S. al-Anbiyā': 107).

⁴⁷ Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

⁴⁸ G. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

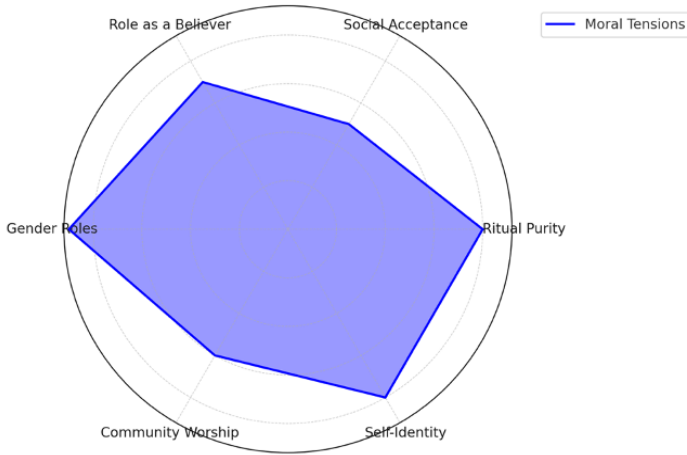


Figure 5. Key Moral Tensions in Religious Identity
Source: Analysis Researcher, 2025

Figure 5 visualizes the degrees of moral tension across five ethical domains: ritual purity, gender roles, social acceptance, self-identity, and communal worship. The highest intensity of tension appears in gender roles and ritual purity, indicating the weight of *fiqh*-based categories that define bodies and practices in binary terms. Within classical jurisprudence, ritual purity (*ṭahāra*) and ritual propriety are linked to gendered embodiment; however, *waria* practitioners reinterpret these categories through the lens of intention and sincerity. As Osim and Eteng (2021) note, ritual purity in Islam is not only a physical condition but an ethical state oriented toward spiritual readiness.⁴⁹ By performing ablution and prayer with deliberate consciousness, *waria* participants reclaim *ṭahāra* as a relational act of purity of heart rather than conformity of form. Their reinterpretation thus aligns with the Shari‘a objective of preserving *ḍīn* (religion) through moral sincerity rather than legal adherence.⁵⁰

The self-identity and communal worship domains reveal moderate tensions but profound emotional depth. *Waria* Muslims report inner reconciliation during collective prayer, experiencing the inner tranquility (*sakīna*) that descends upon the hearts that remember God (Q.S. al-Faḥ: 4). Their moral ambiguity thus becomes spiritually productive: by inhabiting uncertainty, they enact a theology of compassion grounded in humility. This “productive ambiguity”

⁴⁹ Osim and Eteng, “Women and Ritual Purity in Islam.”

⁵⁰ Mahfudz, *Maqāṣid al-Shari‘ah dan Aktualisasinya dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer*.

corresponds to Kugle's view that queer Muslims engage Islam as a hermeneutic of divine intimacy,⁵¹ where ambiguity signifies nearness to God rather than deviation from truth.

The emotional and ethical complexity captured in Figure 5 above underscores that ambiguity is not a failure of Islamic morality but its reorientation. Through their embodied devotion, *waria* believers practice what may be described as a hermeneutics of mercy (*ta'wil al-rahma*), a mode of interpreting religious experience through compassion, patience, and love. Their prayers, fasting, and Qur'anic recitation become performative sites, where divine law and human vulnerability meet. This reinterpretive process transforms the *pesantren* into a laboratory of ethical renewal, where the objectives of the Shari'a are reimaged through lived experience: *hifz al-nafs* is understood as preservation of one's self, *hifz al-din* is understood as preservation of one's faith, and *hifz al-'ird* is understood as protection of one's dignity. In this context, moral ambiguity operates as a theological bridge linking law with compassion, ritual with authenticity, and difference with devotion.⁵²

From a broader theological perspective, moral ambiguity in *waria* religiosity exemplifies a post-normative ethics of faith, an ethics that transcends rigid binaries of obedience and transgression. As Mahmood and Shaikh argued, piety can be understood as an embodied ethical effort, not as mere submission to external norms.⁵³ The *waria* community's devotional practices exemplify this effort through patience, sincerity, and love. Their spiritual struggles mirror the moral dialectic in *tasawwuf*, where paradox and imperfection become the very grounds of nearness to God. By inhabiting ambiguity faithfully, they generate what Widyantoro called a queer Islamic humanism,⁵⁴ a theology of compassion that restores Islam's human-centered moral imagination. In this horizon, ambiguity does not dissolve ethical certainty; it deepens it, revealing faith as a living dialogue between divine mercy and human fragility.

⁵¹ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*.

⁵² Muhammad, *Fiqh Al-Rahmah: Islam Yang Ramah Terhadap Perempuan*; Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*; Mahfudz, *Maqasid Al-Shari'ah Dan Aktualisasinya Dalam Hukum Islam Kontemporer*.

⁵³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*; Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*.

⁵⁴ Widyantoro, "Global Islamic Liberation Theology in the Local Context of Transgendered Indonesian Muslims."

Concluding Remarks

The ethnographic exploration of Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah reveals that sacred disobedience is not a contradiction to faith but an expression of its deepest moral potential. Through their daily devotion, the *waria* believers transform religious practices, prayer, fasting, and Qur'anic recitation into acts of ethical reimagination. Their piety embodies the paradox of obedience and transgression, where devotion to God coexists with defiance against social exclusion. Within this paradox, they cultivate a form of faith that is relational, affective, and sincere, demonstrating that moral life in Islam can flourish amid ambiguity and difference. 'Sacred disobedience' emerges as a theology of embodied compassion, a mode of worship that expands the moral vocabulary of Islam beyond conformity toward divine intimacy.

The experiences of the *waria* illuminate the intricate ways in which belonging, community, and ambiguity intersect. The bonds formed through collective worship and shared vulnerability transform the *pesantren* into a spiritual ecology grounded in love, sincerity, and mutual care. Belonging is not granted by institutional validation but generated through the affective labor of being together in faith. Within this communal life, moral uncertainty becomes a space of ethical discovery, where individuals learn to live faithfully within tension rather than outside of it. The *pesantren* thus stands as a locus of inclusive piety, a living testament that Islam, when practiced through compassion, can accommodate plurality without losing its spiritual core.

This study affirms that the moral and theological lives of *waria* Muslims open new pathways for Islamic thought in the contemporary world. Their lived religiosity challenges rigid binaries of purity and sin, orthodoxy and deviance, and reorients Islamic ethics toward the preservation of dignity and the pursuit of divine mercy. By inhabiting ambiguity as a site of devotion, they enact a quiet but profound theological intervention: that to be faithful is also to remain human in all of one's contradictions. The *pesantren* becomes a refuge for the marginalized as well as a microcosm of a broader theological vision, one in which Islam's essence as a religion of mercy is reawakened through the humble and courageous piety of those who are not deemed worthy of deserving it.

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