

# TRANSFORMATION OF RESEARCH IN ISLAMIC STUDIES



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# ONLINE PIETY: MAINTAINING PIETY THROUGH THE INTERNET OF INDONESIAN SALAFI ACTIVISTS

By:

Ahmad Bunyan Wahib<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The development of technology always gives influences in the development of the transmission of religious doctrines and knowledge. In the period of pre digital age, oral and printed media played important role in the process of the dissemination of religious teachings and creating religious life. Religious knowledge widely disseminate through oral media in the form of speeches and direct learning. In the period of hard printed media, various forms as books, pamphlets, brochures etc. also had been widely utilized to propagate religious teachings.<sup>2</sup> These has helped religious people to increase their religious knowledge and, to some extent, religious piety. The period of the Internet in the digital age has provided wider room for religious preachers and missionaries to propagate religious teachings in the web. The Internet gives a lot of benefits in the dissemination of religious teachings. The internet, therefore, has changed the face of religion. It has brought people from real to cyber life. It is true that life in cyberspace is in continuity with real life. People are doing online similar to what they do in real life, but they are doing it in different way. The internet has changed the face of religion worldwide. Adopting McSherry's term, religious embracers have created *cybercoven*, a group of people of an earth-based religious faith or belief system who interact primarily, if not solely, through the Internet and/or the World Wide Web.

The phenomenon above is also applied to Islam. Mandaville argues that the development of technology always gave influences in the development of Islam. In the digital age, Islamic activists utilize the internet to disseminate religious teachings and create Islamic cyber coven. One of Islamic group which actively utilize the Internet is salafi activists. Recent development of Islam has witnessed an expansion of salafi activism into computer-mediated environments which provide various cyber activities to disseminate salafi doctrines.<sup>3</sup> This paper tries to analyze efforts made by Indonesian safafi activists to create cyber "city of God", a cyber sphere in which religious acts are enacted,<sup>4</sup> or a cyber religious environment, a cyberspace in which religious doctrines are disseminated and practiced.<sup>5</sup>

## Pietyzation of Salafi Activist

Piety originates from the Latin *pietas*, which means reverence and obedience to God. It is also associated with pity. It refers to habitual acts of reverence and obedience. In sociological terms, it means the everyday practices that embody a set of dispositions which in turn determine taste for particular religious beliefs, practices and objects.<sup>6</sup> This means that the concept of piety manifests among believers in practicing their doctrines and teachings which come to the fore, among other things, in the form of religious rituals and identities. These rituals and identities demonstrate superiority within religious field. Religious ritual is a symbolic capital which is necessarily needed in the process of



pietization. Praying five times a day, fasting, and hajj are needed in the process of pietization among Muslims. These rituals will lead Muslims to become good Muslims.

Radical salafi, in some cases, practices religious rituals which differ from other groups. They have their own (wahhabi) references in practicing religious rituals. All religious practices should be based on al-Qur'an and or *Sunna* by following pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*). Muslims are not allowed to add or reduce Islamic teachings. Rituals must be based on the main sources of Islam. Religious innovation is considered *bid'a*. According to salafists, the purity of Islamic teachings envisages two serious threats i.e. folk customs and western values. Folk customs become sources of religious innovations (*bid'a*) and superstitions (*khurafat*) which contaminate Islamic teachings by adding or reducing religious rituals (*sharia*) and beliefs (*aqida*). At the same time, western ideas intrude the consciousness of Islamic religiousness and this weakens the spirit of Islam. In this case, according to salafi activists, piety means rejecting local customs and western ideas.<sup>7</sup>

### **Creating Cyber Salafi World**

In the real world, pietizaion of religious community has two contrasting meanings. It can be understood as strengthening bound among the members of community and, at the same time, keeping the community away from other community. This also applies to cyber religious world. Community of cyber religious world always has any attempt to keep their piety through various ways. If the community of real religious world performs various activities like religious gathering in the form of study circle, religious workshop, disseminating religious knowledge through the fatwas issuance, publishing books and articles, and the like, this can be applied to cyber religious community. There are many similarities between real and cyber religious community in maintaining religious peity. In some cases, cyber religion reflects real organized religion.

Websites which are set up to bring religion online often offer various things to be accessed by visitors. Among them are knowledge, activities, goods and stuffs.<sup>8</sup> Knowledge has close relation to enrich religious understanding, and goods and stuffs are important in creating (physical) identities and rituals. The dissemination of religious knowledge has been conducted by various programmes such as the issuance of fatwa on various (religious) issues, publishing e-articles and e-books, magazines, question and answer (Q&A) and discussion forums. Websites also have important role in publicizing various religious activities. Religious activities can manifest in the form of religious gatherings, religious study circles (*halqah*), or religious workshops, rallying charities, and, to some extent, demonstrations. The webs were also utilized as an effective way to attract people to join particular religious plans.

Meanwhile, religious webs also provide (religious) goods and stuffs. It is very common that religious webs have their functions as one stop e-shops in which visitors can buy religious goods. The goods are varies from drinks and foods and medicines, clothes and accessories which have relation to religions. The fruitful of the web is also applied to Indonesian alafi websites. Indonesian salafi activists have tried to bring their real world (including real piety) into cyber world by promoting salafi doctrines and its implementation in various forms. They have tried to make various attempts to realize it (activities and programmes).

The phenomenon above also applies to cyber Indonesian salafi community. They have created various cyber activities which support the dissemination of salafi doctrines to

strengthen piousness of the members of salafi. They have created a cyber salafi world which provides various facilities to increase their piety. Entering salafi cyber community is similar to come to real salafi community, in the sense that it is completed by a set of places and room which should be arrived. If we visit Indonesian salafi websites, having clicked the keyboard, we will come to a very religious environment. We will hear sound of quranic recitation and the sound is still there while we continue to search the site. Some sites utilize the fruitful of radio station, by directly connecting the site with particular salafi radio stations to keep the sound. Some sites also provide link to salafi radio station streaming which broadcast various programmes. Instead of broadcasting quranic recitation, the stations also broadcast live or recorded religious study circles (*halqahs*) or salafi workshops (*dawrah*).

Salafi search engine plays role as entering gate to salafy cyber community. It is the front line/page of salafi community which provides some initial information about the cyber salafi environment. There are some salafi search engines set up by Indonesian salafi activists, namely google search engine ([gsalaf.com](http://gsalaf.com)), [darussunnah.or.id/salafy-search-engine/](http://darussunnah.or.id/salafy-search-engine/), and [search.salafy.ws/](http://search.salafy.ws/)

For Indonesian salafi, <http://gsalaf.com> or google salaf engine (GSE) is the most popular and famous salafi search engine by which people can surf salafi cyberspace, not only for Indonesian salafi, but also salafi in the world. GSE was set up in the early October 2007.<sup>9</sup> Gsalaf.com has a tag line as “the most comprehensive resource on the web for: Salaf, Salafee, Salafi, Salafiy, Salafy, Ahlussunnah, Sunnah”. It is a search engine which takes benefits from the service of google search engine. It aims to provide a comprehensive salafi search engine which free from any unwanted sites by screening and blocking non saalafi sites from the engine. This also aims to give response to non salafi search engines which cover any form of websites without screening or blocking. “GSE presents as a response to other search engine which was set up by sururiyyun a day before”. This salafi search engine completed by some facilities (directories) to search salafi world: *semua* (all), forum, video, files, store, mailing list, and audio. This allows the users to search the part of cyber salafi world more specific. In one message which was posted in salafi-Indonesia yahoo group by the administrator (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) it was figured out that the GSE was set up to provide a search engine which guarantees the links which are shown. This GSE only shows the links which their contents are free from any deviations. By GSE, Indonesian salafiyyun hve their own search engine which is able to screen articles, audios, forums which easily can be found in this cyber world.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of GSE, there are two other popular Indonesian salafi searach engines, namely <http://search.salafy.ws/>,<sup>11</sup> <http://darussunnah.or.id/salafy-search-engine/>.<sup>12</sup> These two search engines also rely on google search engine data base. Both salafi search engines were set up in 2008. Salafi.ws is similar to gsalaf.com. It provides an empty box to be filled by visitors to search cyber salafi world. Instead of providing empty box to search the world, this search engine is completed by some salafi.ws banners under search box. This banner is provided to open new windows. Meanwhile, darussunnah salafi search engine is a search engine which works under darussunah.or.id web. The administrator states that this search engine has direct link to more than 200 salafi links from Indonesia and other countries. If we make an analogue to real salafi world, it can be concluded that salafi search engine has a same position with an entering gate or front gate which will bring us to cyber salafi world which can be accessed from Indonesian salafi websites.

Salafi web sites are other media by which Indonesian salafi activists build cyber salafi world. If salafi search engine is analogous of entry gate of salafi world, salafi

websites can be positioned as next gates to enter the world. There are tens of websites which have been set up by Indonesian salafi activists. They are commonly under Indonesian salafi foundations. Among them are [salafi.or.id](http://salafi.or.id), [darussalaf.or.id](http://darussalaf.or.id), [darussunnah.or.id](http://darussunnah.or.id), [almakassari.com](http://almakassari.com), [akhwat.web.id](http://akhwat.web.id). These webs promote doctrines and ideas on salafi, salafi goods. Salafi doctrines are promoted in various forms: fatwa on religious issues, articles on salafi doctrines, programmes and activities held by Indonesian salafi (daurah, halaqah, mass gathering and the others).

Indonesian salafi websites also disseminate religious doctrines. This has been done by various steps such as the issuance of fatwa on various religious issues. Usually, the fatwas are compiled in fatwa ulama directory which consists of various materials such as fatwa on theology (*aqida*), fatwa on Islamic law and regulation (*sharia*), fatwa on Islamic education (*tarbiyya*), fatwa on moral and ethics (*akhlaq*). Usually, a fatwa concerns with hot issues spread among the society, or the fatwa is issued as a response to contemporary hot issues. Fatwas are issued by salafi leading figures or salafi shaikhs or ulamas of salafi. So, if we visit salafi websites and come to fatwa ulama directory, we will find compilation of fatwa of prominent figures of salafi such as fatwa of ibn Baz, fatwa of uthaimin, fatwa of Rabi' etc. at the same time, article does not require such a high condition. The mufti should be really authorized figure.

Publishing articles on religious (salafi) doctrines is other way by which salafi websites disseminate the ideas of salafism. The difference between fatwa and article in salafi websites lies on the author or the writer. Usually, the writers are those who are considered as salafi asatidhah. They have authority to write articles. All Indonesian salafi websites provide this directory.

Instead of issuing fatwa and publishing articles, the Question and answer forum is other way by which salafi activists propagating salafism in their cyber city of god. Unlike publishing articles which does not involve the visitors active in the process of dissemination, question and answer forums need active visitors to make it happening. The existence of the forums also depends on the visitors. It also happens that this forum leads to more interactive one, namely discussion forums. In this place, the visitors do not only actively address questions, but also give their opinions about the issues. In the case of Indonesian salafi, discussion forum only happens in limited forum like yahoo group of Indonesian salafi, only the member who can join the discussion in this group.

Instead of websites, cyber group discussion is other room provided by Indonesian salafi to disseminate salafi ideas and doctrines in Indonesia. This comes to the fore in the form of mailing list (*mlist*). The most popular mailing list in which Indonesian salafi discuss salafism and its development in Indonesia is salafi-Indonesian yahoo group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Salafi-Indonesia>). This mailing list group was set up on 17 September 2006. Now, the members of this group are more about 2270 individuals. The formation of this group aims to provide a discussion forum which totally explores salafism and the development of salafism in Indonesia, a room which is filtered from any discussion which can lead the discussants to talk about un-Islamic (salafism) problems.<sup>13</sup> By so doing, it is hoped that Islam can be purified from any deviation. Moreover, this forum is also formatted to create an Islamic bound based on the Qur'an and Sunna in the path of *Salafush Shalih*.

Piety does not only have relation to knowledge. It also has close relation to particular religious identity. Even, it can be understood as a rejection to worldly identity. Physical identity plays important role to distinguish between sacred and profane. In this



context, pietization can be interpreted as a process of the creation of physical identity. How do Indonesian salafi activists utilize cyber world to create salafi identity?

Instead of the agent of the dissemination of salafi doctrines, salafi websites also play as e-shops, or even one stop e-shop, in which visitors can buy various stuffs” drinks and foods, medicine (alternative herbal medicines/*tib al-nabiy*), cosmetics, clothes, books, vcd, magazine, etc. One of them is [www.al-ilmu.com](http://www.al-ilmu.com) with *bekal setiap Muslim mengagungkan sunnah* (stock/reserve for the Muslim to glorify sunna) as its tagline. This site was set up in 2005 and managed and administered by salafi activists of Yogyakarta who take their base in Nitipuran No.285 Dk.Sonosewu - Yogyakarta. This site has been formatted as a one stop e shop for Muslims which can be easily accessed. If the visitors want to buy stuff, they do not need to register or login to the e shop. This makes visitor easy to buy anything provided by this site. This site provides various goods and stuffs: books (Indonesia and Arabic, CD, cassette, magazines and bulletin to increase knowledge on salafi doctrines; herbal medicines like habbatusauda, olive oil, perfume, and salafi fashion like clock or *jubah*, turban, clothes, and praying mat.<sup>14</sup>

The site [www.al-ilmu.com](http://www.al-ilmu.com) is also completed by various facilities which allow visitors to increase their knowledge and their piousness. Despite providing various goods and stuff, this site is also completed by forum and online discussion (*kajian online*) to discuss salafi teachings, online library (*maktabah online*) and bulletin. In order to strengthen visitors’ religiousness, the site is also directly linked to radio as-sunnah. Therefore if we visit the website, we will directly listen to radio as-sunnah. This indicates that in maintaining piety in cyber world, Indonesian salafi activists do not only concentrate on disseminating religious knowledge by issuing fatwa and publishing books and articles. They also promote religious identities in the form of selling goods and stuffs which are consider Islamic.

### **Protecting Cyber Piety**

The internet gives much benefit to the development of Indonesian salafi. Indonesian cyber salafi environments have the potential to transform some aspects of religious understanding and expression within the context of Muslim world. The Internet, however, has negative impact to the development of religion. Authority and authenticity are two problems which probably become serious ones in the context of religious authority. These two problems come to the fore as a product of the openness of the Internet. Everyone, without considering religious experience and deep understanding of religious teachings and expert can give comment and post the comment to the internet without any editorial process. This has made the Internet producing “instant religious experts”, who traditionally, in many cases, do not have authority to give religious opinion.

The issue of Internet censorship has become contentious in relation to the expression of Islam. In the context of Muslim world, some states with Muslims as the majority seek limitations on access, and some others have tried to circumvent censorship of their own materials, and at the same time protesting about the content of other areas of the internet.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the development of religion, the main aim of the censorship is to decrease negative impact of the internet towards religious authority and doctrines. By so doing, cyber Islamic environment can be set up.

Indonesian salafi websites have anticipated negative impact of their visitors. It may happen that visitors of Indonesian salafi websites originate from various paces and groups of people. The diversity of the background of visitors may give negative impact to

the purity of salafi world. It will tarnish the purity of salafism, something that salafi activists harshly reject. In the real world, salafi group is well known as a Muslim group who vividly promote the purity of Islam. Islam should be purified from any deviation. Every religious practice should be based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. In anticipating negative impact of the Internet towards the doctrines of salafism and its development, Indonesian salafi activists should pay deep attention to this possibility.

In order to keep their cyber world pure, salafi activists have anticipated the possibilities by protecting Indonesian salafi websites from unwanted materials and guests. In the context of protecting their cyber world from unwanted materials, Indonesian salafi websites only provide authorized salafi links. They only give links which are under their networks, afford the materials of religious knowledge which support their mission, offer goods and stuffs which promote their faiths and beliefs, announce activities which support the dissemination of salafi dakwah in Indonesia.

Censorship is an accurate word to describe the way by which Indonesian salafi activists protect their cyber world. Indonesian salafi activists apply the censorship in various forms. Blocking and filtering the link are two popular ways by which Indonesian salafi activists protecting their world. Salafi search engines (GSE, darussunah, and salafi.ws) adopt these methods to eliminate unwanted sites. "We have strong attempt to filter sururi and hizbi sites and other sites which have connection to them".<sup>16</sup> If we type some salafi keywords such as salafi, sunnah, ahlu sunnah and the like in searching box of the engines, we will only come to websites which affiliate to the group and we cannot reach other websites.

Optimizing the role of administrator is other way of Indonesian salafi activists keep their world. The role of moderator is very crucial to protect their world. This is applied to discussion forums in comments for particular article. If we visit salafi websites and come to comments for articles, we only find comments which support the ideas in the articles, and questions asking explanation of the articles. There is no critical comment in this room which questions the materials in the article.

Optimizing the role of moderator is other way by which Indonesian salafi activists keep their world pure from any deviation. This applies to the moderator of salafi-indonesia yahoo group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Salafi-Indonesia/>). The moderator of this group clearly states that the moderator will post messages which do not contradict to salafi doctrines, and it is the authority of moderator to reject any message considered contradict to the mission of salafism. "Attempt to screen everything which is non Islamic, in the field of aqidah, ahkam and akhlaq should be conducted in order to make purity of Islam, Islamic teachings which originate from the Holy prophet Muhammad PBUH and understood and earned by his Companions and followed by their followers until the end of the day.

## **Conclusion**

Turner's concept of the acts of piety argues that acts of piety represent a challenge to both secular and traditional religious world, this paper argues that Salafi activists have utilized the Internet to strengthen the piety of its followers by performing various activities. In order to create cyber salafi environment, they proselytize wahhabi teachings by publishing articles, issuing fatwa, and question-answer and discussion forum in the websites. In some occasions, the sites also announce various activities which will be held by salafi activists like religious gatherings. Some sites also sell salafi stuffs like books on salafi and clothes. Instead of benefits, the Internet also gives inconvenient effect to

religious groups. This is because everyone can access and join the sites, including those who have bad intention. In this case, salafi activists need to protect their cyber environment from alien intruders.

Various efforts have been done by salafi activists to clean their cyber world from deviant visitors. They protect their sites by blocking unwanted sites. This is applied to, for instance, gsalaf.com, a salafi search engine made by Indonesian salafi. Some salafi sites optimize the role of moderators to screen the material posted by the visitors. This applies to various discussion forums, question-answer forums, and comments on articles. By so doing, Indonesian salafi activists keep their world a distance from secular and traditional religious world. The internet provides benefits to the dissemination of religion (Islam). It, however, has important social consequences. The internet leads to a crisis of religious authority and a crisis of religious authenticity.<sup>17</sup> The crises come to the fore as a result of: no mechanism by which the information posted and editorial process of the information can be conducted before posting the messages. In this case, authority and authenticity are excluded. The Internet, therefore, produces “instant experts”. In this case, experience, religious experience and expert will be meaningless. In this case, censorship in its various forms can be done to minimize the effects.

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<sup>5</sup> Gary R. Bunt, (2009), *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>9</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Salafi-Indonesia/message/>, 2007, accessed on 02/06/2011

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