

## Ulama and Religion in Modern Indonesia: Zainal Arifin Abbas's Thoughts on Religion

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**Abstract:** This article examines the religious philosophical thought of Zainal Arifin Abbas as reflected in his book *Perkembangan Fikiran terhadap Agama (The Development of Thought Towards Religion)*. The focus of this study is to understand how religion is viewed as a rational element that holds ideological power in shaping human thinking and civilization. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory of domination as the theoretical framework, this research explores the role of religion as a spiritual and social force in shaping cultural hegemony and social struggle, particularly within the context of Indonesia's independence movement. The research employs a qualitative approach with text analysis of Zainal Arifin Abbas's work. The key finding reveals that Zainal views religion as a foundation that connects humanity with both God and society, as well as an ideological force capable of driving social change. This study underscores the importance of rational thought in religious philosophy to comprehend the role of religion as a fundamental pillar of civilization and human identity.

**Keywords:** scholars, religion, philosophy, domination, independence

**Article history:** Received: 05 January 2024 | Revised: 15 April 2024 |  
Available online: 30 June 2024

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## Introduction

Religion, as an element of society in general and of individuals in particular, occupies a very urgent position. Its presence is not only to fulfill the needs of individuals as human beings, but also, on a broader scale, religion is an integral part of human life and civilization. However, some deny this and restrict religion to the private domain. In fact, from the beginning of its creation, through the rise and fall of civilizations, humanity has always sought to live within the world in which it exists. The desire to experience life in the metaphysical world has led them to seek a power greater than their own. Some have even sacrificed themselves to defend the wisdom they received from the Prophets and figures labelled as religious scholars and bearers of belief.

According to H.M. Rasjidi, there are two terms that are often misunderstood: philosophy and religion. He asserts that these two terms encompass the same domain, which he calls the *ultimate*, the most important matter that determines one's life or death, and not trivial matters. The difference between religion and philosophy does not lie in their domain, but rather in how they investigate that domain. Philosophy means thinking, whereas religion means dedication. A person who studies philosophy not only learns about philosophy but, more importantly, learns how to think. Similarly, a person who studies religion is not merely content with religious knowledge, but must also develop the habit of living according to religious principles.<sup>1</sup>

The difference in the attitude of Muslims towards philosophy began centuries ago. Some viewed it as an 'enemy' that must be fought. As a result, some argued that it was forbidden. Some even boldly declared that philosophy is the root of ignorance and deviation, confusion, and error. Anyone who engages in philosophy, they say, blinds the heart from the virtues of the sacred Shariah, which is supported by clear arguments and proofs. Those who study it, they claim, are in disgrace, closed off from the truth, and deceived by Satan.<sup>2</sup> Others accepted it as it came, while some chose a middle path—seeing it as a branch of knowledge that does not need to be opposed to religion. In fact, the

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<sup>1</sup> H.M. Rasjidi, *Filsafat Agama* (Jakarta: N.V. Pemandangan (Bag. Penerbitan), 1965), 3.

<sup>2</sup> 'Abd al-Mu'mī Amīn, ed., *Fatāwā wa Masā'il Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1986).

conflict arising from differences of opinion between the jurists (*fuqāhā*) and philosophers has existed since the classical period of civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Looking at the disputes among Muslims regarding philosophy, it is important to examine the source of philosophy itself. According to Syamsudin Arif, there are three opinions regarding the source of Islamic philosophy: first, it is a continuation of ancient Greek philosophy; second, it arises from within, a result of the intellectual *ijtihad* of Muslims; and third, it is the outcome of intellectual activities that have existed since the early period of Islam.<sup>4</sup> In essence, philosophy is born from a tradition of deep thinking about all that exists. From this philosophical tradition, various disciplines of knowledge emerged, leading to the development of science and technology based on empirical experience.<sup>5</sup>

The development of Islamic philosophy in Indonesia, according to Harun Nasution in his study of Islamic philosophy in Indonesia, has several main characteristics: first, it instills a rational mindset in the thinking of Indonesian Muslims; second, it involves writing books on Islamic thought, including Islamic theology (*kalām*), Islamic philosophy, and mysticism (sufism); and third, it establishes a department of Islamic Theology and Philosophy at the Faculty of Uṣūl al-Dīn.<sup>6</sup>

This study presents the religious philosophy of Zainal Arifin Abbas as one of the thinkers and intellectuals of pre- and post-independence Indonesia. His presence and works have contributed significantly to the intellectual development of the nation and particularly to the Muslim community. This research attempts to examine Zainal Arifin's religious philosophy as reflected in his book *Perkembangan Fikiran terhadap Agama (The Development of Thought Towards Religion)*.

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<sup>3</sup> Dhaoul Ngazizah and Kholid Mawardi, 'Integrasi Filsafat Dan Agama Dalam Perspektif Ibnu Rusyd', *Jurnal Ilmiah Mandala Education* 8, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.58258/jime.v8i1.2746>.

<sup>4</sup> Syamsuddin Arif, 'Filsafat Islam antara Tradisi dan Kontroversi', *TSAQAFAH* 10, no. 1 (31 May 2014): 1, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v10i1.61>.

<sup>5</sup> Moh Rofik Fitrotullah, 'Konstruk Filsafat Dan Agama Dalam Bingkai Peradaban Islam', *El-Qudwah*, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> M Zainal Abidin, Wardani, and Rusydi, 'Kesinambungan Dan Perubahan Dalam Kajian Filsafat Islam Di Indonesia: Studi Terhadap Pemikiran Harun Nasution, Mulyadhi Kartanegara, M. Amin Abdullah, Dan Musa Asy'arie', *Tashwir: Jurnal Penelitian Agama Dan Sosial Budaya* 2, no. 3 (2014).

This book was written to explain the views of intellectuals on religion, both before and after acquiring knowledge. It provides an explanation of religion, addressing the factors that should be included in the conception of religion, from its highest principle about God to the final principle regarding the afterlife. It also discusses other important factors that form the foundation for religious practice in this world, namely reason and the soul, as instruments that connect humans with these two primary principles. Additionally, the book contains explanations from the core views of dozens of thinkers throughout the past 2500 years, from Thales to the present.

Research on Zainal Arifin and his intellectual contributions has been conducted by scholars and researchers. However, his religious philosophy has not been extensively explored. Among the previous studies on Zainal Arifin Abbas are: *Sejarah Sosial Intelektual Islam Zainal Arifin Abbas (1912-1979 M) "Perspektif Sosio-Kultural"* by M. Yakub<sup>7</sup>, *The Intellectual Tradition of Mandailing Ulama in East Sumatra: Zainal Arifin Abbas, 1912-1979* by Zaini Dahlan<sup>8</sup>, *Analysis of the Concept of Al-Hubb in the Thought of Zainal Arifin Abbas (1911-1977)* by M. Yusuf Habibi, Safria Andy, and Uqbatul Khoir Rambe,<sup>9</sup> and *The Relationship between Religion and State According to the Perspective of K.H. Zainal Arifin Abbas* by Rizki Pristiandi Harahap, Syahrin Harahap, and Hasan Bakti Nasution.<sup>10</sup> In brief, religious philosophy is philosophy whose material object is religion, with an

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<sup>7</sup> M Yakub, 'Sejarah Sosial Intelektual Islam Zainal Arifin Abbas (1912-1979 M)"Perspektif Sosio-Kultural"', *Dakwah: Jurnal Kajian Dakwah Dan Kemasyarakatan* 22, no. 1 (2018): 85–106.

<sup>8</sup> Zaini Dahlan, 'The Intellectual Tradition Of Mandailing Ulama In East Sumatra: Zainal Arifin Abbas, 1912-1979', *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 4, no. 1 (2020): 23–57.

<sup>9</sup> M Yusuf Habibi, Safria Andy, and Uqbatul Khoir Rambe, 'Analysis of the Concept of Al-Hubb in the Thought of Zainal Arifin Abbas (1911-1977)', *Ishlah: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin, Adab Dan Dakwah* 5, no. 2 (2023): 235–48.

<sup>10</sup> Rizki Pristiandi Harahap, Syahrin Harahap, and Hasan Bakti Nasution, 'The Relationship between Religion and State According to the Perspective of KH Zainal Arifin Abbas', *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI-Journal)* 2, no. 4 (2019): 666–71.

emphasis on its rational aspects. Harun Nasution defines it as thinking about the foundations of religion according to logic and freedom.<sup>11</sup>

The goal of this research is to reveal the religious philosophical thoughts of Zainal Arifin Abbas as reflected in his book *Perkembangan Fikiran terhadap Agama*. This study aims to explore how religion is understood as a rational element with ideological power in shaping thinking patterns and civilization. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory of domination<sup>12</sup> as a framework, this research examines how Zainal Arifin Abbas views religion not only as a spiritual aspect but also as a social and ideological force capable of driving social change, including in the context of Indonesia's struggle for independence. Thus, religious philosophy, based on rational thought, becomes key to understanding the role of religion as the foundation of civilization, which in Eastern traditions is often viewed as inseparable from philosophy.

## Methods

The research method used in this study is qualitative, with a text analysis approach. The primary data comes from the works of Zainal Arifin Abbas, particularly his book *Perkembangan Fikiran terhadap Agama*. This study focuses on an in-depth examination of Zainal's religious philosophical ideas, using Antonio Gramsci's theory of domination as the analytical framework. This approach is employed to understand how religion is viewed as a rational and ideological element in shaping thinking patterns, civilization, and social struggles, including in the context of Indonesia's independence. Data is analysed interpretively to explore Zainal's views on the relationship between religion, rationality, and social transformation, thereby producing a comprehensive understanding of the religious philosophy he offers.

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<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Alif, 'Eksistensi Tuhan Dan Problem Epistemologi Dalam Filsafat Agama', *Aqlania: Jurnal Filsafat Dan Teologi Islam* 12, no. 2 (2021): 209–34.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

## Results and Discussion

### Biography of Zainal Arifin Abbas

Zainal Arifin Abbas was born in Kampung Lalang on March 12, 1911 (1330 H), coinciding with 23 Rabiul Awal, which is now part of Lalang Village, Sunggal District, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra Province. He was born to Muhammad Abbas Hasibuan and his mother Rajiah Binti Abdullah Lubis, both of whom hailed from a Mandailing family. His formal education began as a student at the Methodis Boy School in Binjai.<sup>13</sup> However, due to certain circumstances, he had to transfer to the Anglo Chinese School in Medan in 1920.<sup>14</sup>

Subsequently, Zainal Arifin Abbas continued his studies at the Arabiyah School in Binjai, which was led by prominent religious scholars at the time, K.H. Abdul Karim Tamim and Sheikh Haji Abdul Halim Hasan. At this school, Zainal Arifin Abbas studied from morning until afternoon. In the evenings, he utilized his time to study at the Madrasah Islam Bandar Senembah Binjai, which was led by Abdul Wahab Musa. After four years of education, he graduated with an Ibtidaiyah level certificate from the Arabiyah School.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to his formal education, Zainal Arifin Abbas also studied under several notable religious scholars of the time, including:

#### 1. Sheikh Hasan Ma'sum

Sheikh Hasan Ma'sum was an esteemed scholar born in Labuhan Deli, East Sumatra, on Saturday, 17 Muharram 1301 H (1884 AD).<sup>16</sup> He spent at least 20 years in the Holy Lands (Haramain), studying under renowned scholars such as Sheikh 'Abd al-Salām, Sheikh Aḥmad

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<sup>13</sup> Nadzrah Ahmad, "'Ulama' Tiga Serangkai' and Their Contribution towards Reviving Islamic Education in the Early Post-Colonial Indonesia (Sumbangan Ulama' Tiga Serangkai Dalam Menghidupkan Semula Pendidikan Islam Di Indonesia Pada Awal Pasca-Kolonial)," *Journal of Islam in Asia (E-ISSN 2289-8077)* 18, no. 2 (2021): 122–43, <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v18i2.1055>.

<sup>14</sup> Ja'far, *Tradisi Intelektual Al Washliyah* (Medan: Perdana Publishing, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Yakub, 'Sejarah Sosial Intelektual Islam Zainal Arifin Abbas (1912-1979 M)' 'Perspektif Sosio-Kultural'".

<sup>16</sup> Matu Mona, *Riwajat Penghidoeapan Alfadil Tocan Sjah Hasan Ma'soem (Biografi Sedjak Ketjil Sampai Wafatnja)* (Medan: Typ. Sjarikat Tapanoeli, n.d.).

Khatīb al-Minangkabawi, Sheikh Ahmad Hayāt, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Quddūs, Sheikh ‘Uthmān Tanjung Pura, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Mandilī, Sheikh Saleh Bafāḍil, Sheikh Sa‘id Yamānī, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Karīm Dgestānī, Sheikh ‘Ali Mālikī, Sheikh Muḥammad Khayyāt, and Sheikh Āmin Riḍwān.<sup>17</sup> According to Ja’far,<sup>18</sup> Sheikh Hasan was recognized for his dedication as a religious student, earning legitimacy from scholars and students in Haramain for his mastery of religious materials.<sup>19</sup>

In 1931, Zainal Arifin Abbas, along with his teachers from Arabiyah School and the Kadi of Binjai, studied with Sheikh Hasan Ma’sum in *halaqah* sessions. Among the texts studied by Zainal Arifin Abbas under Sheikh Hasan Ma’sum included

- a) *Tafsīr Jalālain*, written by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)

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<sup>17</sup> Luckman Tengku Sinar, *Sejarah Medan Tempo Doeloc* (Medan: Perwira, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Ja’far Ja’far, “Tarekat Dan Gerakan Sosial Keagamaan Shaykh Hasan Maksum,” *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 5, no. 2 (2015): 269–293, <https://jurnaluf.uinsby.ac.id/index.php/teosofi/article/view/107>.

<sup>19</sup> See also: Maisyaroh Maisyaroh and Muhammad Iqbal, ‘Malay Ulama in Deli Land: The Life, Manuscripts, and Intellectual Networks of Shaykh Hasan Ma’sum (d. 1936), *Nahrasiyah: Journal of Aceh and Malay Archipelago Heritage*, 1.1 (2023), 39–68 <https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v1i1.2038>; Ja’far Ja’far, *Jejak Sang Bintang: Sketsa Biografis Syekh Hasan Ma’sum H. Ismail Banda, H. Abdurrahman Sjihab H.M. Arsjad Th. Lubis & H. Yusuf Ahmad Lubis*, ed. by Ismed Batubara (Medan: Centre For Al Washliyah Studies (Pusat Kajian Al Washliyah), 2022); Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, ‘Riwayat Hidup Almarhum Syekh Hasan Ma’sum (1884-1937’, in *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama Terkemuka Di Sumatera Utara* (Medan: Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara), pp. 119–37; Radinal Mukhtar Harahap, Aidilfithrah Aidilfithrah, and Ihsan Sa’dudin, ‘Ulama and Authority in the Deli Kingdom: A Brief History of Shaykh Hasan Ma’sum’, *Journal of Indonesian Ulama*, 1.1 (2023), 51–62 <https://doi.org/10.30821/jiu.v1i1.2>; Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, ‘Riwayat Hidup Almarhum Syekh Hasan Ma’sum (1884-1937)’, in *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama Terkemuka Di Sumatera Utara* (Medan: Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, 1983), pp. 119–37; Maisyaroh Maisyaroh, ‘Academic Ethics in Modern Indonesia: Shaykh Hasan Ma’sum’s Thought on Students Ethics in His Tazkir Al-Muridin Suluk Thariqah Al-Muhtadin’, *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman*, 47.1 (2023), 18–35 <http://dx.doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v47i1.1082>.

- b) *Minhāj al-Ṭālibīn* by Muḥy al-Dīn al-Nawāwī up to the chapter on *Rahn*. These texts were studied every Friday from 8 AM to 11 AM at the Masjid Raya Al-Mashun in Medan.
- c) *Faṭḥ al-Mubīn* and *Syarḥ Matn al-Arbaʿīn*, works by Imām Aḥmad Ibn Hajar al-Haytamī, were studied on Fridays from 1 PM to 2 PM at the same mosque.
- d) *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *al-Badru al-Ṭaliʿ fī Ḥalli Jamʿi al-Jawāmiʿ* by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī, were studied daily (except Fridays) from 8 AM to 11 AM at Sheikh Hasan Maksuḥ's residence.

## 2. Sheikh Haji Abdul Halim Hasan

Sheikh Haji Abdul Halim Hasan was born in the village of Limau Sundai, located to the west of Binjai city, a former part of the Langkat Sultanate and now a municipal city, on May 15, 1901.<sup>20</sup> Beginning in 1920, Sheikh Haji Abdul Halim Hasan began teaching in Binjai, where he became the longest-serving educator, remaining until 1947. His teachings during this period were considered a form of reform and modernization of religious education and knowledge at the time.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Zaini Dahlan, 'Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan, 1901-1969: Akar Tradisi Intelektual Di Sumatera Timur Awal Abad XX', *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 128–55.

<sup>21</sup> Adzrah Ahmad, "Abdul Halim Hasan and His Methodological Approach in Tafser Al- Quran Al-Karim," *Journal of Islam in Asia* 14, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v14i2.619>; M. Yusuf Habibi, Safria Andy, and Uqbatul Khoir Rambe, "Analysis of the Concept of Al-Hubb in the Thought of Zainal Arifin Abbas (1911-1977)," *Ishlah: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin, Adab Dan Dakwah* 5, no. 2 (2023): 235–48, <https://doi.org/10.32939/ishlah.v5i2.284>; Shahzadi Pakeeza and Ali Asghar Chishti, "Critical Study of Approaches To the Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an," *Pakistan Journal of Islamic Research* Vol 10, no. 4 (2012): 19–26, [http://www.bzu.edu.pk/PJIR/vol10/eng 2 Shehzadi Pakeeza New 24-05-13v10.pdf](http://www.bzu.edu.pk/PJIR/vol10/eng%20Shehzadi%20Pakeeza%20New%2024-05-13v10.pdf); Nor Syamimi Mohd, Haziyah Hussin, and Wan Nasyrudin Wan Abdullah, "Scientific Exegesis in Malay Qur'anic Commentary," *Asian Social Science* 10, no. 10 (2014): 236–42, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v10n10p236>; Nadzrah Ahmad, Ahmad Nabil Amir, and Sohirin M Solihin, "Abdul Halim Hasan Dan Manhajnya Dalam Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Karim," *Sultan Alauddin Sullaiman Shah* 5, no. 2018 (2018): 309–27, <https://jsass.uis.edu.my/index.php/jsass/article/view/70>; M. Jamil and Ja'far Ja'far, "Pemimpin Perempuan Dan Non-Muslim Perspektif Ulama Tiga Serangkai," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2018.8.1.31->

Zainal Arifin Abbas studied under him at the Arabiyah School in Binjai during his early years and studied the books *Bidāyah al-Mujtahid* and *al-Ashbāh wa al-Nazāir*. Additionally, he took morning and midday lessons from the school headmaster for four years and from other scholars in Binjai, including Kiyai Haji Abdul Karim Yamin, the Mufti of the Langkat Sultanate, who taught *Shabbān al-Mulawij*, and Haji Muhammad Noor Ismail Qadli Langkat Hulu, who taught *Tafsīr al-Jawāhir* and *Itmām al-Wafā'*.<sup>22</sup>

Zainal Arifin Abbas lived in a society where, according to Anthony Reid's account in the *Politiek Verslag Sok* (July 1939),<sup>23</sup> the religious matters of the Malay sultans in East Sumatra held unquestionable authority, standing "unequivocally and without exception" with the conservative old guard that adhered strictly to traditional Islamic teachings, as practiced in the Malay world for centuries. Their opposition to Muhammadiyah was based partly on the movement's acceptance of reformist ideas from Islamic scholars in Egypt, such as Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā. The tensions between Muhammadiyah and the traditionalists reached their peak in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This led to the formation of the Jam'iyatul Washliyah organization in Medan in 1930<sup>24</sup>

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54; Muhammad Reza Fadil and Suparwany Suparwany, "Ulama Tiga Serangkai's Tafsir Al-Qurānūl Karim: Source, Method and Profiles of the Interpreters," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 6, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v6i2.12644>; Zaini Dahlan, "The Intellectual Tradition of Mandailing Ulama in East Sumatra: Zainal Arifin Abbas, 1912-1979," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 4, no. 1 (2020): 23, <https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v4i1.7025>.

<sup>22</sup> M. Hasballah Thaib, *In Memorium Bersama Alm. H. Zainal Arifin Abbas* (Medan: Perdana Publishing, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Reid, *Sumatera Revolusi Dan Elite Tradisional* (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Ja'far Ja'far, "Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Dan Pelestarian Akidah Ahl Sunnah Wa Al-Jama'ah Di Indonesia," *ISLAMICA: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 14, no. 1 (2019): 54–81, <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2019.14.1.54-81>; Ja'far Ja'far, "Ulama, Al Washliyah and Knowledge in Modern Indonesia (1930-1980)," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 46, no. 2 (2022): 235–56, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v46i2.984>; Ja'far Ja'far, "Peran Ulama Al Washliyah Dalam Pengembangan Ilmu Agama," *Islamijah: Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (February 24, 2021): 16, <https://doi.org/10.30821/islamijah.v2i1.11291>; Ja'far Ja'far, "Peran Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Dalam Merevitalisasi Madhhab Shafi'i Di Era Kontemporer," *Justicia Islamica: Jurnal Kajian Hukum Dan Sosial* 13, no. 1 (n.d.); Ja'far Ja'far, "Khazanah Kitab Kuning Di Madrasah Al Jam'iyat Al Washliyah," *Jurnal*

by traditional Muslim teachers and former students of Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli,<sup>25</sup> many of whom had assimilated into East Sumatra's society, such as Haji Abdurrahman Sjihab, who led the group from 1933.<sup>26</sup>

Zainal Arifin Abbas is also recognized as an accomplished scholar with numerous influential works, including:

- a) *Tafsir Al-Quran al-Karim* (1937), co-authored with his teacher H. Abdul Halim Hasan and Abdurrahman Haitami
- b) *Ilmu Tasawuf* (1969)
- c) *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama* (1950)
- d) *Peri Hidup Muhammad Rasulullah saw.* (1941)
- e) *Kitabus Shalat* (1962)
- f) *Kaifiat Sembahyang* (1964)
- g) *Sejarah Puasa dan Hikmahnya* (1962)
- h) *Buku Pelajaran Agama Islam.*

## Religion as Human Nature

In the Islamic understanding of religion, *al-dīn* refers to the concept of indebtedness, submission to divine commands, and the cultivation of human qualities. The innate inclination of humans toward religion is reflected in the Qur'an, specifically in Sūrah al-A'raf/7: 172, which signifies that humans have made a covenant with their Creator, acknowledging

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*Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah* 2, no. 2 (2017): 124–134, [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2017.vol2\(2\).1041](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2017.vol2(2).1041).

<sup>25</sup> Muaz Tanjung, *Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli 1918-1942: Menelusuri Sejarah Pendidikan Islam Awal Abad Ke-20 Di Medan* (Medan: IAIN Press, 2012); A. Akmal Tarigan, N. Nurhayati, and M. Syukri Albani Nasution, "The Network of Ulama and Its Role in The Development of Islam in North Sumatra," *Religio: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 10, no. 2 (2020): 209–26; Hasan Asari and Muaz Tanjung, "History of Maktab Al-Islamiyah Tapanuli," *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 8, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.31291/hn.v8i2.559>.

<sup>26</sup> Ja'far Ja'far, *Sang Ulama Pemimpin: Biografi Abdurrahman Sjihab* (Medan: Perdana Publishing and CAS, n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2014), 27–33.

Him as their Sustainer and Guardian. This covenant is an acceptance of the duties and responsibilities that individuals owe to their Creator, reflecting a pure, original nature of humankind.<sup>27</sup> This aligns with H.M. Rasjidi's view that religion is a sense of dedication or contentment, meaning that every adherent of a religion feels compelled to devote themselves entirely to their faith.<sup>28</sup>

To trace Zainal Arifin Abbas's philosophical thoughts on religion, one must examine his discourse on religion as an inherent trait of humans. According to Abbas, the human propensity to believe in a Creator is inherent in humans, as evidenced by the continuity of this belief throughout history. The belief in a Creator is a natural disposition, just as other forms of knowledge exist in humans who possess reason.<sup>29</sup>

The relationship between humans and religion appears to be of a natural kind. Religion is intertwined with the very nature of human creation, manifesting as submission, the longing for worship, and noble attributes.<sup>30</sup> This fundamental relationship guides humans to seek strength beyond their own, and abilities beyond their limits. This inclination is rooted in the perfect nature of human creation.

According to Abbas, the development of human thought since ancient times has revealed this natural inclination. Hence, the belief in the Creator has historically been symbolized by statues and idols. Various beliefs and practices in the search for God have existed, and the emergence of philosophers and laws has, in part, corrected or refined these ideas.<sup>31</sup>

The human inclination toward religion is a reflection of their nature. The existence of the Supreme Being is, according to Buya Hamka, a fundamental aspect of the soul, acknowledging the purity and nobility of humans compared to other beings. Human intellect's first conclusion is the belief in the unseen. Therefore, the earliest form of religion for humans is a natural one. It is believed that, at the end of

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<sup>28</sup> Rasjidi, *Filsafat Agama*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Zainal Arifin Abbas, *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama* (Medan: Toko Buku Islamiyah, 1951).

<sup>30</sup> Solehan Arif, 'Manusia Dan Agama', *Islamuna: Jurnal Studi Islam* 2, no. 2 (2015): 149–66.

<sup>31</sup> Abbas, *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama*, 26–27.

human intellectual pursuit, individuals will come to a realization of their own weakness when confronted with the Supreme Being, submitting humbly under His majesty. The beginning of this journey is termed *fitrah* (innate nature), and its conclusion is Islam. All of humanity forms one family, bound by a shared nature that seeks to connect with its Creator—until humans meet and submit (Islam).<sup>32</sup>

In his further explanation, Abbas identifies three primary factors influencing human thought about religion: first, reason, second, the afterlife (life after death), and third, the eternal soul. He asserts that human knowledge and reason cannot generate new religious ideas, as religious teachings have been clearly established for over 5,000 years. The human intellect merely serves to understand and adapt religious concepts to individual desires. Therefore, divine guidance is eternally necessary on Earth for humans to continue receiving guidance toward righteousness.<sup>33</sup>

As with philosophy, which is a product of human thought, Abbas argues that it lacks the strength and beauty of religion. Both pro-religion and anti-religion viewpoints may emerge, but their power is limited to their time, or, while they may endure longer, they do not possess the compelling factors that attract hearts.<sup>34</sup> This demonstrates that philosophy, as a product of human thought, has its own era and period of influence. It cannot quench the thirst for truth that humans seek continually.

Furthermore, when measuring the strength of any belief system or ideology, none compares to the power of religion. This is why philosophers worldwide study all religions, extracting what is beneficial from them for society, often under the guise of philosophy and similar terms.<sup>35</sup>

## Religion as the Source of Civilization

When discussing philosophy in the East, particularly among Eastern nations, it is inseparable from religion. For Eastern people, religion and philosophy are essentially one and the same. Therefore, when we

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<sup>32</sup> Hamka, *Falsafah Ketuhanan* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2017), 15–16.

<sup>33</sup> Abbas, *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama*, 425.

<sup>34</sup> Abbas, *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama*, 428.

<sup>35</sup> Abbas, *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama*, 430–31.

study or follow the intellectual development of prominent figures in Eastern societies, the first thing we encounter in their teachings is the subject of religion. In other words, discussing philosophy in the East is equivalent to discussing religion, or religion itself is philosophy.

In contrast, when we consider the West or follow the intellectual development of Western thinkers, philosophy is viewed as entirely separate from religion. In the West, the emphasis of philosophy is on the pursuit of wisdom, as the term *philosopher* literally means “lover of wisdom.”<sup>36</sup>

This distinction highlights the difference between Western culture and Islamic civilization. According to Syed Naquib al-Attas, Western culture is based on philosophy rather than religion. This is because the Western soul lacks the certainty of religious conviction. They focus primarily on theoretical foundations, such as scientific knowledge or intellectual endeavours grounded in assumptions and hypotheses, which may or may not be true. As a result, such an approach, rooted in uncertain knowledge and the resulting lifestyle, does not lead to firm belief.<sup>37</sup>

In the context of nationhood, religion also plays a role in shaping collective beliefs, which then form the basis for mutual respect and support. Zainal Arifin Abbas argues that Indonesia’s civilization and independence are recognized because of its religious foundation. Since religion was a key factor in securing international recognition of Indonesia’s independence, Abbas views religion as a driving force behind the nation’s struggle for independence.<sup>38</sup>

A concrete example of this is Indonesia’s recognition of independence, both *de jure* and *de facto*, at the beginning of its independence. This recognition was not based on the status of the country or its leaders’ skills, which could change over time, but rather on the religious factors that served as the driving force behind the independence movement.

However, in the West, religion is often viewed as an adversary to the state and civilization. This view emerged with the Protestant challenge to the authority of the Pope and the subsequent religious

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<sup>36</sup> Abbas, *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama*, 229.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*.

<sup>38</sup> Abbas, *Perkembangan Fikiran Terhadap Agama*.

wars, during which religion ceased to be seen as an integral part of life. Discussions of God and religious matters gradually faded from public discourse. This shift in consciousness led to a focus on secular law alone, relegating religion to the realm of private individual belief.<sup>39</sup>

In the context of Antonio Gramsci's theory of domination, the research findings on Zainal Arifin Abbas illustrate how ideological domination plays a crucial role in shaping religious thought and civilization. Gramsci argues that in society, the dominant class uses culture and religion as tools to maintain their power. In this regard, Zainal Arifin Abbas teaches that religion is not only a spiritual aspect but also a social force that guides and shapes the mindset of society. His thought reveals how religion, as an ideology, can construct the framework for social and political life, which, in the context of Indonesia, became the foundation for the struggle for independence. Ideological domination, in this case, shows how religion was used to unite society and drive them toward a common goal, as seen in Indonesia's independence movement.

However, at the same time, Gramsci also emphasizes the importance of hegemony, which refers to the cultural domination by the ruling class that is willingly accepted by society. Zainal Arifin Abbas, through his ideas linking religion with philosophy, shows that in Eastern contexts, religion and philosophy often merge into a single entity. This demonstrates how religious ideology can shape civilization without significant opposition, as society has already embraced religious values as an integral part of their identity and way of life. In Gramsci's framework, this represents an example of cultural hegemony, where religion becomes a force that is accepted and perpetuated without question, even though in practice, it can be used to reinforce the existing social structure.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of Zainal Arifin Abbas's thought reveals that religion is inseparable from human life and civilization. He views religion as a natural disposition of humanity, inherent since creation and a part of human nature. In this context, religion is not merely a spiritual instrument but also plays a significant social and civilizational

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<sup>39</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (Yale University Press, 2013).

role. As Zainal stated, religion is the foundation that connects humans to God and becomes the driving force in the pursuit of collective goals, including Indonesia's independence. His thought serves as a reminder that the power of religion as an ideology can shape social, political, and even national independence, as reflected in Indonesia's struggle for freedom.

On the other hand, Zainal Arifin Abbas also highlights the differences in perspectives between the East and the West regarding the relationship between religion and philosophy. In Eastern traditions, religion and philosophy are often regarded as a unity, where philosophy is inseparable from the quest for wisdom that can also be found within religion. This contrasts with Western views, where philosophy often stands independently and separately from religion. In this context, Zainal suggests that religion holds an infinitely greater power than philosophy because religion provides a more tangible and eternal guide to life. This concept aligns with Antonio Gramsci's view on ideological domination, where religion, as an ideological force, plays a dominant role in shaping society and civilization without significant resistance.

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