

Transformation of Scientific Interpretation in Indonesia: An Epistemological Criticism of the Scientific-Religious Paradigm in the Works of Purwanto and Mustofa

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Abstract

The development of scientific interpretation (*tafsīr 'ilmī*) in Indonesia reflects an ongoing attempt to negotiate the relationship between Qur'anic revelation and modern scientific knowledge, while simultaneously raising epistemological questions concerning interpretive boundaries and methodological legitimacy. This study examines the transformation of scientific interpretation in the Indonesian context through a comparative analysis of the interpretive approaches of Agus Purwanto and Agus Mustofa, particularly in their engagement with *kauniyyah* verses. The primary objective of this research is to identify the dominant patterns of scientific interpretation employed by both figures and to assess their continuity with classical exegetical principles. Adopting a qualitative-descriptive design, this study employs comparative textual analysis supported by an evaluative framework derived from classical tafsīr theory, emphasizing linguistic accuracy, rhetorical coherence, and theological consistency as articulated by al-Zahabi. Primary data are drawn from the major works of Purwanto and Mustofa and are contextualized through relevant classical and contemporary literature on scientific exegesis. The findings demonstrate that Purwanto advances a revelation-based, scientific-textual model in which modern science functions as an explanatory tool subordinate to the Qur'anic text. In contrast, Mustofa represents a rational-speculative approach that positions contemporary scientific theories as the primary interpretive lens for metaphysical Qur'anic concepts. This study contributes to Qur'anic studies by offering an epistemological mapping of scientific interpretation in Indonesia and by advancing a critical framework for integrating scientific reasoning with textual fidelity and theological integrity in contemporary exegesis.

Keywords: Scientific Interpretation, *Kauniyyah* Verses, Epistemology of Tafsir, Indonesian Islam, Contemporary Qur'anic Studies.

Abstrak

Perkembangan tafsir ilmiah (*tafsīr 'ilmī*) di Indonesia merefleksikan upaya berkelanjutan untuk mendialogkan wahyu Al-Qur'an dengan pengetahuan ilmiah modern, sekaligus memunculkan perdebatan epistemologis mengenai batas dan legitimasi penafsiran. Penelitian ini mengkaji



secara komparatif transformasi tafsir ilmiah dalam konteks Indonesia melalui analisis metodologis terhadap karya-karya Agus Purwanto dan Agus Mustofa, dua tokoh yang merepresentasikan kecenderungan epistemik yang berbeda dalam menafsirkan ayat-ayat *kauniyyah*. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah mengidentifikasi pola penafsiran ilmiah yang dikembangkan oleh kedua tokoh serta menilai kesinambungannya dengan prinsip-prinsip tafsir klasik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif dengan metode analisis tekstual-komparatif, ditopang oleh kerangka evaluatif tafsir klasik sebagaimana dirumuskan oleh al-Zahabi, yang mencakup aspek kebahasaan, koherensi retorika, dan konsistensi teologis. Data primer diperoleh dari karya utama Agus Purwanto dan Agus Mustofa, serta didukung oleh literatur tafsir klasik dan kajian tafsir ilmiah kontemporer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Agus Purwanto mengembangkan model tafsir ilmiah-tekstual berbasis wahyu yang menempatkan sains sebagai instrumen penjelas makna Al-Qur'an, sedangkan Agus Mustofa merepresentasikan pendekatan rasional-spekulatif yang menjadikan teori sains modern sebagai kerangka utama penafsiran metafisis. Studi ini berkontribusi dengan menawarkan pemetaan epistemologis tafsir ilmiah di Indonesia serta memperkaya diskursus tafsir Al-Qur'an kontemporer melalui pendekatan kritis yang menekankan keseimbangan antara integrasi sains dan penjaan terhadap integritas teks wahyu.

Kata kunci: Tafsir Ilmiah, Ayat Kauniyyah, Epistemologi Tafsir, Islam Indonesia, Tafsir Kontemporer.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of modern scientific knowledge has created an urgent need to reinterpret religious texts, particularly the Qur'an, through empirical and analytical lenses. Contemporary scholarship increasingly attempts to harmonize revelation with scientific knowledge, reflecting a global trend toward integrating religious and empirical epistemologies (Hayat et al., 2023). Scientific interpretation (*tafsīr 'ilmī*) exemplifies this approach, employing scientific terminology to elucidate Qur'anic expressions while drawing upon diverse disciplines and philosophical insights (Al-Zahabi, 1976). However, this movement has generated controversy, as some critics warn that it risks blending with pseudo-science and unverified theories, potentially distorting the authentic meaning of the Qur'an (Bigliardi, 2017). Classical scholars, such as al-Zahabi, emphasize that interpretation must remain grounded in linguistic, historical, and theological principles, cautioning against correlating Qur'anic texts with uncertain scientific claims (Al-Zahabi, 1976). This tension reflects a broader global challenge: how to balance revelation, reason, and empirical evidence without compromising epistemological integrity.

Globally, integrative approaches have emerged that combine rationalism, empirical observation, and spiritual insight. For instance, Said Nursi's *tafsīr şuhudī* merges rational analysis with spiritual perception (*kashf*) and secular knowledge to achieve a more

investigative faith (*iman tahkiki*) (Yucel, 2021). Historiographical studies highlight the importance of understanding the historical development of scientific methodologies in Qur'anic studies, encompassing divine, social, and natural sciences, which are crucial for deepening the conceptual relationship between the Qur'an and scientific inquiry (Amir et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, scientific interpretation has evolved alongside local intellectual traditions, particularly Nusantara-style or tafsīr kauniyyah. Prominent figures include Agus Purwanto and Agus Mustofa, whose methods exemplify contrasting approaches. Purwanto adopts a scientific-textual methodology, integrating physics and cosmology with Qur'anic revelation (Purwanto, 2015), whereas Mustofa employs a Sufi-rational approach that blends metaphysical reasoning with modern science (Mustofa, 2005). Local examples of this integration include Bugis-language tafsirs from Pesantren As'adiyah, such as *Tafsir Surah Amma Bil-Lughah Al-Buqisiyyah*, which preserve local intellectual heritage while promoting Islam through culture-based education (Muhammad Alwi et al., 2025), and manuscripts like *Hakikate Bismillah* from Lamongan, which combine Sufi hermeneutics with Javanese cosmology (Mauluddin et al., 2025). Reformist interpretations, such as Hamka's *Tafsir Al-Azhar* and Kyai Bisri Musthofa's *Tafsir al-Ibriz*, address social-religious challenges and modernist concerns, reflecting the dynamic adaptation of Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia (Badawi & Zulkarnaini, 2021; Rozi et al., 2024; Abidin et al., 2024).

Sufi-rational integration is further evident in classical and modern scholarship. Sufi tafsīr emphasizes inner spiritual meaning beyond the literal text, exemplified by Ibnu 'Ajjabah's *al-Baḥrul Madīd* (Hashim & Tacali, 2022), while rationalist Sufi approaches, such as those of Harun Nasution, integrate dzikir practices with analytical reasoning, influenced by Muhammad Abduh (Musa & Khaidir, 2023). Philosophical Sufi frameworks, including Wahdat al-Wujud and Wahdat ash-Shuhud, provide metaphysical models reconciling divine unity with the observable world (Rakhmetkyzy, 2014). Some scholars, such as al-Muḥāsibī in *Fahm al-Qur'ān*, attempt to integrate theological, rational, and mystical perspectives within tafsīr kauniyyah (Yüksek, 2023). Studies also show that tafsīr (objective-linguistic), ta'wīl (subjective-insightful), and hermeneutics (historical-sociological-psychological) employ distinct yet complementary approaches (Supena, 2024).

Classical tafsīr methodologies, such as al-Ṭabarī's *Ġāmi' al-bayān*, emphasize linguistic precision and systematic classification (Koç, 2023), while Ottoman works like Taskopruluzade's *Miftāhus-Sa'āda* contextualize interpretation within scientific frameworks

(Hariani, 2023). Modern tafsīr employs pre-modern philological hermeneutics, social commentary, and alignment with contemporary science, often complemented by Sufi-rational insights (Mubarak, 2018; Bin Sapran Hrp et al., 2021).

Despite rich scholarship, comparative epistemological studies of Purwanto and Mustofa's interpretation of kauniyyah verses remain scarce. Previous studies have mainly been descriptive (Yusuf et al., 2017; Asvia, 2018; Muis, 2019; Daruhadi, 2024) and rarely provide critical comparative analysis, leaving the alignment of scientific and Sufi-rational approaches with classical tafsīr principles underexplored.

This study therefore aims explicitly to identify and critically evaluate the interpretive methods used by Agus Purwanto and Agus Mustofa for kauniyyah verses, assessing the extent to which their approaches adhere to or diverge from classical interpretive principles as formulated by al-Zahabi. Preliminary observations suggest that Purwanto's scientific-textual methodology aligns closely with classical linguistic and rhetorical norms, whereas Mustofa's Sufi-rational approach, while epistemologically rich and spiritually profound, exhibits greater speculative flexibility. By addressing this gap, the study proposes an epistemological framework for evaluating Indonesian scientific interpretation, contributing to both local and global Qur'anic exegesis discourse, and offering guidance for interpretations that are methodologically rigorous, contextually relevant, and spiritually meaningful.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with comparative text analysis to examine and contrast the interpretive methods used for kauniyyah verses in the works of Agus Purwanto and Agus Mustofa. The research design emphasizes textual interpretation and conceptual evaluation rather than empirical measurement, as it allows for a deep exploration of the hermeneutical and epistemological dimensions of scientific interpretation in Indonesia. By focusing on both the integration of revelation with scientific knowledge and the methodological frameworks employed by the interpreters, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of contemporary scientific exegesis.

The primary sources of this study are the main works of the two figures, including *Nalar Ayat-Ayat Semesta* by Agus Purwanto and *Ternyata Akhirat Tidak Kekal* by Agus Mustofa. These texts are analyzed with particular attention to kauniyyah verses, highlighting the differences between Purwanto's scientific-textual approach and Mustofa's Sufi-rational approach. Secondary sources include relevant classical and contemporary literature, which

provide theoretical and methodological context for evaluating the interpretive practices of the two figures.

Data collection is conducted through documentary study, involving thorough reading, coding, and categorization of interpretive patterns in the texts. This process allows the identification of methodological tendencies and trends in the scientific and Sufi-rational interpretations of the *kauniyyah* verses. The analysis is guided by an evaluative framework that examines linguistic accuracy, rhetorical quality, and theological consistency. Linguistic accuracy assesses the precision of terminology and syntactic structure in the verses, while rhetorical quality evaluates the appropriateness of language style and the use of figurative expressions in conveying scientific interpretations. Theological consistency examines the alignment of interpretations with Islamic doctrinal principles and the careful connection of textual revelation to scientific claims, especially those of a speculative nature.

The comparative analysis synthesizes the findings to map the methodological tendencies of Purwanto and Mustofa according to these three dimensions. The study ensures validity through triangulation of sources and theoretical validation, cross-checking findings with both classical and contemporary interpretive literature. This methodology is particularly effective in operationalizing classical interpretive theory to critically evaluate contemporary practices, producing a systematic and coherent assessment. While the study focuses on epistemological and methodological dimensions rather than empirically testing the scientific content referenced, it emphasizes interpretive coherence, methodological rigor, and the integration of revelation with scientific reasoning within the Indonesian scientific interpretation tradition.

Results and Discussion

A. Dynamics of Scientific Interpretation in Indonesia: Methodological Patterns in the Works of Purwanto and Mustofa

The development of scientific interpretation (*tafsīr 'ilmī*) in Indonesia is closely connected to the intellectual history of Islam in the Nusantara. From the early introduction of Islam, Qur'anic interpretation functioned not only as a means of understanding religious texts but also as a framework for explaining natural and social realities. A decisive influence came from Indonesian scholars who studied in the Middle East—particularly Egypt—and were inspired by the reformist ideas of Muhammad 'Abduh. This intellectual encounter encouraged the emergence of rational and scientific approaches to the Qur'an, which gradually evolved

from the early twentieth century and became more systematic in the modern period (Fadhliyah, 2024; Anwar & Syarifuddin, 2014; Firdarini & Syarifuddin, 2023).

According to the classification proposed by Rizki Maulana, the development of scientific interpretation in Indonesia can be divided into three major periods. The first period, emerging in the 1960s, is represented by Hasbi Ash-Shiddieqy's *Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Majid*, which, although general in nature, already incorporated scientific elements in the interpretation of *kauniyyah* verses, such as gravity and the evaporation of seawater in Q. al-Baqarah (2):164 (Maulana et al., 2024). The second period, spanning the 1990s to the early 2000s, witnessed significant expansion through the works of Ahmad Baiquni, Agus Purwanto, and Agus Mustofa. The third period, from 2010 onward, is marked by institutional and collaborative projects such as the *Tafsir Ilmi* produced by the Ministry of Religious Affairs–LIPI–LAPAN and *Tafsir Salman* of ITB.

Agus Purwanto represents a model of scientific interpretation grounded in theoretical physics and developed within the framework of revelation-based Islamic science. His methodology is scientific-textual in nature, characterized by a systematic classification of *kauniyyah* verses as the foundation for constructing scientific knowledge. In works such as *Ayat-Ayat Semesta* and *Nalar Ayat-Ayat Semesta*, Purwanto emphasizes the integration of Islamic ontology, epistemology, and axiology as an alternative to Western positivistic science (Purwanto, 2015). Revelation occupies a central epistemic position in his approach, while modern science functions as a critical instrument to deepen understanding of natural phenomena rather than as an autonomous source of meaning.

A concrete illustration of Purwanto's approach can be seen in his interpretation of Q. An-Naml:18. He understands the phrase *qālat namlatun* as “the queen ant spoke,” based on Arabic grammatical analysis, particularly the use of *tā' marbūṭah* and the feminine verb form, and corroborates this with biological findings that ant colonies are led by female individuals (Purwanto, 2015). This interpretation reflects an attempt to scientifically verify the linguistic meaning of the verse. Nevertheless, it also raises methodological questions concerning the boundary between reinforcing textual meaning and embedding contemporary scientific knowledge into the semantic structure of revelation.

In contrast to Purwanto, Agus Mustofa develops a form of scientific interpretation grounded in a speculative-rational approach shaped by his background in nuclear engineering and Sufi philosophy. His works integrate modern scientific theories with Qur'anic theological and eschatological concepts. Mustofa places strong emphasis on rational reasoning and

subjective experience, displaying a clear tendency toward *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*. In this framework, contemporary scientific theories are not merely auxiliary explanatory tools but become the primary epistemic lens through which metaphysical Qur'anic verses are understood.

Mustofa's interpretation of Q. Huud:106–108 exemplifies the speculative nature of his methodology. He interprets the eternity of heaven and hell as relative continuity dependent on the existence of the universe, drawing explicitly on Einstein's theory of time relativity (Mustofa, 2005). This reading challenges classical theological doctrines concerning the absolute eternity of the afterlife and introduces a new epistemological discourse. At the same time, it has attracted criticism for being overly speculative and insufficiently grounded in the *bayānī* tradition and the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text.

Aspect	Agus Purwanto	Agus Mustofa
Academic Background	Theoretical physics	Nuclear engineering & Sufism
Intellectual Paradigm	Revelation-based Islamic science	Modern Sufism & rationalism
Interpretive Approach	Scientific-textual	Speculative-rational
Key Example	Q. An-Naml:18 (queen ant)	Q. Huud:106–108 (relative afterlife)
Epistemology	Revelation, reason, observation	Reason & subjective experience
Relation to Classical Tafsir	Partial continuity	Weak continuity

Table 1. Comparative Overview of the Scientific Interpretation Methodologies of Agus Purwanto and Agus Mustofa

The comparative data reveal that scientific interpretation in Indonesia is not monolithic but manifests as a methodological spectrum shaped by the disciplinary backgrounds of individual interpreters. Agus Purwanto represents a relatively systematic integrative model that seeks to preserve textual authority, whereas Agus Mustofa reflects a more fluid rational-speculative tendency that departs from classical exegetical constraints. These differences demonstrate that scientific interpretation evolves contextually in response to intellectual challenges of each period, while simultaneously generating debates regarding methodological legitimacy and epistemic boundaries.

Overall, the findings indicate that the transformation of scientific interpretation in Indonesia has progressed from early, modest formulations toward increasingly complex and epistemologically contentious models. The data highlight the need for an evaluative framework capable of balancing the integration of science and revelation without undermining linguistic accuracy, rhetorical coherence, and theological integrity as articulated by al-Zahabi. These results provide a conceptual foundation for the subsequent Discussion section, particularly in addressing questions of validity, ethical boundaries, and the future trajectory of scientific interpretation within contemporary Islamic scholarship.

B. Dynamics of the Transformation of Scientific Interpretation in Indonesia

The development of scientific interpretation (tafsīr 'ilmī) in Indonesia reveals a clear trajectory from early introduction, through an exploratory phase, to institutional and methodological consolidation. From the initial arrival of Islam in the Nusantara, Qur'anic exegesis served not only as religious understanding but also as a framework to explain natural and social realities (Fadhliyah, 2024). Indonesian scholars educated in the Middle East, particularly Egypt, were influenced by Muhammad 'Abduh's reformist ideas, which encouraged rational and scientific approaches to the Qur'an (Anwar & Syarifuddin, 2014; Firdarini & Syarifuddin, 2023).

This intellectual encounter contributed to the emergence of tafsīr 'ilmī as a recognizable pattern within the Indonesian exegetical tradition. The data show that early scholarly works gradually systematized scientific interpretation, integrating observations of natural phenomena with Qur'anic exegesis. Tafsīr 'ilmī became increasingly structured and methodologically informed, responding to intellectual currents and educational experiences abroad.

Rizki Maulana's classification identifies three major phases: the preliminary phase (1960s), the first development phase (1990–2000s), and the second development phase (2010–present). In the latest phase, tafsīr 'ilmī evolved from individual efforts into collaborative and institutional projects, exemplified by the Ministry of Religious Affairs–LIPI–LAPAN–Observatorium Bosscha Tafsir Ilmi project (Darojat, 2023; Maulana et al., 2024).

These patterns indicate that tafsīr 'ilmī in Indonesia is not static; rather, it reflects adaptive intellectual engagement with both Islamic textual traditions and contemporary scientific paradigms. Its evolution mirrors the broader trajectory of knowledge production in Indonesian Islamic scholarship.

C. Scientific Interpretation within an Epistemological and Methodological Framework

In this section, the author engages in a critical discussion regarding the implications of the research findings for the development of

The observed patterns suggest that tafsīr 'ilmī is methodologically plural, encompassing a spectrum of epistemic orientations. Agus Purwanto represents a revelation-based Islamic science paradigm, integrating ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions to construct scientific knowledge from kauniyyah verses (Purwanto, 2015; Yusuf, 2017). His methodology is systematic, scientific-textual, and emphasizes verification through observation while keeping revelation as the primary source.

In contrast, Agus Mustofa develops tafsīr 'ilmī grounded in modern Sufism with a speculative-rational approach. His interpretation relies heavily on contemporary scientific theories, such as Einstein's time relativity, to understand metaphysical concepts in the Qur'an (Mustofa, 2005). Mustofa's approach prioritizes human reasoning and subjective experience, reflecting tafsīr bi al-ra'yi, which departs from classical exegetical conventions.

When assessed against Muhammad Husain al-Zahabi's criteria for scientific interpretation, Purwanto's approach shows relative strength in linguistic analysis but poses challenges in rhetorical coherence (balāghah) and doctrinal consistency (i'tiqādiyyah), whereas Mustofa's methodology is critiqued for over-reliance on rational speculation at the expense of the apparent meaning of the text (Al-Zahabi, 1976).

These distinctions illustrate that tafsīr 'ilmī functions as a dialogical space between revelation and scientific reasoning. Different epistemological frameworks produce varied interpretations, demonstrating the elasticity and adaptability of Islamic exegetical practices in responding to intellectual and cultural contexts.

D. Socio-Intellectual Implications of Contemporary Scientific Interpretation

The methodological differences between Purwanto and Mustofa reflect broader social and intellectual tensions in contemporary Indonesian Islam. Tafsīr 'ilmī acts as a bridge between faith and rationality, providing educated Muslim audiences and younger generations with interpretations that align with scientific reasoning (Darmadi, 2017).

However, the data also indicate potential risks. Overemphasis on contemporary science as a determinant of meaning, as seen in Mustofa's interpretation of the relative eternity of heaven and hell, may reduce the text's theological depth and compromise doctrinal clarity (Mustofa, 2005). Such practices can provoke debate and resistance from more traditionalist circles.

From a social perspective, tafsīr 'ilmī contributes to intellectual discourse, encouraging critical engagement with religious texts while fostering scientific literacy. It functions as a tool for reconciling faith and reason but also tests the boundaries of interpretive authority and methodological legitimacy.

Consequently, tafsīr 'ilmī operates not merely as a scholarly exercise but as a negotiation arena for epistemic authority in Indonesian Muslim public life, balancing innovation with adherence to classical principles.

E. Methodological Lessons for Developing Scientific Interpretation

The patterns and reflections suggest that effective tafsīr 'ilmī requires a critical-contextual methodological framework. Integration of science and Qur'anic exegesis should remain anchored in classical principles—linguistic precision (*lughawiyyah*), rhetorical coherence (*balāghah*), and doctrinal integrity (*'itiqādiyyah*)—as articulated by al-Zahabi (Al-Zahabi, 1976).

A critical-contextual model positions science as an illustrative tool rather than the primary determinant of meaning. This ensures that tafsīr 'ilmī maintains epistemological integrity while fostering constructive dialogue between revelation and contemporary scientific knowledge.

Such an approach is not only relevant in the Indonesian context but can also inform global discourses on contemporary Qur'anic interpretation. It allows for creative, transdisciplinary engagement without compromising the timeless relevance of the Qur'an.

Ultimately, this model demonstrates that *tafsīr 'ilmī* can evolve responsively while preserving continuity with classical Islamic epistemology, serving both scholarly rigor and socio-intellectual relevance.

Conclusion

This study reveals that scientific interpretation (*tafsīr 'ilmī*) in Indonesia has undergone a dynamic transformation, evolving from early, individual efforts to highly institutionalized and methodologically diverse forms. The comparative analysis of Agus Purwanto and Agus Mustofa demonstrates two epistemic poles: a revelation-based, systematic scientific-textual model versus a speculative-rational, Sufism-influenced approach. Purwanto emphasizes ontological, epistemological, and axiological integration rooted in Islamic revelation, while Mustofa prioritizes rational speculation and contemporary scientific theories, such as relativity, in interpreting metaphysical concepts. These findings highlight

that tafsīr ‘ilmī is plural, contextually adaptive, and serves both intellectual and socio-religious functions in modern Indonesian.

This research contributes to the field of Islamic studies and Qur’anic exegesis by providing a structured comparative framework for understanding methodological diversity in tafsīr ‘ilmī. It identifies key epistemological patterns and demonstrates how disciplinary backgrounds shape interpretive approaches. Furthermore, it proposes a critical-contextual model that balances textual fidelity, rhetorical coherence, and theological integrity with scientific reasoning. This framework can guide contemporary exegetes in integrating empirical knowledge without compromising classical principles of Qur’anic interpretation. The study also offers insights for educational institutions, policy makers, and researchers seeking to develop rigorous, science-informed Islamic scholarship.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, the analysis focuses on two prominent Indonesian scholars, which may not fully represent the entire spectrum of tafsīr ‘ilmī practices in Indonesia. Second, the scope primarily examines textual and methodological aspects, leaving room for empirical assessment of reception and social impact among Muslim communities. Future research could expand the sample to include additional scholars, regional variations, and quantitative surveys of readership impact. Moreover, longitudinal studies could explore how tafsīr ‘ilmī evolves in response to emerging scientific paradigms and socio-cultural changes, ensuring continued relevance for both academic and religious audiences.

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