



Religion and Public Criticism: Dialogue for Reconsidering Religious Peace

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Abstract:

Religious criticism is an integral part of a multicultural society, yet it can become sensitive amid debates over freedom of expression and religious respect. Recent cases, such as online disputes between preachers and the rise of ex-Muslim voices, demonstrate how religious criticism can strengthen dialogue or deepen divisions. This study aims to distinguish two contrasting forms of religious criticism in the contemporary public sphere: destructive criticism, which reinforces polarization and hostility, and dialogic criticism, which encourages transformation of understanding and increases tolerance between religious communities. The study adopts Mikael Stenmark's framework of forms of religious criticism. It examines two influential cases: the Apostate Prophet, whose online content often shapes public perception through secular, confrontational criticism of Islam, and Husein Ja'far Al Hadar, a preacher whose inclusive and dialogic approach promotes tolerance. The study uses qualitative digital ethnography and discourse analysis to examine religious criticism in online media. The two contrasting figures were deliberately selected based on their distinct digital influence and communication styles. Data from YouTube dialogues and podcasts are analysed to identify patterns of constructive and destructive criticism. The findings suggest that dialogical criticism, which encourages understanding and tolerance, has greater potential to maintain interfaith harmony in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Key Words: *Religion; Public Criticism, Apostate Prophet; Husein Ja'far Al Hadar; Religious Peace*

Abstrak:

Kritik agama merupakan bagian integral dari masyarakat multikultural Indonesia, namun seringkali menjadi sensitif di tengah perdebatan tentang kebebasan berekspresi dan penghormatan beragama. Kasus-kasus terkini seperti perselisihan daring antar-pendakwah dan munculnya suara-suara eks-Muslim menunjukkan bagaimana kritik agama dapat memperkuat dialog atau memperdalam perpecahan dalam konteks plural Indonesia. Studi ini bertujuan untuk membedakan dua bentuk kritik agama yang kontras di ranah publik kontemporer: kritik destruktif, yang memperkuat polarisasi dan permusuhan, dan kritik dialogis, yang mendorong transformasi pemahaman dan meningkatkan toleransi antar-komunitas agama. Studi ini mengadopsi kerangka kerja Mikael Stenmark tentang bentuk-bentuk kritik agama dan mengkaji dua kasus berpengaruh: Nabi Murtad, yang konten daringnya seringkali membentuk persepsi publik melalui kritik sekuler dan konfrontatif terhadap Islam, dan Husein Ja'far Al Hadar, seorang pendakwah dengan pendekatan inklusif dan dialogisnya yang mempromosikan toleransi. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan etnografi digital

kualitatif dan analisis wacana untuk mengkaji kritik agama di media daring. Dua tokoh yang kontras dipilih secara sengaja berdasarkan pengaruh digital dan gaya komunikasi mereka yang berbeda. Data dari dialog YouTube dan podcast dianalisis untuk mengidentifikasi pola kritik yang membangun dan yang destruktif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kritik dialogis, yang mendorong pemahaman dan toleransi, memiliki potensi yang lebih besar untuk menjaga kerukunan antarumat beragama dalam masyarakat majemuk Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *Agama; Kritik Publik, Nabi Murtad; Husein Ja'far Al Hadar; Perdamaian Beragama*

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of religious tolerance remains relevant today, especially in Indonesia, which is diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, tribes, and religions. Indonesia's religious diversity requires effective governance. Good governance is needed to avoid conflict and tension between religious communities. Otherwise, the history of inter- and intra-religious relations in Indonesia will continue to be perceived through recurring tensions, where social conflicts are often framed in religious terms. In such cases, religion does not function as the root cause, but rather as a channel through which deeper socio-political and cultural grievances are articulated, sometimes exploited to justify intolerance and division (Rahmat et al., 2025).

Inter and intra-religious tensions in Indonesia often stem not only from theological differences but also from socio-political and interpretive misunderstandings. Studies by Adib et al. (2025) and Ja'far (2024) reveal that issues such as church construction disputes in West Java, contestations over Islamic sects like Ahmadiyah and Syiah, and digital polemics between conservative and progressive Muslim preachers frequently trigger communal divisions. These conflicts exemplify what Kennedy (2024) terms the "cosmic war" dynamic, where religious narratives become symbols of broader political and identity struggles. At the grassroots level, such disputes rarely foster mutual understanding; instead, they often reinforce group boundaries and exclusivist truth claims. This indicates that without dialogical engagement and epistemic humility, public debates on religion risk devolving into arenas of polarization rather than platforms for coexistence.

Indonesia's democratic framework guarantees freedom of expression, including the right to critique religious ideas. However, this freedom operates within legal and ethical boundaries that prohibit expressions that incite hatred or violence, as regulated by the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) and reinforced by international human rights standards. Scholarly discussions on free speech emphasize that criticism must remain accountable to principles of civility and public responsibility, particularly in the digital era, where unverified or inflammatory content can easily escalate interfaith tensions and undermine social harmony.

In Western contexts, public criticism of religion has historically centered on the dialogue between faith, science, and rationality, a legacy of the Enlightenment that fostered secular humanism and the redefinition of religion's

role in public life. Thinkers such as Cakir (2021) and Parmaksız (2021) emphasize that the modern public sphere requires a post-secular dialogue in which religion and reason coexist within shared ethical frameworks rather than in mutual exclusion. While this trajectory differs from Indonesia's experience, it offers a comparative perspective for understanding how religious criticism can evolve from confrontation to cooperation. In Indonesia, where secularization is less pronounced and religion remains intertwined with identity and politics, adopting a dialogical approach inspired by Stenmark's ethics offers a contextual path to reconcile freedom of expression with communal harmony (Regoli, 2025).

One example of public criticism of religion is Pope Benedict XVI's call to renew the dialogue between Christianity and rationality, particularly in response to the tension between faith and modern secular thought. His approach sought to reassert reason as an ally rather than an adversary of faith, reflecting an intellectual form of dialogical criticism that aims to reconcile belief with philosophical inquiry. In contrast, Pope Francis situates religious dialogue within social ethics, emphasizing justice, compassion, and solidarity with marginalized groups such as refugees and the poor. While Benedict's engagement reflects a rational-theological discourse, Francis advances a humanistic dialogue grounded in lived moral responsibility. Together, these approaches demonstrate how religion, when critically self-reflective, can serve as both a source of moral renewal and a catalyst for social transformation.

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) bridged the tension between religion and philosophy by affirming that truth can be accessed through both revelation (*ayat qauliyah*) and reason (*ayat kauniyah*), since both originate from God and therefore cannot fundamentally contradict each other. His synthesis of rational inquiry and scriptural interpretation reflects an early form of dialogical criticism, treating faith and reason as partners in the pursuit of understanding. This perspective aligns with Stenmark's call for epistemic openness in public criticism, where religious arguments should engage rational discourse rather than reject it. In the Indonesian context, Ibn Rushd's thought provides a valuable philosophical foundation for reconciling faith-based reasoning with democratic deliberation, especially in contemporary debates on religious authority, science, and pluralism.

The main challenge faced by religious communities in Indonesia is not criticism arising from dialogue between religion and science, but rather destructive, polarizing public criticism (Kurniawan, 2024). Within Stenmark's framework, such criticism is exemplified by the works of the Apostate Prophet, whose discourse often relies on emotional, polemical narratives rather than reasoned argument. These critiques frequently portray Islam as inherently linked to violence or intolerance, overlooking the internal diversity and interpretive richness within the tradition. In contrast, the Qur'an emphasizes tolerance and coexistence, as seen in verses such as *Al-Baqarah* (2:256), which declares, "There is no compulsion in religion," and *Al-Kafirun* (109:6), which affirms, "To you

your religion, and to me mine.” A more dialogical and reflective form of religious criticism grounded in empathy and mutual understanding can therefore contribute to interfaith peace and inclusivity within Indonesia’s plural society.

This article examines two contrasting forms of public religious criticism in the digital age, destructive and dialogical, as reflected in the works of Apostate Prophet and Husein Ja’far Al-Hadar. The analysis situates these cases within Indonesia’s plural social context to demonstrate how public criticism can either foster understanding or intensify division. The study is particularly relevant given that over 80 percent of the global population identifies with a religion (Van Tongeren, 2021), underscoring the continuing significance of faith in shaping public discourse. By combining Mikael Stenmark’s theoretical framework with empirical analysis of digital religious dialogues, this article contributes a novel perspective on how constructive criticism can serve as a foundation for interfaith coexistence in pluralistic societies. As previous studies have shown (Hutabarat, 2023; Alam et al., 2024), religion continues to hold potential as a medium for reconciliation, yet this research extends the discussion by exploring how such potential operates within the dynamics of Indonesia’s contemporary digital culture.

The discussion of religious tolerance remains interesting to explore today, especially in the context of Indonesia, which is diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, tribes, and religions. Indonesia’s religious diversity requires effective governance. Good governance is needed to avoid conflict and tension between religious communities. Otherwise, the history of inter- and intra-religious relations in Indonesia will continue to be perceived through recurring tensions, where social conflicts are often framed in religious terms. In such cases, religion does not function as the root cause, but rather as a channel through which deeper socio-political and cultural grievances are articulated, sometimes exploited to justify intolerance and division (Rahmat et al., 2025).

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In Western contexts, public criticism of religion has historically centred on the dialogue between faith, science, and rationality, a legacy of the Enlightenment that fostered secular humanism and the redefinition of religion's role in public life. Thinkers such as Cakir (2021) and Parmaksız (2021) emphasise that the modern public sphere requires a post-secular dialogue in which religion and reason coexist within shared ethical frameworks rather than in mutual exclusion. While this trajectory differs from Indonesia's experience, it offers a comparative perspective for understanding how religious criticism can evolve from confrontation to cooperation. In Indonesia, where secularisation is less pronounced and religion remains intertwined with identity and politics, adopting a dialogical approach inspired by Stenmark's ethics offers a contextual path to reconcile freedom of expression with communal harmony (Regoli, 2025).

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Beyond the context of conflict, dialogue offers a constructive framework for re-evaluating the role of religion in sustaining coexistence within a diverse society. Rather than merely restating the importance of tolerance, this study situates dialogue as a methodological bridge linking public criticism with the transformation of religious understanding. From this perspective, dialogue becomes not only a moral imperative but also an analytical lens for examining how public criticism can evolve from confrontation to collaboration, thereby informing the research questions that guide this study.

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This article analyzes public criticism of religion through Mikael Stenmark’s theoretical framework, which provides a basis for evaluating the ethical and epistemic dimensions of religious critique. The study addresses two central research questions: (1) How can public criticism of religion be expressed responsibly within a plural and democratic society? Moreover, (2) In what ways can dialogical criticism contribute to strengthening interfaith understanding and social harmony? To answer these questions, the article examines two contrasting case studies, Apostate Prophet and Husein Ja’far Al-Hadar, selected based on their prominence, digital visibility, and divergent approaches to public religious discourse. Apostate Prophet represents an external, secular form of destructive criticism, while Husein Ja’far embodies an internal, dialogical model grounded in compassion and critical reflection. By juxtaposing these cases, the study aims to illustrate how differing modes of criticism influence the prospects for religious peace and non-violent engagement in Indonesia’s contemporary public sphere. This article analyzes public criticism of religion through Mikael Stenmark’s theoretical framework, which provides a basis for evaluating the ethical and epistemic dimensions of religious critique. The study addresses two central research questions: (1) How can public criticism of religion be expressed responsibly within a plural and democratic society? Moreover, (2) In what ways can dialogical criticism contribute to strengthening interfaith understanding and social harmony? To answer these questions, the article examines two contrasting case studies, Apostate Prophet and Husein Ja’far Al-Hadar, selected based on their prominence, digital visibility, and divergent approaches to public religious discourse. Apostate Prophet represents an external, secular form of destructive criticism, while Husein Ja’far embodies an internal, dialogical model grounded in compassion and critical reflection. By juxtaposing these cases, the study aims to illustrate how differing modes of criticism influence the prospects for religious peace and non-violent engagement in Indonesia’s contemporary public sphere. Beyond the context of conflict, dialogue offers a constructive framework for re-evaluating the role of religion in sustaining coexistence within a diverse society. Rather than merely restating the importance of tolerance, this study situates dialogue as a methodological bridge linking public criticism with the

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RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative digital ethnography combined with critical discourse analysis to examine public criticism of religion in online spaces. Data were collected purposively from YouTube, podcasts, and social media content published between 2020 and 2024, using keywords such as "religious criticism," "Islam," and "tolerance" to identify relevant dialogues. Two figures, Apostate Prophet and Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar, were selected based on their digital reach, contrasting discourse orientations, and influence in online religious debates. The data, including video transcripts and audience comments, were coded thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, focusing on tone, argumentation, and audience response. Triangulation was applied through cross-platform comparison to ensure analytical validity. This methodological design enables a transparent and reproducible interpretation of how constructive and destructive criticism operate within Indonesia's digital public sphere (Wijayanto et al., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Religious Criticism

In the digital age, religious identity remains a prominent topic of public discourse across platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. According to Adib et al. (2025), more than 64% of religion-related tensions and hate incidents in Indonesia between 2019 and 2023 were amplified through digital media—similarly, a Ja'far. (2024) survey found that 58% of Indonesian internet users had encountered content expressing hostility toward

other faiths. These findings confirm that social media serves not only as a platform for freedom of expression but also as a site of contestation where religious criticism can easily shift into emotional or intolerant rhetoric. Although Indonesia officially recognizes six religions under the national motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in Diversity), online debates often polarize communities rather than foster dialogue. Supporting this, Binny. (2022) in his article reports an increase in cases of digital-based religious hate speech, which reflects the urgent need for ethical and dialogical engagement in digital religious discourse.

Efforts to assert the absolute correctness of one’s religion in the public sphere have often led to the stigmatization of minority groups as heretical or deviant, fueling social unrest (Ricca, 2023). In Indonesia, such labeling has been evident in cases like the persecution of Ahmadiyah communities in West Java, the expulsion of Shi’a followers in Sampang (Madura), and the disbandment of the Gafatar movement in 2016, all of which were amplified through social media narratives portraying these groups as threats to orthodoxy. As Zana Ayunda et al. (2022) note, digital platforms have been instrumental in circulating misinformation and moral panic that transform theological disagreement into social hostility. These incidents illustrate how the misuse of religious discourse online can endanger Indonesia’s inclusive public space, where pluralism and freedom of belief are constitutionally guaranteed yet remain socially contested (Zana Ayunda et al., 2022).

Public criticism of religion in Indonesia takes diverse forms and serves various intentions, particularly in the digital sphere. For instance, constructive criticism can be observed in initiatives such as Habib Husein Ja’far Al Hadar’s interfaith dialogues on YouTube, which use humor, empathy, and theological reasoning to promote mutual understanding among young audiences. In contrast, destructive criticism often appears in the form of provocative content or hate-based narratives, such as viral videos and commentaries that frame religion, especially Islam, as irrational or violent, echoing global secularist rhetoric. These contrasting examples illustrate how online platforms have become both arenas of dialogue and sites of polarization. Building on Mikael Stenmark’s typology, this study examines the underlying motives, methods, and discursive impacts of these forms of criticism. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as not all criticism leads to reform or Enlightenment; some merely reinforce division. Therefore, reassessing dialogical criticism becomes essential for fostering religious peace and inclusive civic discourse in Indonesia’s plural society.

In *Religion and Its Public Critics*, Mikael Stenmark (2022) proposes a comprehensive framework for analyzing different forms of religious criticism according to four key dimensions: the origin of the critique, the epistemic basis of the argument, its intended purpose, and the discursive context in which it operates. Rather than viewing this as a purely theoretical taxonomy, Stenmark’s categories can be directly applied to contemporary Indonesian cases to illustrate how religious discourse unfolds in digital public spaces.

For instance, Apostate Prophet’s content represents what Stenmark terms external secular criticism, where the critic originates outside the religious community and employs moral-secular arguments with a polemical or

debunking intent. This type of criticism often lacks sensitivity to religious diversity and can reinforce social polarization. In contrast, Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar exemplifies constructive internal criticism, emerging from within the spiritual tradition and grounded in theological and ethical reasoning that aims at reform and reconciliation. By mapping these cases onto Stenmark's typology, the study demonstrates how his framework provides analytical clarity for distinguishing between criticism that undermines coexistence and that which fosters reflection and dialogue within Indonesia's plural public sphere.

By categorizing and mapping various criticisms of religion, readers will hopefully be able to evaluate and distinguish between valid and constructive criticism and criticism that is biased, destructive, or unfounded. Thus, criticism of religion is not a neutral act but is greatly influenced by the critic's motives, position of power, and epistemic orientation (Stenmark, 2022).

Classification of Criticism of Religion According to Mikael Stenmark

Building on Stenmark's (2022) typology, this study identifies how each form of religious criticism manifests in Indonesia's digital sphere. In terms of critical identity, Apostate Prophet represents external, secular criticism, as his YouTube content employs moral-secular arguments detached from theological engagement. At the same time, Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar embodies internal, immanent criticism, using Islamic reasoning to reform exclusivist interpretations. Regarding the basis of argument, Apostate Prophet's rhetoric relies on anecdotal generalizations and selective textual readings, whereas Husein Ja'far anchors his dialogue in Qur'anic ethics and contemporary social values. The purpose and target audience also differ: Apostate Prophet appeals mainly to ex-Muslim and non-believing audiences, reinforcing skepticism toward religion. In contrast, Husein Ja'far targets young Muslim viewers to promote empathy and tolerance.

Within the discursive context, Apostate Prophet's criticism circulates in algorithm-driven spaces that reward provocation, contributing to echo chambers and misinformation. Conversely, Husein Ja'far's dialogical approach invites rational engagement, though it remains limited by unequal digital visibility and audience segmentation. These findings show that, when applied empirically, Stenmark's categories reveal not only the ethical distinctions between types of criticism but also the sociotechnical risks shaping religious discourse in Indonesia's online public sphere.

Building on Stenmark's typology, this study identifies how each category of religious criticism manifests in Indonesia's digital context. In terms of critical identity, intra-religious criticism is exemplified by Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar, whose YouTube discussions, such as "Bagimu Agamamu, Bagiku Agamaku" employ humor and scriptural reasoning to address exclusivist interpretations within Islam. Meanwhile, external secular criticism appears in the content of Apostate Prophet, whose videos – widely circulated among Indonesian audiences portray Islam through a polemical and reductionist lens. Regarding the basis of criticism, Husein Ja'far's immanent approach draws on Qur'anic principles such as *wasathiyah* (moderation), whereas the Apostate Prophet relies on moral-secular claims detached from religious hermeneutics. The purpose and intent of these

two forms also diverge: Husein Ja'far's criticism aims at religious reform and civic empathy, whereas the Apostate Prophet's critiques seek to delegitimize religion and appeal to secular or ex-Muslim audiences. In terms of target audience and discourse norms, Husein Ja'far engages directly with Muslim youth and interfaith interlocutors through dialogical, long-form discussions. At the same time, Apostate Prophet's short, provocative videos are designed for viral spread, often amplifying polarization. Collectively, these empirical findings demonstrate that constructive criticism in Indonesia's digital public sphere is characterized by internal, dialogical, and reform-oriented discourse. In contrast, destructive criticism tends to be external, polemical, and optimized for virality, confirming the applicability of Stenmark's framework within the Indonesian context (Stenmark, 2022).

Destructive Public Criticism: Apostate Prophet

Apostate Prophet, the pseudonym of Ridvan Aydemir, is a Turkish-German former Muslim activist and YouTuber whose content has gained significant international traction, with more than one million subscribers and millions of cumulative views. His videos are frequently reuploaded, subtitled, or discussed in Indonesian online forums and social media, making his discourse increasingly visible to local audiences. The selection of Apostate Prophet as a case study is thus based on his measurable digital reach and his influence in shaping global narratives that resonate within Indonesia's online public sphere. Within Stenmark's framework, his approach exemplifies external secular criticism characterized by a moral-secular basis and a pragmatic goal of debunking rather than dialogue. While his critiques often employ emotive and polemical tones that associate Islam with violence or backwardness, their analytical value lies in revealing how global digital rhetoric intersects with local religious sensibilities and challenges interfaith cohesion in Indonesia.

An analysis of the Apostate Prophet's YouTube video titled "Praying to Allah on Friday" illustrates how destructive criticism operates discursively. Using thematic coding, three dominant patterns emerged: (1) ridicule of ritual practice, (2) delegitimization of theological reasoning, and (3) emotional provocation. For instance, in the segment between 1:11-1:16, Apostate Prophet sarcastically interprets a hadith about the sacredness of Friday, framing it as a superiority claim of Islam over other religions. At 2:02, following a narration from Abu Hurairah on the virtue of bathing before Friday prayer, he concludes mockingly, "That's how dirty and strange Islam is."

These coded instances reflect what Stenmark (2022) categorizes as secular, external, and negative criticism a form of delegitimizing discourse aimed not at rational engagement but at undermining religious credibility. The tone and content reveal affective bias rather than analytical reasoning, aligning with patterns of provocative secular rhetoric commonly found in digital atheism communities. Moreover, algorithmic amplification of such emotionally charged content reinforces echo chambers that normalize ridicule as critique, illustrating how destructive criticism in digital environments can exacerbate misinformation and intergroup hostility.

Based on the video described above, in Stenmark's framework, the type of criticism directed by Apostate Prophet towards Islam and Muslims is secular and public, delegitimizing (negative), aimed explicitly at Islam to change views on Islam by destructively influencing those around them, and is not an elaborate criticism.

The Apostate Prophet's criticism may diverge from the principles of Stenmark's ethical framework, particularly regarding epistemic responsibility and dialogical engagement. His content frequently targets rigid or literalist interpretations of Islam without acknowledging the diversity of Muslim practices and thought. This rhetorical strategy, characterized by simplification and emotional appeal, may contribute to polarization and the spread of misinformation among online audiences. Rather than facilitating constructive discussion, such narratives tend to limit opportunities for internal reflection and reinforce defensive attitudes within religious communities. Consequently, they may deepen suspicion toward secular criticism and complicate efforts at interfaith dialogue. In line with Stenmark's analysis, this form of external criticism appears more oriented toward visibility and identity affirmation in the digital sphere than toward genuine epistemic or reformative goals.

Response to Destructive Criticism from Apostate Prophet

The destructive criticism presented by Apostate Prophet is often framed as stemming from epistemic ignorance a concept within the epistemology of ignorance that explores how selective or distorted understandings of knowledge can sustain prejudice and misinformation. Examining this phenomenon through an epistemic lens is crucial, as ignorance here does not merely signify a lack of knowledge, but an active process of misrecognition and exclusion that obscures certain truths while amplifying biased narratives. In this context, Apostate Prophet's critique reflects a form of motivated reasoning that privileges emotional appeal and group identity over rational engagement. Such epistemic limitations can distort public understanding of Islam and reinforce polarized representations in digital spaces. Therefore, recognizing how epistemic ignorance shapes destructive criticism enables a more balanced analysis that distinguishes between uninformed rejection and reasoned disagreement in the study of religion and public discourse.

Thus, it can be said that social situations influence the epistemology of ignorance. Sometimes, the production of knowledge is shaped by the interests of certain groups, leading to the repression of other groups in society. Therefore, it is also said that, in addition to the formation of knowledge, there is also ignorance that is formed because it is covered up for the interests of certain parties. Furthermore, he says, "we don't even know that we don't know"; our ignorance is not even known to us, caused by factors such as interests, beliefs, and theories that obscure related information. Tuana reiterates this in his following argument: "they don't want us to know" that we are not allowed to know (Dauda, 2024).

A closer examination suggests that Apostate Prophet's critique reflects a limited engagement with Islamic intellectual traditions, resulting in generalized assumptions about the faith. From an interpretive perspective, the Qur'anic notion of *ummatan wasathan* (Qur'an 2:143) offers a contrasting framework, portraying Muslims as a "moderate community" that upholds balance and avoids extremes. Rather than a theological assertion, this concept can be understood as an ethical principle that guides social and interreligious relations, encouraging proportionality, dialogue, and coexistence. When viewed through this lens, the Qur'an itself provides textual grounding for moderation and pluralism, demonstrating that the diversity of faiths is an inherent aspect of human existence. Emphasizing these interpretive dimensions highlights how scriptural reasoning can serve as a resource for dialogical engagement rather than as a defensive response to criticism.

Rather than emphasizing textual enumeration, the Qur'an's references to other faiths such as Christianity (*nashārā*), Sabianism (*al-sābi'īn*), and Magianism (*al-majūs*) reveal a consistent ethical principle: the recognition of moral worth across religious boundaries. These verses collectively highlight that righteousness and sincere belief, not formal affiliation, are the primary measures of faith. This inclusivist theological outlook contrasts sharply with the reductionist portrayal advanced by Apostate Prophet, who interprets Islam through a lens of exclusivism and hostility. By framing diversity as part of divine intent rather than deviation, the Qur'an provides a moral and philosophical foundation for dialogical tolerance. Thus, instead of responding polemically, Muslims are encouraged to approach criticism with understanding, empathy, and intellectual humility, principles that closely align with Stenmark's vision of ethical public criticism.

In addition to the two religions mentioned in the Qur'an, there is also the religion of *al-sābi'īn*. Ath-Thabari explains *al-sābi'īn* as a term for a new religion or a religion newly embraced by someone (Ath-Thabari, 2009). The religion of *al-sābi'īn* is mentioned in the Qur'an three times, namely in Q.S (2) Al-Baqarah verse 62; Q.S (5) Al-Maidah verse 69, and Q.S (22) al-Hajj verse 17. There is also the religion of the Magi, mentioned in the Qur'an once, namely in QS (22) Al-Hajj, verse 17. The term "Magi" refers to fire worshippers. This religion is also often called Zoroastrianism.

The diversity of religions and beliefs mentioned in the Qur'an is a form of statement and affirmation that there are many religions and beliefs in this world, and they must be treated as part of an effort to compete in doing good deeds. The Qur'an forbids its followers from being hostile towards all existing religions, because it is Allah who will make the final decision on the Day of Judgment. This statement can be clearly seen at the end of Q.S (22) Al-hajj verse 17, which means "... Allah will judge between them on the Day of Judgment."

Towards a Dialogical Public Critique by Husein Ja'far Al Hadar

As previously discussed, the public criticism expressed by Apostate Prophet toward religious practices exemplifies a form of non-constructive discourse that may contribute to the erosion of interreligious trust and tolerance. In contrast, public criticism should serve as a medium for promoting understanding through dialogical, constructive engagement, encouraging interfaith communication to identify shared moral and social values. When conducted with a commitment to fairness and epistemic responsibility, such criticism can foster an inclusive public dialogue that supports peace-oriented education and mutual respect among diverse communities (Sekibo et al., 2024). Accordingly, dialogical criticism possesses the potential to transform social tensions into opportunities for reflection and reform, promoting coexistence and reconciliation within multicultural and democratic societies (Cleven et al., 2021).

Husein Ja'far Al Hadar is an example of dialogical and compassionate intra-religious criticism. Through media channels such as YouTube, podcasts, and other social media, Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar delivers sermons that emphasize the importance of compassion, openness, and humor in conveying Islamic values inclusively. He often engages in dialogue with individuals who hold different views, including atheists and people of other religions, with a friendly attitude and arguments grounded in the principles of internal religion. Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar himself is a preacher who not only engages in dialogue with other religions, but also targets his preaching to young people by getting closer to them and educating them about Islamic teachings, so that there are no deviations in the interpretation and understanding of Islamic verses and laws. Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar preaches and critiques through discussions to teach about wasathiyah or moderation in religion (Annisa, 2023).

In his book *Ada Tuhan di Hatimu* (There is God in Your Heart), Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar (2022) articulates the concept of wasathiyah moderation as an ethical and dialogical framework within Islam. He emphasizes emulating the Prophet Muhammad's example in fostering coexistence among people of different faiths, critiquing exclusivist tendencies such as takfir and sectarian labeling. To reinforce this view, researchers such as Abdullah et al., (2025) and Addzaky et al., (2024) have also interpreted wasathiyah as a dynamic model of contextual ethics that balances orthodoxy with pluralistic engagement.. This alignment situates Al-Hadar's argument within a broader intellectual tradition of Islamic moderation that sees revelation as a means for social harmony rather than division. By grounding moral discourse in dialogical reasoning, Al-Hadar's framework complements Mikael Stenmark's vision of constructive religious criticism, in which faith-based dialogue becomes a catalyst for reflection and interfaith understanding.

In addition to his reflective and dialogical book, Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar's digital content particularly the YouTube podcast "Bagimu Agamamu, Bagiku Agamaku" illustrates how religious dialogue can be practiced within Indonesia's

plural society. In this episode, conducted with Pastor Yerry Pattinasarany, the discussion centers on a viral claim that the Qur'an contains verses inciting violence. Rather than framing the issue polemically, Husein Ja'far contextualizes the verses within Islamic hermeneutics, emphasizing interpretive nuance and historical setting. His approach aims to de-escalate controversy and redirect discourse toward empathy and coexistence.

Scholarly analyses support this interpretation. Bari and Jamila (2023) argue that Husein's digital dialogue model exemplifies *da'wah al-hiwārī* (dialogical preaching), which promotes mutual understanding across religious boundaries, while Annisa (2023) highlights his consistent advocacy of *wasathiyah* as an antidote to dogmatic rigidity. Nonetheless, critical observers note that such engagements remain limited to elite or urban audiences and rely heavily on his personal charisma and online visibility rather than institutionalized interfaith mechanisms. These mixed scholarly receptions indicate that while Husein Ja'far's dialogical initiatives contribute meaningfully to interreligious discourse, their broader transformative potential still depends on sustained structural and educational integration (Samsul Hady et al., 2025).

Through his dialogical preaching style and inclusive rhetoric, Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar promotes an approach that encourages tolerance and mutual respect among different religious communities. Studies by Bari & Jamila (2023) indicate that diverse audiences widely receive his digital sermons due to their empathetic tone and avoidance of polarizing language. This reception suggests that Al-Hadar's discourse facilitates two-way communication that emphasizes understanding rather than confrontation. Audience responses in YouTube comment sections and social media interactions also reflect perceptions of sincerity and balance, indicating that his approach contributes to reducing misconceptions and mitigating interreligious tension in Indonesia's online public sphere

In Stenmark's perspective, Husein Ja'far's approach falls into the category of immanent and reformative criticism, which means that he criticizes from within the Islamic belief system itself, using internal religious arguments such as verses from the Qur'an and hadiths and various other foundations, and aims to improve religious practices that are exclusive, not contextual, or not in accordance with the values of mercy. This kind of criticism creates a safe space for spiritual reflection without feeling attacked by the outside world. Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar also facilitates the transformation of beliefs through empathetic dialogue. The content of his preaching and criticism exemplifies that faith and criticism are not always at odds, but can reinforce each other. Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar shows that in the religious world, change and reconciliation, both with fellow believers and outsiders, do not have to come from outside with criticism full of pressure and antagonism, but can grow from within through an approach based on love, knowledge, and a willingness to change.

Mikael Stenmark argues that the effectiveness of religious criticism depends not only on the logical strength of arguments but also on the critic's sensitivity to discursive context, communicative intent, and audience orientation. Ethical criticism, therefore, requires epistemic awareness the ability to balance internal faith-based reasoning with external public rationality and reformist intent rather than rhetorical hostility (Stenmark, 2022). In practice, Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar's preaching embodies these ethics through dialogical engagement in his YouTube discussions and interfaith podcasts, where he consistently frames theological disagreement as an opportunity for shared reflection. For example, in his "Bagimu Agamamu, Bagiku Agamaku" dialogue with Pastor Yerry Pattinasarany, Al-Hadar demonstrates epistemic responsibility by contextualizing Qur'anic principles of tolerance in language accessible to non-Muslim audiences. This practical application of ethical criticism transforms abstract principles into communicative action illustrating how dialogical ethics can function as a viable framework for sustaining pluralism in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar's approach aligns more closely with Mikael Stenmark's framework of constructive and dialogical criticism, which emphasizes empathy, reflexivity, and reform from within the religious tradition. In practice, Husein Ja'far's method whether through his writings or digital dialogues encourages believers to reinterpret religious teachings contextually and inclusively, framing faith as compatible with humanistic and civic values. This approach has been observed to reduce tension in online religious discussions; studies by Adib et al. (2025), for instance, found that dialogical content promoting *wasathiyah* (moderation) generated higher positive engagement and lower hostility rates than polemical religious debates.

Conversely, confrontational models of criticism, such as that exemplified by Apostate Prophet, tend to reinforce group polarization rather than mutual understanding. Empirical findings in communication psychology support this tendency: Nyhan's (2021) research demonstrated that direct, accusatory refutations of deeply held beliefs often produce a backfire effect, strengthening rather than weakening group identity. Similar dynamics are observable in digital religious discourse, where provocative and dismissive rhetoric frequently escalates resistance and animosity rather than reflection or reform. The contrasting outcomes between Husein Ja'far's dialogical strategy and the Apostate Prophet's confrontational approach underscore the broader challenge identified by Stenmark, namely that the moral and intellectual effectiveness of criticism depends not merely on its content but also on its epistemic ethics and communicative form.

In Indonesia and other multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies, Stenmark's framework remains highly relevant as a conceptual foundation for shaping social ethics and public regulations that promote responsible criticism. Healthy criticism should create space for dialogue rather than provoke tension, allowing

religion to function as a moral force for reflection and peace. Stenmark's approach also offers a lens to distinguish between criticism that contributes to social harmony and that which merely seeks to divide or delegitimize. Within Indonesia's long yet occasionally fragile history of interfaith relations, such an ethical framework could inform public policy, religious education, and interreligious dialogue initiatives.

However, translating dialogical ideals into practice faces significant challenges. Structural inequalities, politicization of religion, and algorithm-driven media polarization often constrain open dialogue and amplify confrontational voices (Kermanshahi et al., 2024). Even figures like Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar, who embody dialogical ethics, operate within these limitations, in which digital virality frequently rewards controversy over reflection. Thus, while Stenmark's framework offers a valuable normative guide, its success in Indonesia depends on sustained institutional support, media literacy, and public commitment to deliberative engagement beyond rhetorical tolerance.

In reflecting on the potential for ongoing dialogue between religion and public criticism, we can see how this interaction can enhance religious peace in a diverse society. Dialogue not only facilitates mutual understanding but also provides space for alternative narratives that can challenge marginalization and discrimination. This dialogical approach aligns with the critical principles needed for reconsidering peace, where transformative and participatory ideas are essential to creating positive change. In this context, ongoing dialogue serves as part of activism that involves all parties in building bridges of understanding amid diversity. Thus, it can be expected that collaboration between religion and public criticism will lead to more peaceful and inclusive resolutions amid the challenges facing society today (Yana et al., 2024). Stenmark's analysis also emphasizes that criticism of religion is not a neutral act. Religious criticism is fraught with social and political implications. When done with empathy, knowledge, and good intentions, religious criticism can be a means of reconciliation and social transformation. However, when done with hatred and simplification, criticism becomes a tool of polarization and symbolic violence.

CONCLUSION

Criticism of religion is an inseparable part of the dynamics of a democratic and pluralistic society. However, the quality and form of such criticism determine whether it functions as a bridge toward peace or a source of division. In this regard, Mikael Stenmark's conceptual framework remains a valuable lens for distinguishing constructive from destructive criticism, emphasizing that the success of religious critique depends not only on logical rigor but also on contextual sensitivity, communicative ethics, and audience awareness. Yet, applying this ethical ideal within Indonesia's plural and digital environment presents significant challenges. Public discourse is frequently shaped by unequal power relations, politicization of religion, and algorithmic incentives that reward

provocation over reasoned engagement. These structural realities complicate efforts to uphold dialogical ethics in practice. Thus, fostering responsible religious criticism requires not only epistemic integrity from individuals but also institutional support through education, media regulation, and interfaith collaboration to translate ethical principles into sustainable civic practice.

Two approaches derived from online data collection can be examined as real-world illustrations: Apostate Prophet and Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar. Apostate Prophet voices criticism from outside Islam in a tone that tends to be provocative and simplistic. His secular and destructive approach tends to close the space for dialogue, which ultimately increases the potential for conflict and weakens efforts to promote mutual understanding between religious communities. In Stenmark's framework, this form of criticism does not meet public ethical standards because it is more oriented toward delegitimization and the strengthening of certain groups' identities. In contrast, Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar offers a model of immanent and dialogical criticism from within Islam itself. His approach is rich with religious reflection, the use of internal arguments, and the reinforcement of the values of compassion and tolerance. Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar can open up a healthy, empathetic, and in-depth space for discussion, thereby building bridges of understanding between people without negating anyone's faith.

In Indonesia and other societies with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, Stenmark's framework is valuable for defining the ethical boundaries of freedom of expression in matters of faith. Religious criticism, while inseparable from democratic life, must also be situated within moral and social responsibility. When carried out through dialogue and mutual understanding, criticism can contribute to religious renewal and peaceful coexistence. However, realizing such dialogical ideals remains fraught with challenges. In Indonesia, meaningful interfaith dialogue is often constrained by political instrumentalization of religion, unequal representation between majority and minority groups, and the spread of digital misinformation that distorts theological discussions. These socio-political tensions frequently transform potentially constructive criticism into identity-based contestation. Therefore, while Stenmark's approach offers a normative guide for ethical engagement, its practical implementation requires not only interreligious goodwill but also systemic efforts to address power imbalances, strengthen media literacy, and institutionalize mechanisms for inclusive dialogue.

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