

Communicating Islam across Social Difference in Contemporary Indonesia

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Article Info

Article history:

Received June 15th, 2026

Revised June 21th, 2026

Accepted June 27th, 2026

Keyword:

Digital religion; Islamic communication; Moral boundaries; Religious authority; Social difference.

ABSTRACT

Islamic preaching in Indonesia have extensively addressed message effectiveness, religious moderation, and digital authority, yet rarely explain how theological claims, moral classification, social recognition, and media circulation operate within one communicative process. This study examines how Islamic communication forms and negotiates moral boundaries in encounters with social difference in contemporary Indonesia. This research uses a qualitative literature study with a conceptual approach. The findings show that preaching does more than transmit religious teachings: it assigns moral positions to those discussed and may shape whether they are treated as legitimate members, objects of correction, or socially suspect actors. Doctrinal boundaries do not necessarily produce exclusion because theological disagreement can remain separate from civic rights and everyday cooperation. Problems arise when judgments about beliefs extend to a person's social worth, loyalty, or right to participate, a process identified here as *moral spillover*. Protection and coexistence also do not always amount to equal recognition when dominant groups retain unilateral authority to define the terms of acceptance. In digital settings, the force of moral labels is strengthened or challenged by the credibility of religious actors, platform structures, and the arrival of audiences outside the original setting. Islamic communication across difference is therefore better assessed by whether it preserves doctrinal conviction while allowing those being judged a meaningful opportunity to speak, respond, and influence shared social relations.



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INTRODUCTION

Dakwah begins from a normative premise that religious truth should be communicated, defended, and allowed to guide conduct. A socially diverse public, however, includes people who neither share the same theological premises nor recognize the same standards of piety. This tension is often reduced to tolerance, but the communicative problem is more demanding. A truth claim reaches people who may not accept its source of authority. A sermon can clarify doctrine for Muslim listeners while assigning a moral position to people who are discussed rather than addressed. The question is not whether preaching may contain judgment, since religious communication cannot be stripped of normative evaluation. What requires closer scrutiny is the movement from disagreement over belief to judgments about social worth, civic standing, or the right to speak within relationships that bind both parties (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013).

Contemporary Indonesia gives this problem particular force. Constitutional guarantees and public commitments to harmony coexist with uneven recognition across religious groups (Colbran, 2010). Post-Reformasi democratization expanded the space available to Islamic organizations, preachers, and lay activists, while disputes over orthodoxy, minority belief, gender, and acceptable Muslim life also

became more visible (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). Digital media altered the setting further. Statements once confined to a congregation can now reach unintended audiences, including the people evaluated in the message. These developments resist a simple description of Indonesia as either tolerant or intolerant. They point to a shifting communicative environment in which theological disagreement, public authority, and social recognition intersect. Dakwah participates in that environment through persuasion and through the language by which legitimate membership and moral difference are defined.

Scholarship on Islamic communication has examined message effectiveness, audience response, religious moderation, and the changing authority of preachers (Alvian & Ardhani, 2023). Research on digital Islam has likewise addressed online piety, religious learning, and the relationship between media visibility and authority (Husein & Slama, 2018; Rusli et al., 2020; Slama, 2018). These conversations remain only partly connected. Effectiveness studies tend to concentrate on intended audiences, whereas work on pluralism usually turns to tolerance, conflict, or state regulation. The person or group made into the subject of a religious message receives less sustained attention. A sermon may consolidate its intended audience while narrowing the social position of those it names. The unresolved issue, then, is not an absence of scholarship on tolerance or digital preaching. It is the lack of an integrated account of theological evaluation, moral classification, social acceptance, and media circulation as elements of the same communicative process.

Research on symbolic boundary processes provides a useful point of departure. Such scholarship treats boundaries as distinctions through which people classify persons, practices, and groups, while also asking when those distinctions become durable social inequalities (Pachucki et al., 2007). Symbolic distinctions need not become exclusion; they may organize identity without denying rights or everyday cooperation. Religious boundaries demand the same analytical caution. A Muslim community may firmly distinguish beliefs considered true from those it regards as false while continuing to recognize the civic standing of people outside that boundary. The difficulty arises when doctrinal distinctions begin to regulate who may be trusted, heard, protected, or accepted as a legitimate participant. This study adapts boundary work to dakwah in order to examine that movement. Moral boundary work refers to communicative practices through which religious judgments assign social positions to the people they describe.

The audience addressed by a message must therefore be distinguished from the party discussed within it. The former may gain reassurance, solidarity, or clearer religious orientation. The latter may be represented as mistaken, dangerous, deficient, or in need of correction. These positions are not equivalent even when produced by the same sermon. The central risk is moral spillover, a shift whereby an evaluation of doctrine, practice, or conduct becomes a broader judgment of personal and social value. “This belief is wrong” then begins to support the assumption that its adherents are less trustworthy or less entitled to participate. Doctrinal firmness alone does not establish spillover. Evidence lies in the social consequences attached to the judgment and in whether the people judged have a credible opportunity to contest its meaning.

Digital circulation complicates this process without determining its outcome. Online platforms may extend the reach of established scholars, support new religious voices, or allow audiences to compare competing sources. They can also bring a message into contact with listeners who do not share the setting in which it was first delivered. Research on mediated and networked religion shows that media may alter religious authority, community, and the relationship between online and offline practice without simply replacing established religious institutions (Campbell, 2012; Hjarvard, 2008). The resulting change in audience matters because context is not distributed evenly. A preacher and regular followers may understand the conventions surrounding a statement, whereas outsiders encounter the words without the same relationship to the speaker. Religious authority also becomes part of the message’s social force. A label voiced by a trusted figure and repeated through a wide network may carry consequences beyond the speaker’s original intention. Technology does not create those consequences by itself, but it changes who receives the judgment and how far the judgment can travel.

This study examines how Islamic communication forms and negotiates moral boundaries in encounters with social difference in contemporary Indonesia. It asks how dakwah assigns moral standing, when religious evaluation develops into unequal acceptance, and how authority and digital circulation alter the reach of such judgments. Doctrinal boundaries, the argument holds, do not inherently produce exclusion. The decisive movement occurs when theological disagreement diminishes civic standing or when acceptance is offered entirely on terms set by the dominant party.

Assessing preaching across difference therefore requires attention to whether those discussed can represent themselves, challenge harmful judgments, and influence the relationships in which they are expected to participate.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based design and a conceptual approach suited to examining the relationship between Islamic communication, moral boundary formation, and the recognition of social difference in Indonesia. Its units of analysis are arguments, concepts, and empirical findings in relevant journal articles, academic books, and institutional documents. The conceptual approach allows ideas drawn from different bodies of scholarship to be examined as an interconnected analytical framework rather than as isolated definitions (Jabareen, 2009). Symbolic-boundary theory provides an initial lens for tracing how religious communication assigns moral positions to people and groups, but it is not applied as a fixed classification. Indonesian scholarship is approached with the possibility that theological firmness and social acceptance may move in different directions. The study does not claim to represent the attitudes of all preachers or Muslim audiences.

Sources were identified through journal websites offering full-text access. Supporting documents came from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and institutions publishing material on religious life in Indonesia. Sources qualified for inclusion when they addressed Islamic communication or dakwah in Indonesia and provided evidence about how a group, identity, belief, or practice was evaluated and socially positioned. Normative texts that merely advocated tolerance were not treated as evidence of communicative practice, although they could clarify the policy environment. This structured use of the literature follows the view that a literature review can operate as a research methodology when source selection and synthesis are made explicit (Snyder, 2019). The material was examined through qualitative content analysis and comparison across sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. From Message Transmission to Moral Boundary Work: Dakwah and the Formation of Moral Standing

Research on dakwah effectiveness commonly asks what an intended audience understands or does after receiving a message. That measure reveals little about people who appear within the message as objects of judgment. Lengauer's (2018) ethnographic study of Muslim communities in Bandung describes how digital interaction sustains piety and belonging across online and everyday settings. Community formation, however, also draws boundaries. A message that strengthens solidarity among followers may simultaneously narrow the position available to those outside the group. The distinction between addressees and people discussed is therefore analytically consequential. Communicative success with the first cannot by itself establish fairness toward the second.

Lamont and Molnár's (2002) account of symbolic boundaries helps explain this problem because religious communication does more than transfer information. It classifies conduct and places people in relation to shared standards. Adapted to dakwah, moral boundary work refers to the communicative process through which a religious evaluation gives social meaning to difference. Some boundaries remain doctrinal. They distinguish beliefs accepted as Islamic from those rejected as erroneous. Others enter everyday relations by shaping proximity, cooperation, or trust. A further movement occurs when a judgment begins to affect civic standing and the right to participate. These movements should not be treated as a rigid sequence. A doctrinal distinction may remain limited, while a seemingly mild social label may carry serious consequences. The analytical task is to identify what kind of position is created and what that position permits others to do.

The distinction is sharper when authoritative communication is separated from ordinary preaching. Burhani's (2014) study of fatwas against Ahmadiyya shows how institutional religious judgments help sustain orthodoxy by assigning a formal status to a minority belief. The Indonesian Ulema Council's 2005 fatwa was not a sermon delivered to a congregation but an institutional judgment circulating through religious and political networks. Irawan's (2017) critical discourse analysis further traces how the Islamic Defenders Front presented Ahmadiyya through labels of deviation and exclusion from legitimate Islam. Neither article establishes that every listener acted against Ahmadi Muslims. Together, however, they identify a discursive condition in which a theological category became

available for broader social use. Repeated beyond its original institutional setting, the category could influence how a group's presence was discussed in neighbourhoods, organizations, and public policy.

Moral spillover begins when wider circulation changes the object of judgment. A statement rejecting a teaching remains a doctrinal evaluation while the social worth of its adherents is not inferred from that rejection. Spillover occurs when disputed belief becomes a reason to doubt whether adherents are trustworthy, loyal, or entitled to equal protection. No explicit call for exclusion is required. Repetition, institutional endorsement, and the absence of a meaningful reply may gradually make the social conclusion seem self-evident. Tone is therefore an unreliable guide. Polite language can assign another group a subordinate position, whereas a firm theological statement may leave civic relations untouched. The relevant evidence lies in the position made available to those being described.

The relationship between doctrine and social position is not uniform across Indonesian cases. Fahmi et al.'s (2023) study of Pesantren Bali Bina Insani describes an Islamic institution that maintained its religious identity while employing Muslim and Hindu teachers. Professional responsibility, rather than religious sameness, governed the working relationship. Rejeki et al. (2026), in an ethnographic study of egalitarian *dakwah* in a Muslim-minority community, found that dialogue and non-coercive engagement could continue without requiring others to accept Islam. These cases are local and cannot establish a national pattern. Their value lies elsewhere. They show that doctrinal boundaries may remain clear while cooperation is organized through a different social standard. The other party is not required to surrender belief before being treated as a legitimate partner in everyday life.

Such cases also caution against treating inclusion as the disappearance of difference. Hindu teachers at Bali Bina Insani did not become socially acceptable because religious distinctions were dissolved. Their participation was possible because the institution did not allow doctrinal difference to determine professional worth. The egalitarian *dakwah* described by Rejeki and colleagues worked through a similar separation. Religious commitment remained present, but the relationship was not made conditional on conversion or submission. A boundary can therefore be firm in one domain and open in another. The crucial question is who decides where the boundary operates. Cooperation may appear inclusive while the dominant party still retains sole authority over the terms of participation. That problem leads beyond boundary formation to the quality of recognition itself.

Moral boundaries are better approached as changing relations than as fixed lines between those judged right and wrong. Religious evaluation may remain attached to doctrine, guide a limited form of social distance, or expand until it restricts participation. Mild language does not guarantee equality, just as doctrinal firmness does not preclude cooperation. The deeper question concerns what becomes possible after the boundary is drawn. People may remain physically present while being denied the authority to explain themselves or contest the conditions imposed on them. Whether acceptance extends that far becomes central to evaluating *dakwah* across social difference.

2. Beyond Tolerance: Recognition and Asymmetrical Acceptance

The absence of violence does not establish that difference has been accepted on equal terms. Menchik (2014) explains how Indonesia's religious nationalism can acknowledge diversity while excluding heterodox groups from the community deemed legitimate. Simandjuntak (2021) identifies a layered arrangement in which constitutional religious freedom coexists with everyday citizenship that privileges majority values and distinguishes acceptable minorities from groups labelled deviant. Neither study examines *dakwah* directly. Their importance lies in the communicative problem they expose. Acceptance depends on who has the authority to name a difference, define its limits, and decide whether the people classified may answer those definitions.

The Shia community in Sampang demonstrates why protection should not be equated with recognition. Miichi and Kayane (2020) found that cohesive networks connecting a minority community to majority actors capable of mobilizing state power could provide a safety net under threat. Such protection is indispensable, since physical security is a basic condition of social life. The same arrangement may nevertheless leave access dependent on intermediaries. Their study does not establish that Shia communities lacked all control over decisions affecting them, and no such claim is warranted. A narrower inference is sufficient. Security may improve without an equivalent opportunity for public self-representation. Dependence on majority networks can also make protection appear as political generosity rather than an unconditional right. Religious communication reproduces this asymmetry when a minority is defended from violence but described entirely through terms established by the

dominant group. Recognition deepens when those concerned can articulate their interests without continually relying on a majority intermediary.

Theological judgment and civic standing need not follow the same logic. Civic-theological decoupling, as used here, does not require all religious claims to be regarded as equally true. It separates an assessment of belief from decisions about rights in shared social life. The concept is offered as a limited analytical device rather than a separate theory. Its practical implication is that employment, legal protection, and participation should not depend on willingness to accept majority theology. Doctrinal disagreement may remain firm. The difficulty begins when that disagreement acquires the power to diminish civic standing.

The Bali Bina Insani case offers one example of a religious boundary that does not close social relations. Muslim and Hindu teachers worked within an institution that continued to maintain an Islamic identity, and religious difference was not used to judge professional competence. The Krajan study approached the issue from a different setting. Its participants described egalitarian dakwah through dialogue, non-coercive engagement, and attention to basic needs in a Muslim-minority community. Neither case is broad enough to describe a national pattern. Their significance appears through comparison. Cooperation can continue without first requiring the other party to change belief. The relationship moves beyond passive tolerance because everyday interaction becomes possible across a declared religious difference. Even so, the evidence does not establish that every participant held equal influence over institutional rules or the direction of the relationship. Social acceptance is visible, but the depth of recognition still depends on opportunities to speak and resist decisions experienced as harmful.

Separating theology from citizenship is not a settled condition achieved once and for all. An institution may preserve a clear Islamic identity while opening work and communication across religious difference. Presence alone, however, does not guarantee equality. People may be accepted because they are regarded as competent, useful, or non-disruptive, while the power to define the rules remains concentrated in the dominant group. Such acceptance still matters because it reduces distance and makes sustained cooperation possible. The assessment cannot stop at access, however. Recognition becomes more substantial when those admitted can explain their interests and influence decisions that also bind them.

The earlier account of segregated citizenship shows how minorities considered acceptable can remain disciplined according to majority interests, while groups labelled deviant encounter harsher exclusion. At the communicative level, a narrower version of this arrangement may be described as asymmetrical acceptance. The other party is permitted to remain, but only within a role defined from outside. The language of harmony can provide protection without opening an equivalent opportunity to negotiate the conditions of acceptance. Such inequality need not appear as an explicit prohibition. It may persist through one-sided guidance or through expectations of adjustment treated as ordinary by the dominant group. The decisive distinction concerns who may offer reasons and who is expected merely to comply.

Doctrinal conviction and social recognition are not opposite points on a single scale. The studies considered here describe religious disagreement that coexists with cooperation and social acceptance that still contains unequal voice. An assessment of dakwah must therefore move beyond general claims about tolerance. More demanding questions concern whether people can represent themselves, challenge conditions imposed on them, and influence decisions shaping the relationship. Where these capacities remain concentrated in one group, coexistence may be secure without recognition becoming equal.

3. Religious Authority and the Circulation of Moral Judgments in Digital Spaces

A dakwah message may reach audiences the speaker never anticipated. Slama's (2017) study of Indonesia's Islamic preacher economy shows that social media reorganizes exchanges between preachers and followers beyond the moment of face-to-face delivery. Once recirculated, a message does not necessarily retain the context of its first delivery. A sermon addressed to followers may later be encountered by the group evaluated within it. The change in audience transforms an internal explanation into a public assessment. Those discussed may experience its social consequences despite having no equivalent opportunity to respond within the same communicative space.

Arifianto (2020) treats social media as one route through which new preachers and Islamic groups have challenged established authority, although their influence still depends partly on organizations,

political networks, and support from established figures. Nisa and Saenong (2022) describe another trajectory. Female ulama associated with Rahima used digital media to strengthen recognition of their scholarship and advance interpretations contesting conservative narratives. These studies concern different actors, yet together they establish that platforms carry no single theological direction. Digital space becomes an arena in which the authority to explain Islam and define moral boundaries is disputed (Kadir, 2025a). Scholarly credentials remain important, but reach and perceived proximity to audiences also shape who is heard. A moral label gains force when voiced by a trusted actor with extensive channels, while the group being judged may have smaller platforms or enter the discussion only after a particular meaning has circulated (Kadir, 2025b). Religious authority can therefore no longer be explained by education alone. Public reception also affects whether an interpretation endures, is contested, or gradually loses influence.

Visual appeal is not the same as authority. Hew (2018) shows that Felix Siau's *dakwah* developed through the interaction of digital communication and face-to-face activity, supported by a recognizable visual style. Askar et al. (2025) place a useful limit on the assumption that such appeal is sufficient. The Muslim students in their study still examined the credibility of online sources and their links to trusted ulama or institutions. Media can make a message quickly recognizable, but trust requires another basis. This distinction matters because the wide circulation of a moral judgment does not mean that audiences accept the speaker's entire claim to authority. Some messages attract temporary attention without becoming durable religious references.

Marwick and boyd's (2011) concept of context collapse helps explain how formerly separate audiences meet in the same digital setting. Their research did not concern Indonesian *dakwah*, so the concept is used here cautiously. Preachers ordinarily speak with assumptions about an audience's knowledge and relationship to them; social media makes those assumptions harder to sustain. A message produced within an internal community may reach the group being evaluated, while the contextual conventions that guided its first listeners fail to travel with it. The preceding case study demonstrates close links between online communication and offline activity, but it does not examine sermon clips circulated by third-party accounts. The evidence therefore cannot support a general claim that recirculation necessarily distorts meaning. It supports the narrower conclusion that the convergence of different audiences weakens certainty about shared context (Mappaselleng et al., 2020). When a preacher commands a much larger following than the group being judged, both sides enter public discussion with unequal capacities to shape meaning. The people discussed may bear the consequences of an interpretation in whose initial circulation they had no part.

Digital spaces do not all operate in the same way (Mappaselleng & Kadir, 2018). Open platforms allow messages to reach people outside the original community, whereas a WhatsApp group can preserve clearer membership boundaries. Nisa's (2018) study of *One Day One Juz* shows how WhatsApp was used to sustain Qur'an-reading discipline and strengthen internal relationships. The finding does not demonstrate dialogue across difference. Its value lies in showing that digital media may also maintain a community rather than continually expose it to diverse audiences. The consequences of communication must therefore be examined through the kind of space in which a message circulates and the people who can enter the conversation. Those structural differences affect whether an outside response is possible.

The studies compared above show that contests over digital religious authority can reinforce moral boundaries, while the same spaces may also be used to challenge them. The contrast weakens any assumption that technology carries a fixed moral direction. What matters is the relationship between religious knowledge, audience recognition, and the capacity to reach a public. Those resources still do not guarantee fair communication. People being discussed need an opportunity to explain their experience and reject judgments they consider harmful. Without such a possibility, a contest over authority may merely replace the most dominant voice. A change of speaker does not necessarily alter the position assigned to the people being judged.

Wider reach does not by itself improve *dakwah*. Labels voiced by influential figures may acquire greater consequences after leaving their original setting, even though audiences can compare sources and direct their trust elsewhere. The persistent problem arises when those discussed encounter a judgment only after its meaning has spread. A more equal position requires a credible space for response. Seeing oneself explained by others is not equivalent to participating in the production of

meaning. Recognition begins when correction and counter-explanation have a reasonable chance of being heard rather than remaining comments that can easily be ignored.

CONCLUSION

Dakwah forms moral boundaries by assigning positions to the people it discusses. These boundaries may remain attached to doctrinal difference, shape everyday relations, or extend into rights and civic participation. Doctrinal firmness does not automatically produce exclusion. The difficulty arises when theological judgment is used to question social worth while the people concerned lack an equivalent opportunity to speak. Acceptance must likewise be distinguished from recognition. A group may receive protection, access, or cooperation while remaining confined to a role unilaterally defined by others. In digital settings, the consequences of moral judgment also depend on religious authority and patterns of circulation. Wider reach can magnify a label, especially when new audiences encounter it without the context shared by its original listeners.

This study shifts attention from the effectiveness of dakwah to the social consequences of assigning moral standing. Moral boundary work clarifies the connection between religious evaluation and social acceptance, while civic-theological decoupling explains how religious disagreement can persist without diminishing citizenship. A literature-based design cannot determine how often these patterns occur, capture the responses of all audiences, or establish a causal relationship between digital messages and social action. Dakwah across difference is therefore better assessed by its capacity to preserve doctrinal conviction without closing the space in which others can speak, reject harmful judgments, and influence the relationships that bind them.

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