

Language, Power, and Pluralism: Decolonizing Islamic Discourse through Abu Zayd's Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate how Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd employs language as a site of power and resistance in the reinterpretation of Islamic texts and the promotion of religious pluralism. It focuses on how his linguistic-hermeneutical approach challenges dominant literalist paradigms and contributes to the development of inclusive Islamic theology. The research adopts a qualitative methodology through textual analysis of Abu Zayd's major works, complemented by a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework. Key concepts such as language, power, and authority in interpretation are examined to understand how Abu Zayd reconstructs religious meaning within the context of sociopolitical realities. The findings reveal that Abu Zayd's philosophy of language subverts literalist and hegemonic interpretations by promoting a dynamic, context-sensitive, and pluralistic reading of Islamic texts rooted in lived human experience. His hermeneutics exposes the embedded power relations in religious discourse and offers a critical lens for deconstructing interpretative authority. By foregrounding the role of language in shaping theological narratives, this study contributes to the decolonization of Islamic discourse and highlights Abu Zayd's hermeneutics as a foundation for developing an emancipatory and pluralist Islamic theology, particularly relevant for Muslim communities beyond the dominant Arab-Western paradigms. This research contributes to the decolonization of Islamic studies by demonstrating how linguistic awareness and interpretive plurality can challenge hegemonic discourses, reclaim interpretative agency, and open new spaces for contextual and inclusive Islamic thought, especially within postcolonial Muslim societies.

Keywords: *Language and Power, Religious Pluralism, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Decolonization of Islamic Thought.*

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Introduction

The discourse on religious pluralism within Islamic thought remains one of the most contested and evolving areas in contemporary scholarship. At the heart of the debate lies a tension between exclusivist and inclusivist interpretations of Islamic texts, particularly the Qur'an. Scholars rooted in traditionalist frameworks often uphold literalist readings that reinforce doctrinal boundaries, while reformist thinkers advocate for contextual and historically grounded interpretations that accommodate religious diversity. This intellectual divide is further intensified by the persistence of epistemological paradigms shaped by colonial and orientalist legacies, which continue to influence both Muslim and non-Muslim approaches to Islamic scripture. Thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman (2009), Abdullah Saeed (2013), and Farid Esack (2013) have emphasized the need for reinterpreting Islamic texts in a manner that fosters inclusivity and interfaith engagement. Within this discourse, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd stands out for his unique integration of hermeneutics and linguistics in approaching the Qur'an. He argues that scripture should not be viewed as a static repository of divine commands but rather as a linguistic and cultural construct, open to contextual interpretation.¹

Abu Zayd's scholarly work delves deep into the complexities of religious pluralism, examining its implications for societal cohesion and harmony. By navigating various cultural and religious terrains, he sheds light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in managing religious diversity in contemporary settings. Through his analyses, Abu Zayd highlights the intricate interplay between religious beliefs, cultural norms, and social structures, offering valuable insights for fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation. His contributions not only enhance academic discussions but also provide practical guidance for promoting understanding and collaboration across different faith traditions.² His exploration of decolonization and intercultural worship further enriches the discourse on religious pluralism, emphasizing the importance of power dynamics and transformative practices in diverse worshipping communities.³

Abu Zayd's scholarship delves into religious pluralism, emphasizing language as a key medium for conveying and comprehending such concepts. This critical examination, focusing on linguistic dimensions within Abu Zayd's discourse, aims to uncover the intricate nature of religious pluralism through his linguistic strategies.⁴ Muslim perennialists advocate for religious pluralism as a means for peaceful co-existence, highlighting the importance of interfaith dialogue.⁵ The study of logical pluralism underscores the challenges of cross-framework communication, suggesting metalinguistic negotiation as a solution to facilitate disagreements across domains.⁶ By exploring

¹ Hamid Abu Zayd Nasr, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), https://books.google.co.id/books?id=0UZc_Yvle_AC&printsec=frontcover&hl=id&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

² Magdi Youssef, "Magdi Youssef: Corrections and Refutations," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 3 (May 26, 2020): 504–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1763125>.

³ Safwat Marzouk, "Intercultural Worship and Decolonialization: Insights from the Book of Psalms," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (January 28, 2023): 152, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020152>.

⁴ Bharatwaj Iyer, "The Transimmanence of the Real: Ontological Pluralism in the School of Ibn 'Arabi," *Religions* 14, no. 7 (July 17, 2023): 923, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070923>.

⁵ Teresa Kouri Kissel, "Metalinguistic Negotiation and Logical Pluralism," *Synthese* 198, no. S20 (August 28, 2021): 4801–12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02264-z>.

⁶ Neelam Bano et al., "Principles of Religious Pluralism," *Religions* 14, no. 1 (December 22, 2022): 20, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010020>.

these diverse perspectives, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding religious pluralism, enriching scholarly dialogues in the field.

The research on religious pluralism aims to enhance scholarly comprehension by analyzing Nashir Hamid Abu Zayd's views, particularly focusing on language. It seeks to enrich the understanding of religious pluralism by exploring Abu Zayd's insights, uncovering themes, arguments, and perspectives that shape his conceptualization. This in-depth examination contributes to navigating religious diversity complexities and promoting academic dialogue.⁷ Additionally, the study on value pluralism in social policy suggests that embracing a variety of moral values can facilitate constructive policy discussions, offering a pragmatic approach to engage different perspectives.⁸ Understanding the implications of pluralism in religious and social contexts is crucial for fostering tolerance, peace, and progress in contemporary societies.

The pivotal role of language in shaping and conveying concepts of religious pluralism is underscored by research findings. Language serves as a powerful tool for articulating and disseminating ideas within society.⁹ Linguistic analysis, such as scrutinizing the strategies employed by communicators like Abu Zayd, elucidates how language influences perceptions of religious pluralism.¹⁰ Understanding these linguistic mechanisms is crucial for fostering interfaith dialogue and promoting mutual understanding. By examining the use of language in discussing religious topics, we can gain insights into how ideas are communicated and interpreted, emphasizing the significance of linguistic sensitivity in promoting harmony and cooperation among diverse religious communities.¹¹

The research on religious pluralism, as discussed in various contexts, provides valuable insights into fostering social cohesion and interfaith harmony in diverse societies.¹² By delving into the principles advocated by Muslim perennialists and examining the integration of ultra-Orthodox academics, the research highlights the importance of understanding and accommodating diverse religious perspectives in societal frameworks.¹³ This understanding aids in the formulation of strategies and policies that promote inclusivity, tolerance, and mutual respect among different religious groups, ultimately contributing to peaceful coexistence and unity across religious divides. The nuances of religious pluralism, as explored in the research, offer a roadmap for navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by religious diversity, paving the way for harmonious interactions and enhanced social integration.

While substantial scholarship has explored Abu Zayd's theological and philosophical contributions, relatively little attention has been given to the specific role of language in shaping

⁷ Rachel Cummings, Gabriel Kaptchuk, and Elissa M. Redmiles, "I Need a Better Description": An Investigation Into User Expectations For Differential Privacy," in *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM SIGSAC Conference on Computer and Communications Security* (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2021), 3037–52, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3460120.3485252>.

⁸ (Howick et al., 2023)

⁹ Metin M. Coşgel et al., "Religiosity: Identifying the Effect of Pluralism," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 158 (February 2019): 219–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2018.11.018>.

¹⁰ Shanette C. Porter, Michelle Rheinschmidt-Same, and Jennifer A. Richeson, "Inferring Identity From Language," *Psychological Science* 27, no. 1 (January 4, 2016): 94–102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615612202>.

¹¹ George C. Asadu, Nicholas Asogwa, and Benjamin C. Diara, "Religious Pluralism and Its Implications for Church Development," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 3 (July 28, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.5955>.

¹² Asadu, Asogwa, and Diara.

¹³ Tehila Kalagy and Orna Braun-Lewensohn, "Diversity Management in the Integration of Minorities in the Job Market: Policies and Practices," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 43, no. 9/10 (August 22, 2023): 838–52, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-09-2022-0228>.

his understanding of religious pluralism. Abu Zayd's work strongly suggests that language is not merely a neutral vessel of transmission but a dynamic force that constructs religious meaning, frames interfaith relations, and influences public discourse. Despite this, the linguistic dimensions of pluralism in Islamic thought remain underexplored, particularly in the context of Abu Zayd's hermeneutical method.¹⁴

Most existing studies on Islamic pluralism have focused on theological, ethical, or sociopolitical aspects, often neglecting how language, discourse, and interpretative frameworks actively mediate religious tolerance and interfaith interaction.¹⁵ Moreover, there is a significant gap in connecting Abu Zayd's linguistic hermeneutics to contemporary models of interreligious dialogue and pluralist theology. This study seeks to address this gap by offering a critical linguistic analysis of Abu Zayd's thought on religious pluralism. It aims to illuminate how his views on language provide a powerful framework for reinterpreting religious texts and fostering inclusive theological engagement in pluralistic societies.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine the linguistic and epistemological dimensions of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's thought on religious pluralism. Specifically, the analysis adopts Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which integrates textual analysis, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice.¹⁶ This model is appropriate for interrogating how language constructs and reflects power relations, especially in religious discourse where authority and meaning are often contested. Fairclough's framework enables the study to explore (1) the textual features of Abu Zayd's language—such as word choice, rhetorical strategies, and argumentation structures; (2) the production and interpretation processes of his texts within scholarly and religious communities; and (3) the broader ideological and socio-political contexts that shape and are shaped by his discourse. Through this layered analysis, the study seeks to understand how Abu Zayd constructs a pluralistic vision of Islam through linguistic strategies that challenge epistemic orthodoxy and hegemonic interpretations of sacred texts.

The corpus analyzed in this research includes a curated selection of Abu Zayd's published works, public lectures, and interviews that directly address issues of hermeneutics, interpretation, and pluralism. Primary sources include "Reformation of Islamic Thought" (2004), "Voice of an Exile",¹⁷ and his chapter in "Rethinking Islam", along with relevant essays and interviews published in academic and journalistic platforms. These texts are chosen based on their explicit engagement with the role of language, interpretation, and the plurality of meaning in Islamic theology.¹⁸

The analysis is supported by secondary sources from discourse theorists, postcolonial scholars, and contemporary Islamic reform thinkers to contextualize Abu Zayd's language within a broader intellectual tradition. By combining Fairclough's model with a hermeneutic reading of

¹⁴ Ismail Suardi Wekke and Acep; Firdaus, "Hermeneutical Approach To The Qur'an," *Epistémé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 13, no. 2 (December 16, 2018): 455–79, <https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2018.13.2.483-507>.

¹⁵ Momy Hunowu et al., "RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES: Comparing Gorontalo, Indonesia and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 49, no. 1 (July 1, 2025): 222, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v49i1.1350>.

¹⁶ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (New York, NY, USA: Routledge, 2010), <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=nf7cAAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=id#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

¹⁷ Nasr, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis*.

¹⁸ Abdul Mufid et al., "Rereading Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Method of Interpreting Religious Texts," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (January 31, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8102>.

the corpus, this study bridges the gap between linguistic analysis and Islamic intellectual history, offering a comprehensive approach to understanding pluralism in contemporary Islamic thought.

1. Linguistic Dynamics in Religious Discourse

Abu Zayd's writings heavily rely on classical theological sources, which shape his interpretations of religious pluralism.¹⁹ This study identifies specific terminologies, rhetorical strategies, and discursive structures that Abu Zayd employs to construct a narrative of tolerance and inclusivity. His approach demonstrates how language can be used to reinterpret religious texts in ways that support pluralistic values while challenging exclusivist readings of sacred scriptures.

2. Role of Language in Interfaith Dialogue

Language plays a central role in constructing religious identities and facilitating interfaith interactions, as seen in the broader discourse on religious moderation in Arabic education.²⁰ The analysis reveals that linguistic biases can either promote or hinder interfaith dialogue, depending on how religious terminology is framed and interpreted. This underscores the necessity of critical linguistic awareness to navigate interreligious communication effectively and prevent misunderstandings stemming from deeply ingrained discursive traditions.

3. Implications of Language Use

The research emphasizes the importance of understanding how language influences perceptions of religious diversity, drawing parallels with broader discussions on discrimination in media discourse.²¹ It suggests that language can either reinforce stereotypes or foster mutual understanding, depending on how it is applied in religious contexts.

Conversely, while Abu Zayd strongly advocates for religious pluralism, some critiques argue that his approach may oversimplify the complexities of religious identity formation. Critics suggest that his emphasis on dialogue and tolerance, though valuable, does not fully account for the socio-linguistic power structures that influence religious discourse. This highlights the need for a more nuanced exploration of language's role in shaping religious beliefs, perceptions, and interfaith relations.

Result and Discussion

Fundamental Concept of Religious Pluralism

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's view of religious pluralism is anchored in a hermeneutic approach that centers language as both the medium and the site of religious meaning-making. His insistence on interpreting Islamic texts through their historical-linguistic context represents a significant departure from classical exegetical traditions that assume fixed, eternal meanings. By arguing that the Qur'an is a discursive text shaped by the cultural and linguistic realities of its time, Abu Zayd challenges the epistemological foundation of traditional Islamic orthodoxy. This position does not

¹⁹ Luis Xavier López-farjeat, "Naṣr Ḥamid Abū Zayd's Use of Classical Theological and Philosophical Islamic Sources in His Qur'ānic Hermeneutics," *Filozofia* 79, no. 8 (October 14, 2024): 892–906, <https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2024.79.8.4>.

²⁰ Yasmadi Yasmadi et al., "Insights from a State Islamic University on Arabic Education as a Catalyst for Religious Moderation in Indonesia," *International Journal of Language Education* 8, no. 3 (October 6, 2024): 533–49, <https://doi.org/10.26858/ijole.v8i3.66496>.

²¹ Inmaculada Garnes-Tarazona, "Discriminatory Discourses against Morocco and Moroccan Immigrants in the Spanish Context. A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of 'Jovenlandia/Jovenlandés' (Youthland/Youthlandian) on X," *Discourse & Communication*, October 6, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813241285907>.

merely advocate for contextual interpretation it reclaims interpretive agency from religious authorities who monopolize meaning.²² Thus, Abu Zayd's work becomes a gateway to rethinking how religious diversity is negotiated in language and discourse.

Abu Zayd's perspective aligns with the principles of religious pluralism advocated by Muslim perennialists, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and respecting diverse religious beliefs and practices.²³ This inclusive approach is crucial in contemporary society, where issues of diversity, pluralism, and rights are pressing concerns. By drawing on Islamic values, educational courses can be redesigned to enhance students' understanding and respect for diversity, fostering tolerance and compassion.²⁴ In the higher education sector, the need for diversity in education teams is recognized to meet the demands of a diverse student population and labor market, highlighting the importance of integrating cultural differences for mutual learning and skill development. Overall, embracing religious inclusivism, as advocated by Abu Zayd, is essential for promoting interfaith dialogue, peaceful co-existence, and a deeper appreciation of the richness that diverse religious traditions offer.

Abu Zayd's writings emphasize the transformative power of religious pluralism in nurturing mutual understanding and empathy among individuals from varied religious backgrounds. This concept aligns with the principles advocated by Muslim perennialists, stressing the importance of religious pluralism for peaceful co-existence.²⁵ The Qur'an underscores the significance of noble values like mutual respect and cooperation in dealing with diversity, refuting misconceptions about religious texts promoting hatred. Furthermore, the necessity of a pluralistic outlook to foster harmony among people of different faiths is highlighted, especially in regions like Indonesia where diverse beliefs pose challenges to community cohesion.²⁶ Embracing religious pluralism enables the exploration of common ground and shared human experiences across religious divides, facilitating dialogue and cooperation amidst diversity, as discussed in various scholarly works.

Abu Zayd's perspective on religious pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance, emphasizing the enrichment that diverse religious traditions bring to society. This approach aligns with the idea that embracing religious diversity can lead to cultural enrichment and collective wisdom, fostering inclusivity and social cohesion.²⁷ The promotion of tolerance and respect for diversity, drawing on Islamic values, is seen as essential for shaping individuals who value compassion and understanding. The development of a pluralistic Islamic religious education in Indonesia highlights the importance of positive pluralism, where students can uphold their beliefs while engaging with others who differ, promoting open-mindedness and tolerance.²⁸ Overall, these perspectives advocate for a shift towards appreciating and celebrating religious pluralism as a fundamental aspect of human identity and societal harmony.

Ideas	Description	Elaboration
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²² Nasr, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis*.

²³ Bano et al., "Principles of Religious Pluralism."

²⁴ Semiyu Adejare Aderibigbe et al., "Fostering Tolerance and Respect for Diversity through the Fundamentals of Islamic Education," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (February 3, 2023): 212, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020212>.

²⁵ Zekirija Sejdić, "Religious Plurality from the Perspective of Islamic Religious Education," in *Rethinking Islam in Europe* (De Gruyter, 2022), 91–112, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110752410-010>.

²⁶ Bano et al., "Principles of Religious Pluralism."

²⁷ Bano et al.

²⁸ Aderibigbe et al., "Fostering Tolerance and Respect for Diversity through the Fundamentals of Islamic Education."

Recognition of Diversity	Abu Zayd emphasizes the importance of recognizing and respecting the multitude of religious traditions present within society, viewing them as integral components of human experience.	Religious pluralism, in Abu Zayd's view, necessitates acknowledging the diverse array of beliefs and practices as valid expressions of human spirituality and cultural heritage.
Appreciation of Different Beliefs	He advocates for an appreciation of the diverse array of religious beliefs and practices, portraying religious diversity as enriching the cultural and intellectual landscape.	Abu Zayd highlights the significance of valuing the unique perspectives and insights offered by different faith traditions, fostering a culture of openness and curiosity towards religious diversity.
Promotes Inclusivity	Abu Zayd's perspective promotes inclusivity by encouraging individuals and communities to embrace the richness of religious diversity, fostering mutual understanding and respect.	He argues that embracing religious pluralism creates an environment where individuals feel valued and accepted regardless of their religious affiliations, thereby promoting social cohesion and harmony.
Catalyst for Dialogue	Religious pluralism serves as a catalyst for dialogue and cooperation among individuals of diverse religious backgrounds, facilitating the exploration of shared values and experiences.	Abu Zayd contends that engaging in meaningful dialogue allows for the exchange of perspectives, dispelling misconceptions, and building bridges of understanding across religious divides.
Source of Cultural Enrichment	He posits religious pluralism as a source of cultural enrichment, enabling the exploration of diverse perspectives and fostering collective wisdom within society.	Abu Zayd suggests that embracing religious diversity fosters a dynamic cultural landscape where individuals have the opportunity to learn from and engage with different religious traditions, leading to a deeper appreciation of human creativity and diversity.

Table 1. Fundamental Concept of Religious Pluralism

The table offers a structured insight into Abu Zayd's views on religious pluralism, combining brief descriptions with detailed explanations for each concept. This approach aligns with the Catholic Church's evolving use of interreligious dialogue to foster respectful relationships and promote a new evangelization of collaboration for the global common good.²⁹ Additionally, the study on architectural design elements in mosques emphasizes the importance of social inclusion, reflecting the need for unity among diverse groups regardless of religion or ethnicity. Furthermore, the theoretical perspective on the virtual sphere highlights the challenges posed by online pluralism, suggesting that while the internet amplifies voices quantitatively, it may also

²⁹ Joyce Ann Konigsburg, "Religious Pluralism: Transforming Society Using New Concepts of Evangelization and Dialogue," *Religions* 14, no. 1 (January 6, 2023): 80, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010080>.

deepen the qualitative divide between them, potentially hindering the goals of a pluralist political system.

Viewed through a decolonial lens, Abu Zayd's hermeneutics align with broader critiques of hegemonic knowledge production. His approach can be read as an instance of what Walter Dignolo (2007) terms epistemic disobedience a refusal to submit to dominant epistemologies that obscure alternative, indigenous, or plural ways of knowing. By undermining literalist and absolutist frameworks, Abu Zayd's method offers a counter-hegemonic reading of Islam that is open, pluralistic, and historically grounded. His rejection of singular theological authority parallels Ram3n Grosfoguel's (2011) call to dismantle the coloniality of power embedded within religious and academic institutions. In this sense, Abu Zayd's linguistic turn not only reconfigures Islamic theology but also participates in a larger decolonial intellectual movement. However, Abu Zayd's project has encountered resistance, particularly from conservative scholars who view his ideas as excessively liberal or influenced by Western paradigms. These criticisms, ironically, reflect the very epistemic anxieties that his work exposes namely, the fear of losing control over religious meaning in an age of interpretive pluralism. Moreover, while many discussions of Islamic pluralism focus on theology or interfaith practice, few have explored how language functions as a vehicle of epistemic power in shaping religious discourse. Abu Zayd's contributions thus fill a crucial gap by foregrounding the role of language in both enabling and contesting authority.³⁰ His thought provides not only a pluralist theology but also a critical linguistic framework for rethinking power, knowledge, and belief in Islam.

Importance of Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue, as emphasized by various scholars, plays a pivotal role in promoting societal harmony and mutual understanding among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. Abu Zayd's philosophy underscores the significance of interfaith dialogue as a fundamental tool for bridging divides and fostering religious pluralism.³¹ This dialogue involves sincere listening, openness, and respect for different beliefs, allowing for the exchange of thoughts and hearts to achieve common goals. Community involvement in interfaith dialogues contributes to creating a harmonious life amidst globalization challenges, highlighting the importance of active engagement in such discussions. Incorporating interfaith dialogue into pedagogical designs in higher education can prepare students for global careers and support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in multinational corporations.³² Overall, interfaith dialogue stands as a crucial mechanism for nurturing understanding and unity across varied faith traditions, echoing the essence of religious pluralism.

Abu Zayd's emphasis on interfaith dialogue aligns with various research findings. Studies show that interfaith dialogue is crucial for promoting tolerance and peace. It serves as a means to signal moderation, dispel misconceptions, and foster empathy among diverse religious groups. Interfaith dialogue facilitates the transmission of religious and cultural values within families,

³⁰ SYED FARID ALATAS, "Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Sciences: Responses to Eurocentrism," *Sage Publications* 12y, no. 235 (2007): 245, [http://digilib.unila.ac.id/4949/15/BAB II.pdf](http://digilib.unila.ac.id/4949/15/BAB%20II.pdf).

³¹ Tuck Leong Lee, "Interculturality in Interfaith Dialogue," *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 78–95, <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJBIDE.2021010106>.

³² Renaldo Benarrivo, "Teoritisasi Dialog Lintas Agama Dalam Kajian Hubungan Internasional Kontemporer," *Jurnal Dinamika Global* 7, no. 01 (June 28, 2022): 106–21, <https://doi.org/10.36859/jdg.v7i01.975>.

influenced by social and contextual factors.³³ Furthermore, interfaith groups in the US act as mediating structures, positively impacting individual political action through community and religious information sharing. Conflicts over burial rites due to differing faiths highlight the importance of respecting the deceased's religious identity, showcasing the need for understanding and honoring diverse beliefs. In essence, interfaith dialogue plays a vital role in bridging divides, promoting understanding, and nurturing harmonious coexistence among different religious communities.

Abu Zayd's emphasis on language in interfaith dialogue aligns with the broader discourse on the significance of communication in fostering understanding among diverse religious communities. Language, as highlighted in various studies, plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards individuals of different religious backgrounds. Effective communication, characterized by respect, openness, and empathy, can serve as a bridge that connects people from various faith traditions. Conversely, poor communication can act as a barrier, hindering meaningful interactions. Abu Zayd's advocacy for language that promotes mutual respect and empathy echoes the importance of linguistic strategies in facilitating harmonious interfaith relations.³⁴ By recognizing the power of language in interfaith dialogue, Abu Zayd underscores the need for intentional and inclusive communication practices to bridge religious divides.

Abu Zayd's emphasis on interfaith dialogue, as highlighted in the contexts, aligns with the transformative potential of fostering harmonious relations among individuals of diverse religious backgrounds. This emphasis is crucial for promoting social cohesion and mutual respect amidst religious diversity. The studies emphasize the significance of respectful communication and empathetic understanding in building strong social capital within communities, as seen in the research on Arab business relationships.³⁵ Furthermore, the exploration of Islamic sacred architecture and the design of contemporary sacred spaces underscore the importance of transcending mimetic processes and prioritizing unseen dimensions to create context-sensitive meanings. By integrating creative and spiritual practices, a transformative approach emerges that can mitigate challenges faced in designing sacred spaces, ultimately contributing to the promotion of social inclusion and understanding across different faiths.

Critiques of Abu Zayd's Perspective

The critiques of Abu Zayd's perspective on religious pluralism delve into potential limitations, especially regarding linguistic dynamics, as highlighted in language reviews. While Abu Zayd's focus on interfaith dialogue and tolerance is praised for fostering mutual understanding and societal peace, scholars from language reviews raise concerns that his approach may oversimplify the complex linguistic intricacies contributing to interreligious tensions. This nuanced examination underscores the importance of considering language dynamics in discussions of religious pluralism

³³ Nathan R. Todd et al., "Interfaith Groups as Mediating Structures for Political Action: A Multilevel Analysis," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 59, no. 1–2 (March 6, 2017): 106–19, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12121>.

³⁴ Muaz Mohd Noor et al., "Badī' Al-Zamān Sa'īd Nursī's Approach through Writing in Da'wah: A Study of Effective Verbal Communication," *Al-Irsyad: Journal of Islamic and Contemporary Issues* 8, no. 1 (June 29, 2023): 1068–76, <https://doi.org/10.53840/alirsyad.v8i1.374>.

³⁵ Alenxander Ng et al., "Evaluation Of Architectural Design Elements In Saidina Abu Bakar As Siddiq Mosque on Social Inclusion," *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 1 (June 28, 2022): 120–26, <https://doi.org/10.18860/jia.v7i1.12899>.

to address underlying issues effectively and promote genuine harmony among diverse faith communities.³⁶

Critics emphasize the importance of considering linguistic dynamics in interfaith dialogue to enhance understanding and address conflicts effectively. Language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards religious others, influencing interreligious interactions. While dialogue and tolerance are vital, linguistic power dynamics and biases significantly impact how individuals perceive and engage with those of different faiths.³⁷ Muslim perennialists advocate for religious pluralism principles to promote peaceful co-existence through discourse analysis, highlighting the significance of linguistic dimensions in fostering interfaith cooperation. Understanding the role of language in shaping interreligious relations is essential for Abu Zayd's perspective to comprehensively address underlying tensions and conflicts in promoting religious pluralism and tolerance.³⁸

Abu Zayd's emphasis on dialogue and tolerance, as discussed in, may overlook the impact of linguistic biases and prejudices on interreligious. While dialogue is crucial for fostering understanding, the failure to address linguistic dynamics, as noted in, can hinder efforts to tackle deep-rooted biases that shape perceptions of religious communities. The critique suggests that without considering linguistic influences, as emphasized in, the approach may not effectively mitigate interreligious tensions and misunderstandings.³⁹ By integrating an understanding of linguistic biases, as discussed in, alongside dialogue and tolerance, Abu Zayd's approach could potentially offer a more comprehensive solution to address the complexities of interfaith relations and promote genuine understanding and harmony.

Critics emphasize the importance of understanding linguistic power dynamics in fostering authentic interfaith dialogue. They argue that biases and discursive patterns in language can perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce hierarchies, and marginalize religious groups, impeding genuine engagement and mutual respect.⁴⁰ To address this, they propose integrating linguistic analysis into approaches to religious pluralism to recognize and challenge these biases and power dynamics. By identifying and confronting linguistic biases, interfaith dialogues can work towards dismantling barriers, promoting inclusivity, and fostering a more equitable and respectful environment for diverse religious groups to interact and cooperate effectively.⁴¹

Concepts	Description	Elaboration
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³⁶ David L. Rousseau, "Just War and Ordered Liberty. By Paul D. Miller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 278p. \$99.99 Cloth, \$29.99 Paper.," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (March 9, 2022): 297–98, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759272100387X>.

³⁷ Mahmood Vaezi, "The Role of Interreligious Dialogues on Religious Tolerance," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 3 (November 26, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5146>.

³⁸ Halim Rane, "Interfaith Actor Reception of Islamic Covenants: How 'New' Religious Knowledge Influences Views on Interreligious Relations in Islam," *Religions* 13, no. 9 (September 19, 2022): 873, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090873>.

³⁹ Samuel Fairlamb and Marco Cinnirella, "To Be or Not to Be Tolerant? A Terror Management Perspective Exploring the Ideological Dilemma of Tolerance and Prejudice," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 60, no. 2 (April 20, 2021): 360–82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12407>.

⁴⁰ Juyan Zhang, "Putting Interfaith Dialogue on the Public Diplomacy Radar: Goals, Power, Strategies, and the Influence of Worldviews," *CrossCurrents* 72, no. 3 (September 2022): 216–46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cro.2022.0021>.

⁴¹ Andrew Lustig, Gavin Brookes, and Daniel Hunt, "Linguistic Analysis of Online Communication About a Novel Persecutory Belief System (Gangstalking): Mixed Methods Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 23, no. 3 (March 5, 2021): e25722, <https://doi.org/10.2196/25722>.

Overlooking Linguistic Dynamics	Critics argue that Abu Zayd's emphasis on interfaith dialogue and tolerance may overlook the nuanced linguistic dynamics that underlie interreligious tensions.	They suggest that a deeper understanding of linguistic biases and power dynamics is necessary to effectively address underlying conflicts.
Lack of Exploration of Linguistic Biases	Abu Zayd's approach may lack a sufficient exploration of linguistic biases and prejudices that influence how individuals perceive and interact with members of different religious communities.	Critics advocate for a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic dimensions to address root causes of interreligious tensions.
Importance of Linguistic Power Dynamics	Critics emphasize the significance of understanding linguistic power dynamics, discursive formations, and linguistic biases in shaping interreligious interactions and perceptions.	They argue that a deeper understanding of these dynamics is essential for promoting genuine interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

Table 2. the critiques of Abu Zayd's perspective on religious pluralism

The revised table offers a structured summary of the fundamental criticisms directed towards Abu Zayd's stance on religious pluralism. It delves into the principles advocated by Muslim perennialists, emphasizing the importance of interfaith dialogue for peaceful co-existence. Additionally, it explores the implications of religious pluralism, highlighting its role in fostering religious tolerance and dialogue within societies.⁴² The table also delves into the concepts of religious pluralism within Semitic religions, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of pluralism to address contemporary issues of radicalism and terrorism.

Critiques of Abu Zayd's perspective on religious pluralism emphasize the significance of delving into nuanced linguistic dynamics to address interreligious tensions effectively. While dialogue and tolerance are crucial, understanding linguistic power dynamics, discursive formations, and biases is essential for fostering genuine interfaith cooperation.⁴³ By recognizing the role of language as a symbol of national identity, societies can navigate the challenges posed by cultural and religious diversity. Multilingualism plays a pivotal role in promoting tolerance and understanding, offering a solution to conflicts rooted in linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that integrates linguistic analysis with interfaith dialogue is vital for mitigating conflicts and nurturing harmonious coexistence in diverse societies.

Discussion

Idealism vs. Realism

Critics engage in a nuanced debate on the tension between Idealism and Realism in evaluating Abu Zayd's perspective on religious pluralism. While Zayd's emphasis on interfaith dialogue is praised for promoting tolerance, critics argue that his approach may lean towards Idealism, overlooking the intricate dynamics of language, identity, and belief systems that fuel

⁴² (Asadu et al., 2020)

⁴³ Bano et al., "Principles of Religious Pluralism."

religious tensions.⁴⁴ This critique aligns with the broader discourse on the challenges of reconciling aspirational visions with complex realities, as seen in debates on immigration ethics, ontological pluralism, and the compatibility of realism and utopianism in political thought.⁴⁵ The call for a more realistic assessment acknowledges the need to navigate practical complexities in fostering genuine interfaith understanding amidst linguistic and cultural intricacies.

Abu Zayd's perspective on religious pluralism, as advocated by Muslim perennialists, emphasizes the principles that promote interfaith dialogue and peaceful co-existence in multicultural societies. Critics highlight the significance of linguistic dynamics in shaping interreligious interactions, cautioning against oversimplified views that disregard the complexities of language in either exacerbating or alleviating religious tensions.⁴⁶ Understanding the intricate role of language in religious discourse is crucial for addressing the nuances of interfaith relations and fostering genuine mutual respect and dialogue among individuals of diverse faith backgrounds. This nuanced approach acknowledges the multifaceted nature of religious pluralism and the need to navigate linguistic intricacies for effective interfaith harmony.

Linguistic realities significantly influence attitudes and behaviors towards religious diversity, serving as a tool for expressing beliefs and negotiating power dynamics within society.⁴⁷ Language shapes identities and perpetuates interreligious tensions through biases, discourses, and narratives. The centrality of language in healthcare underscores its role in health beliefs and practices, emphasizing the impact of language-insensitive treatment on care quality and equity.⁴⁸ Furthermore, linguistic biases in speech can lead to inferences about a communicator's social identity, highlighting the interconnectedness of language and social perceptions. Understanding how language constructs religious identities and influences interfaith dynamics is crucial for fostering inclusivity and mitigating tensions within diverse societies.

The intersection of language, identity, and belief systems significantly impacts religious pluralism dynamics. Language not only mirrors but also molds individuals' comprehension of their religious beliefs and others'. Critiques suggest that oversimplification may occur in perspectives like Abu Zayd's, as they may neglect how language reflects and perpetuates prevailing power dynamics and inequalities in society. This complexity is evident in the role of language in shaping cultural values, religious identities, and group affiliations.⁴⁹ Language, as a potent cultural marker, influences the preservation of group identity and can be manipulated to manage socio-cultural, linguistic, religious, and political needs. The relationship between language and religion is intricate, with language serving as a crucial means of portraying and transmitting religious teachings.

⁴⁴ James S. Pearson, "Realism in the Ethics of Immigration," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49, no. 8 (October 22, 2023): 950–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221079676>.

⁴⁵ Thomas Pözlner and Jennifer Cole Wright, "Anti-Realist Pluralism: A New Approach to Folk Metaethics," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 11, no. 1 (February 5, 2020): 53–82, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-019-00447-8>.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Pugh, "Genetic Exceptionalism, Revisionism, Pluralism and Convergence in the Ethics of Insurance: Response to Commentators," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 48, no. 11 (November 2022): 879–80, <https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2022-108153>.

⁴⁷ Karen J. Foli et al., "The Power of the Language We Use: Stigmatization of Individuals and Fellow Nurses with Substance Use Issues," *Research in Nursing & Health* 46, no. 1 (February 26, 2023): 3–8, <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.22295>.

⁴⁸ Muhalim Muhalim, "Negotiating Religious Discourses in English Language Teaching: Reorienting and Reframing Dominant English Ideologies," *Changing English* 30, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 209–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2023.2217424>.

⁴⁹ Sonia Sikka, "Pluralism About What? Religion as Belief and Identity," in *Re-Thinking Religious Pluralism* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 3–19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9540-0_1.

The debate between Idealism and Realism in international relations highlights the significance of language in shaping perceptions of religious diversity. While Abu Zayd advocates for dialogue and tolerance, critics stress the need for a deeper understanding of linguistic dynamics influencing interreligious tensions. By recognizing the intricate interplay of language, identity, and belief systems, scholars can develop more effective strategies for fostering genuine interfaith dialogue and collaboration in multicultural settings. This emphasis on linguistic nuances aligns with the broader call to integrate diverse meaning-making resources, including religious discourses, into educational practices to challenge dominant ideologies and promote inclusivity.⁵⁰ Ultimately, a nuanced approach to language and religious diversity can enhance efforts towards peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding in diverse societies.

Decolonizing Islamic Discourse through Abu Zayd's Hermeneutics Concept Map

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's contribution to Islamic thought lies in his bold reconceptualization of the Qur'an not as a static repository of divine truths but as a dynamic linguistic and cultural text that demands contextual interpretation. Central to his project is the claim that language is not a neutral medium of communication but a formative and contested site where religious meaning is constructed, negotiated, and often politicized. This insight has far-reaching implications for how Islamic theology engages with the idea of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue. Here's a chart summarizing Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's thoughts on religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue:

Main Concept	Key Ideas	Details
Epistemological Foundation	Religious Pluralism as a Hermeneutical Imperative	Pluralism is not just tolerated but required by the dynamic, context-driven nature of revelation.
	Language as Site of Meaning and Power	Language constructs religious meaning and is embedded in historical and political contexts.
	Hermeneutics of Human Experience	Interpretation is rooted in human history, not in abstract universals.
	Deconstruction of Authority	Challenges the monopoly of traditionalist and literalist readings of the Qur'an.
Role of Language	Language as a Decolonial Tool	Aims to liberate Qur'anic interpretation from hegemonic, absolutist structures.
	Discursive Formations	Religious texts gain meaning through historical-linguistic processes, not fixed truths.
	Linguistic Mediation of Pluralism	Language shapes the possibility (or impossibility) of theological diversity and interfaith dialogue.

⁵⁰ Muhalim, "Negotiating Religious Discourses in English Language Teaching: Reorienting and Reframing Dominant English Ideologies."

Main Concept	Key Ideas	Details
	Power and Interpretation	Who controls language controls meaning; thus, interpretive authority is inherently political.
Criticism & Limitations	Idealism vs. Realpolitik	Critics argue Abu Zayd underestimates structural inequalities and political constraints.
	Linguistic Hegemony	Language carries power; religious discourse may reproduce dominance and exclusion.
	Epistemic Violence	Literalist frameworks can erase plural voices and alternative readings.
	Translation and Inequality	Challenges of rendering texts across cultural-linguistic lines reflect deeper asymmetries.
Impact & Relevance	Contribution to Progressive & Decolonial Thought	Encourages inclusive, pluralist Islamic theologies grounded in lived experience and dialogue.
	Interdisciplinary Methodology	Bridges Islamic hermeneutics with critical discourse analysis and decolonial theory.
	Reforming Interfaith Discourse	Calls for linguistic awareness in interreligious engagement to avoid reinforcing asymmetries.
	Shifting Interpretive Paradigms	Moves away from defensive apologetics toward emancipatory Qur'anic interpretation.

Abu Zayd locates pluralism not merely in the sociological reality of religious diversity but within the very act of interpretation itself. Since language is shaped by historical context and discursive power relations, the reading of religious texts inevitably reflects the values, tensions, and structures of the society in which it occurs. His hermeneutics foregrounds human experience as the locus of revelation's unfolding, rejecting essentialist and literalist approaches that detach scripture from history and culture. In doing so, Abu Zayd deconstructs the monopoly of interpretative authority long held by traditionalist scholars and institutions.

By treating the Qur'an as a text embedded in and mediated through language, Abu Zayd invites a decolonial approach to Islamic studies—one that challenges hegemonic models of understanding shaped by colonial legacies, theological absolutism, and epistemic authoritarianism. His emphasis on discursive formations illustrates how language both enables and limits theological expression. Interpretations are never purely objective; they are marked by the interpreter's positionality, ideology, and socio-political context. In this sense, language becomes both a bridge and a barrier in interfaith engagement.

Nevertheless, Abu Zayd's approach has not been without its detractors. Critics argue that while his vision of pluralism and dialogical openness is compelling, it tends to underplay the entrenched asymmetries of power that structure religious discourse in the real world. Political authoritarianism, institutional monopolies over religious interpretation, and hegemonic linguistic frameworks often constrain the possibility of genuine interfaith dialogue and theological plurality. In this regard, some scholars contend that Abu Zayd's hermeneutical optimism does not fully confront how religious language—despite its discursive openness—can be instrumentalized to maintain exclusionary norms, silence dissenting voices, and reinforce systemic marginalization, particularly within postcolonial Muslim contexts where minority subjectivities are routinely delegitimized.

Despite these critiques, Abu Zayd's work remains a transformative force in contemporary Islamic thought. His interdisciplinary methodology—rooted in hermeneutics, semiotics, and critical discourse analysis—provides a powerful epistemological alternative to scriptural literalism and theological dogmatism. Rather than offering pluralism as a mere ethical posture, Abu Zayd presents it as an epistemic necessity: a condition that emerges from the recognition that all religious interpretation is mediated by language, context, and human agency. In this sense, his hermeneutics is not simply a call for tolerance, but a radical project of intellectual emancipation—challenging centralized interpretive authority and re-opening the discursive space for inclusive, context-sensitive, and pluralist articulations of Islamic theology.

Ultimately, Abu Zayd's legacy lies not only in affirming the importance of pluralism but in reconfiguring the very conditions that make pluralism theologically and politically possible. By foregrounding language as both a medium of revelation and a site of contestation, he reframes Islamic theology as a dynamic, historically situated, and emancipatory discourse—one that must continuously negotiate the tensions between text and context, power and meaning, tradition and change. His insights invite Muslim scholars, educators, and communities to engage in a deeper critique of the linguistic and discursive infrastructures that shape religious understanding, and to cultivate dialogical ethics that are not only inclusive in aspiration but also critical of the structures that inhibit genuine plurality.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's contribution to the discourse on religious pluralism is not only theological but fundamentally linguistic and epistemological. By conceptualizing the Qur'an as a linguistic and cultural text, Abu Zayd reorients interpretation from a fixed, absolutist endeavor into a dynamic, context-sensitive process deeply embedded in human experience. His linguistic-philosophical approach foregrounds language as a site of meaning production and power negotiation, thereby destabilizing rigid interpretative monopolies and enabling pluralistic readings of Islamic scripture. This repositioning reveals how semantics, discursive structures, and historical context condition the very possibilities of theological plurality and interfaith engagement within Islam.

Furthermore, Abu Zayd's hermeneutics should be understood as a critical intervention within the broader trajectory of progressive and decolonial Islamic thought. His method challenges entrenched epistemological hierarchies sustained by traditional orthodoxy and state-sanctioned interpretations. By advocating interpretive openness grounded in historical consciousness and dialogical ethics, he aligns Islamic teachings with inclusive, human-centered values—without

abandoning fidelity to the Qur'anic tradition. His project thus represents a move beyond apologetic or reactive reformism toward a self-critical, emancipatory model of engaging with modernity.

Academically, the implications of Abu Zayd's work are significant for both Islamic studies and decolonial theory. His integration of hermeneutics and critical discourse analysis offers a methodological bridge between religious interpretation and the critique of epistemic power. This study contributes to the decolonization of Islamic discourse by affirming the role of language as both a contested terrain and a generative force for inclusive, contextually rooted theologies. Future research may extend this inquiry by examining how linguistic strategies continue to shape theological authority, religious subjectivity, and emancipatory thought within diverse Muslim societies, especially in postcolonial and non-Western contexts.

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