

## Religious Practices and Socio-Religious Critique in the Drama Series *Bidaah*: An Analysis through Soekarno's Concept of Islam Sontoloyo

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of problematic religious practices in the Malaysian drama series *Bidaah* through the lens of Soekarno's concept of Islam Sontoloyo. Although previous studies have explored *Bidaah* from the perspectives of religious discourse, maqasid al-shariah, media literacy, and religious violence, none has specifically employed Islam Sontoloyo as an analytical framework to explore religious manipulation, blind obedience, the excessive glorification of religious leaders and the use of religion for personal gain. This research adopts a qualitative approach and employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine dialogues, narratives, and visual representations across all fifteen episodes of the series. The analysis focuses on textual representations, discursive constructions, and their broader socio-religious implications. The findings reveal four major patterns of problematic religious practice. First, religion is portrayed as a means of legitimizing authority and advancing personal interests through practices such as forced arranged marriages and *nikah batin* (spiritual marriage). Second, followers are depicted as accepting religious teachings without critical reflection, fostering a culture of unquestioning obedience. Third, the excessive glorification of religious leaders elevates Walid to a quasi-sacred status, obscuring the principle of tawhid and discouraging critical engagement. Fourth, religious teachings function as mechanisms of control that shape followers' beliefs, decisions, and social relationships. In contrast, the characters of Baiduri and Hambali embody critical awareness and resistance to religious manipulation. This study contributes to Islamic and media studies by highlighting the continuing relevance of Islam Sontoloyo as a framework for understanding contemporary forms of religious manipulation, fanaticism, and religious authority in digital culture.

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## Introduction

The development of digital technology has significantly transformed the ways in which society understands, consumes, and disseminates religious discourse. The emergence of streaming platforms, social media, and digital culture has made religion no longer confined to conventional spaces such as mosques, Islamic boarding schools, or religious study assemblies, but also increasingly present in popular media, including films, podcasts, TikTok, and drama series (Mukhroman et al., 2024; Ulfa, 2024). Digital media serves as an arena for the production of meaning and as a battleground for religious ideologies, influencing public attitudes toward religious authority, religious practices, and contemporary socio-religious issues (Jannah & Nurmila, 2025; Nugroho et al., 2024). Digital media not only functions as a vehicle for religious outreach, but also shapes new patterns of religious practice that are more visual, emotional, interactive, and rapidly disseminated in the public sphere. The shift toward digital media has transformed religious communication from traditional oral lectures toward more concise and visually engaging content, such as images, short videos, infographics, and digital posters. This transformation has occurred because digital citizens tend to access information quickly, practically, and visually. Consequently, religious messages are no longer confined to houses of worship or study forums, but are now present on various digital platforms accessible anytime and to anyone (Saidah, 2024; Zhang, 2025).

This phenomenon is increasingly visible in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, both of which have Muslim populations with very high levels of digital media consumption. Data from the Indonesia Digital Report 2023 show that Indonesia ranks among the countries with the largest number of internet users globally. In 2023, active internet users in Indonesia reached 212.9 million people, representing approximately 77% of the total population. In addition, social media users numbered 167 million people, or approximately 60.4% of the population. These figures demonstrate the high enthusiasm of Indonesian society for the internet and social media, which are no longer used merely as communication tools but have become integral to daily life, work, culture, identity formation, and the sourcing of religious knowledge (Hamidah, 2023; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019).

One of the most attention-grabbing phenomena of 2025 is the Malaysian drama series *Bidaah*, also known internationally as *Broken Heaven*, which has been streaming exclusively on the VIU platform since 6 March 2025. The series garnered more than 2.5 billion views in fewer than two months and became one of the most popular productions in both Malaysia and Indonesia (Kompas TV, 2025;

CNNIndonesia, 2025). Its extraordinary popularity is inseparable from its bold and critical portrayal of religious phenomena that have long attracted scholarly attention, namely the abuse of religious authority, fanaticism toward religious figures, spiritual manipulation, and the emergence of sectarian practices within contemporary Muslim society. These phenomena are not merely dramatic constructs; they reflect deeply rooted socio-religious problems that scholars have extensively documented (Fitriyah & Hamdan, 2025; Sabiila & Arrahmah, 2025; Susanti & Rohwati, 2025). Furthermore, research on digital media and religion highlights that the rise of charismatic religious figures in the online sphere has created new vulnerabilities to manipulation and uncritical devotion among Muslim communities. In this regard, *Bidaah* does not simply entertain; it functions as a medium of social critique that invites critical reflection on the boundaries of legitimate religious authority in the contemporary era (Abd Hannan & Ach Fatayillah Mursyidi, 2023; Febrian, 2024).

*Bidaah* centers on the character Baiduri, who is forced by her mother to join a group called Jihad Ummah, led by Walid Muhammad Mahdi Ilman, a charismatic figure who claims to be the Imam Mahdi. As the story progresses, Baiduri witnesses a range of deviant religious practices, from excessive blessing-seeking rituals and absolute obedience to the leader, to forced marriage and spiritual marriage (*nikah batin*) dressed in religious legitimacy (Nurhidayah et al., 2025). The character Hambali, who returns from Yemen with a more critically grounded Islamic understanding, begins to question these practices and works to expose Walid's manipulation (Mohd Asnan et al., 2025). This narrative makes *Bidaah* not merely entertainment but also a form of social critique directed at the abuse of religion still commonly found in social reality.

Religious manipulation is not a new phenomenon in the history of Indonesian Islam. Various studies have shown that the misuse of religious authority frequently manifests in the form of individual cults, group fanaticism, and religious legitimation of economic and political interests (Rahman, 2020; Rumadi, 2012). In the Indonesian context, such problems were long critiqued by Soekarno through his concept of "Islam Sontoloyo." In his essay published in the magazine *Pandji Islam* in 1940, Soekarno criticized religious practices that instrumentalized religion for personal gain, justified certain actions through the legitimation of *fiqh*, and produced blind imitation (*taqlid*) that deadened the critical faculties of believers (Soekarno, 2015). For Soekarno, Islam should be a religion that liberates human beings, promotes rationality, and advances social progress through the spirit of "Islam is Progress."

Soekarno's ideas have become increasingly relevant in the digital age, when religious authority is no longer built solely through formal institutions but also through media popularity and digital influence. Social media has given rise to a new form of religious authority grounded in popularity, virality, and emotional closeness with audiences. This development makes the public more susceptible to the influence of charismatic religious figures without adequate verification of their religious knowledge (Febrian, 2024; Hannan & Mursyidi, 2023). In such a context, fanaticism and religious manipulation can spread more rapidly because social media operates through algorithmic systems that present content based on users' interests, search histories, and interaction patterns. These algorithms cause users to more frequently receive information consistent with their existing beliefs, potentially forming echo chambers or closed communicative spaces in which a person continuously interacts with ideas, figures, or groups that share similar convictions (Kim, 2023). If this condition is not balanced by digital literacy and a critical understanding of religion, social media can become fertile ground for the spread of exclusive truth claims, exclusivist attitudes, and the rejection of other groups (Barberá, 2020).

Several prior studies have examined *Bidaah* from the perspectives of religious discourse contestation in popular media (Afifah et al., 2025), religious deviation through the lens of *maqasid al-shariah* (Mohd Asnan et al., 2025), the controversy of the *Bidaah* drama in relation to Islamic pedagogy and media literacy (Hanifansyah et al., 2025), and religiously motivated violence through critical discourse analysis (Ali & Nurdin, 2025; Sabiila & Arrahmah, 2025). Meanwhile, a substantial body of scholarship has examined Soekarno's Islamic thought, particularly in relation to Islamic reformism, nationalism, and critique of religious conservatism (Yufriadi et al., 2023). Soekarno's conception of Islam positioned religion not merely as ritual practice but as a social force capable of responding to the challenges of the age, emphasizing rationality, progress, openness of thought, and the courage to interpret religious teachings contextually (Soekarno, 2015). However, no study has yet specifically analyzed *Bidaah* through the lens of Soekarno's *Islam Sontoloyo* as a critique of manipulative religious practice in the digital age. This research gap provides the principal justification for the present study and its contribution of novelty to the field of Islamic and media studies.

Based on the foregoing background, this study aims to analyze the representation of religious practices in the drama series *Bidaah*, to explain the relevance of Soekarno's *Islam Sontoloyo* in reading the phenomenon of religious abuse in the series, and to examine the role of digital media as a space for the

dissemination of socio-religious critique in the contemporary era. This research is expected to contribute to the development of Islamic and social media studies, as well as to strengthen critical religious literacy amid the growing influence of digital religious authority in Muslim society today.

## **Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis method. Critical discourse analysis is utilized to examine how meanings, ideologies, and representations of religious practices are constructed and communicated through dialogues, narratives, and visual scenes in the Bidaah series. This approach was chosen because it enables the researcher not only to describe the content of the series at a textual level, but also to interpret the hidden meanings embedded in the narrative in a more critical manner (Fairclough, 2023). Within Fairclough's model, discourse is examined through three interrelated dimensions: text, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice (Haryatmoko, 2017). Using this framework, every piece of dialogue, narration, and visual scene in the series is read not merely as representation, but analyzed as discursive practice that produces, maintains, and reproduces power relations within a broader socio-religious context (Eriyanto, 2001). Soekarno's Islam Sontoloyo is employed as a framework for ideological critique of religion in order to read the phenomena of deviant religious practice in the series. More importantly, Soekarno's concept functions as the principal interpretive lens through which practices of religious manipulation, blind conformity, excessive reverence toward religious leaders, and the exploitation of religion for personal gain are critically evaluated (Soekarno, 2015).

Primary data were drawn from all 15 episodes of the Bidaah drama series, which was streamed via the VIU platform. Data collection was carried out through repeated viewing of the series, documentation of dialogues and narrations, and systematic recording of visual scenes relating to religious practice, fanaticism, and the abuse of religious authority. These observational and documentary techniques are consistent with the principles of qualitative data collection, which emphasize the researcher's deep engagement with the object of study (Moleong, 2017). Data analysis was conducted through several stages based on the interactive data analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014): first, data reduction, in which scenes and dialogues directly relevant to religious practice in Bidaah were selected; second, thematic categorization, in which data were grouped according to major themes such as fanaticism, religious manipulation, abuse of religious authority, and deviant

religious practice; third, critical interpretation using Soekarno's Islam Sontoloyo perspective to understand the meanings and social critique embedded in the series; and fourth, the drawing of comprehensive and contextual conclusions consistent with the research focus (Sugiyono, 2022).

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Forms of Religious Practice in the Drama Series Bidaah**

Repeated observation of the Bidaah series reveals a powerful representation of diverse religious practices displayed through ritual, the use of religious symbols, congregational obedience, and the relational dynamics between the religious figure and his followers. These practices do not merely function as dramatic elements within the narrative; they also reflect socio-religious phenomena prevalent in society. Through this portrayal, Bidaah offers a critique of religious practices that tend to position the religious figure's authority in an excessive manner, and it encourages viewers to approach religious issues more critically and reflectively.

#### ***Blessing-Seeking Rituals as Religious Practice***

Bidaah depicts blessing-seeking rituals (*tabarruk*) as a form of religious practice carried out by congregants based on their belief in the sacred values embedded in the teachings they follow. These rituals illustrate how followers believe that blessings can be obtained through particular actions, religious symbols, or figures believed to possess spiritual standing. In several scenes, followers are depicted competing to drink the leftover water and even the foot-washing water of Walid, believing it to confer spiritual blessings. This belief is constructed through the narrative that Walid is a saint of God (*wali Allah*) whose body is perceived as possessing a sacred spiritual quality (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 1,; Ep. 2). This practice illustrates how congregants' actions and decisions are shaped not through physical coercion, but through religious narratives that have been deeply internalized within their consciousness. As noted by Kusuma and Sudikan (2023), authority can be maintained through symbolic legitimacy and the acceptance of religious and spiritual leadership, enabling followers to comply voluntarily with the values and directives promoted by those in positions of authority.

Critique of this practice emerges when Hambali questions the act of drinking Walid's foot-washing water for the purpose of obtaining blessings. He asserts that such a practice has no basis in the Quran or in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. However, one of the congregants rejects this criticism on the grounds that Walid is a *mursyid* who must be obeyed (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 7). This dialogue

reveals that the congregants' loyalty to their leader has superseded the authority of the religious text itself. The discourse constructed by Walid has succeeded in creating a "truth claim" such that followers trust the spiritual authority of their leader over arguments grounded in more authentic Islamic teaching. Hambali's refusal to drink the foot-washing water demonstrates his caution toward religious practices that lack clear foundations in the Quran and Sunnah. From a jurisprudential perspective, every act of worship requires prior examination to ensure it is not contrary to Islamic teachings; if a religious practice lacks a sound textual basis (*dalil*), it may be regarded as inconsistent with religious prescription (Syukur & Huda, 2025). The congregants' rejection of Hambali's critique, expressed through the claim that Walid is a *mursyid* who must be obeyed, reflects the disciple–master relationship within a Sufi order (*tarekat*), in which obedience to the *mursyid* is regarded as a prerequisite for spiritual attainment (Rahima & Salam, 2023). In a sound Sufi order, this obedience remains framed within the bounds of Shari'a and moral conduct (*akhlak*); the *mursyid* is positioned as a guide toward closeness with God, not as a source of law that stands above the Quran and Hadith (Abdul Hamid et al., 2025; Ruslan et al., 2022).

The tension between obedience and critical thinking is also visible in the dialogue between Baiduri and her mother. The mother believes that all of Walid's teachings are correct because they are considered consistent with the Quran and Sunnah. Baiduri, by contrast, begins to express doubt about the practices carried out by the group (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 1). This situation illustrates two different positions within the power relation: the congregant who fully accepts domination, and the individual who begins to resist the religious authority regarded as deviant. Resistance frequently arises when religious authority is used to shape collective beliefs and behavior. In Bidaah, Walid functions as the primary source of religious "truth" within his community. His teachings are accepted as authoritative and rarely questioned, influencing how followers understand religious obligations and social reality. This portrayal demonstrates how religious authority can shape collective perceptions of truth and legitimacy, particularly when critical engagement is limited (Haugaard, 2022). Bidaah presents a deviant form of this: Walid monopolizes religious interpretation and manipulates symbols (*tabarruk*, spiritual marriage, etc.) to consolidate personal power, so that practices contrary to Islamic doctrine, jurisprudence, and *maqasid al-shari'ah* are nonetheless accepted by congregants as religious teaching (Fitriyah & Hamdan, 2025).

### ***Forced Arranged Marriage and Spiritual Marriage (Nikah Batin) as Manifestations of Congregants' Obedience***

The practices of forced matchmaking and spiritual marriage in the *Bidaah* series illustrate a form of domination exercised over the bodies of women through religious legitimation. In one scene, Abi Saifullah announces the matchmaking of several women in the name of Walid's authority and the direct guidance of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. These women are said to be "dedicating themselves" to the sheikhs in order to attain heaven (*Bidaah*, 2025, Ep. 2). Such spiritual narratives render relations of subordination appear as a noble form of devotion. From the perspective of Soekarno's *Islam Sontoloyo*, this phenomenon reflects the misuse of religious discourse to legitimize personal interests and reinforce unquestioning obedience. Soekarno criticized forms of religiosity that encourage blind conformity and place religious leaders beyond critical scrutiny. Consequently, religious teachings are transformed from instruments of ethical guidance into tools for maintaining influence and control over followers (Soekarno, 2015). In the context of *Bidaah*, the narrative of dedicating oneself for the sake of heaven functions as a religious discourse that reframes submission as a form of spiritual virtue, illustrating how religious narratives can be used to legitimize authority and secure followers' compliance (Bartky, 2020; Ghosh, 2021).

The practice continues with the ritual of spiritual marriage, which is directly led by Walid. The marriage is performed under the claim that it is witnessed by the Prophet Muhammad, while Salmiah accepts the decision with gratitude (*Bidaah*, 2025, Ep. 2). This scene illustrates how religious discourse is used to construct legitimacy for the control of women's bodies. Power relations operate subtly because the dominated subject does not perceive herself as being coerced; rather, she believes that she is fulfilling religious teachings and attaining spiritual blessings. In this context, the ritual of spiritual marriage can be understood as a practice that employs religious discourse to legitimize domination over women's bodies. The claim that the marriage is witnessed by the Prophet Muhammad positions Walid's decision as though it possesses divine legitimacy, making it difficult for the congregants to challenge. The use of religious arguments and symbols to place women in a position of submission to male authority reflects a pattern also found in religious discourses that legitimize the obedience and submission of wives on the basis of the divine authority attributed to husbands or male religious leaders (Novitasari, 2025).

The portrayal of Salmiah as someone who accepts the decision with gratitude demonstrates how religious narratives and promises of spiritual reward can foster

acceptance of decisions made by religious authorities, presenting obedience as a virtue closely associated with faith and devotion (Achmadin et al., 2024). In this case, power relations operate subtly through normalization rather than physical coercion. Women are encouraged to believe that obeying the decision of a religious leader means fulfilling religious teachings and obtaining blessings. This pattern resembles other cases in which women feel “pleased” to occupy an inferior position because they have internalized the construction that such a position is either their natural destiny or a religious obligation (Davies et al., 2002).

Kusuma and Sudikan (2023) describe such practices as relations of power over the sexual body exercised through religious legitimation. Women in the Jihad Ummah group are not merely positioned as objects of marriage, but also become part of a loyalty system that reinforces the power of the group's elite. This condition illustrates how religion can be used to justify practices of domination over women in the name of spirituality and religious obedience. Furthermore, Spiritual marriage as depicted in *Bidaah* contravenes the valid conditions for marriage, it lacks a lawful guardian, witnesses, and a proper marriage contract (*akad*), thereby failing to meet the pillars of marriage according to Islamic jurisprudence and positive Islamic law in Indonesia. The practice is manipulative in nature and associated with sexual violence and exploitation of women, including forced abortion and the social stigmatization of women (Nauroh & Subhi, 2025). Spiritual marriage introduces an additional layer of danger, as the spiritual leader exercises full control over women's bodies and sexuality, while women are made to believe that their obedience is a form of worship.

### ***The Imam Mahdi Claim as Legitimation of Religious Authority***

The culmination of the power relations constructed in *Bidaah* is seen in Walid's claim to be the Imam Mahdi. In one scene, Hambali's father states with full conviction that Walid is the Imam Mahdi and that all congregants are therefore obliged to remain loyal to him (*Bidaah*, 2025, Ep. 4). This claim constitutes the most potent strategy for constructing absolute authority because it positions Walid as a figure believed to possess divine legitimacy. The history of Mahdi movements shows that this title has frequently been used to mobilize the masses and seize power, rather than simply as an expression of personal piety. Other research confirms that numerous figures and groups have exploited the concept of a savior by declaring themselves or their leaders to be the Mahdi, in order to eliminate rivals and secure dominant positions. In many cases, belief in the Mahdi has emerged in contexts of

crisis and oppression, and the hope for a savior renders followers vulnerable to false claims (Artan, 2022).

Walid's claim to be the Imam Mahdi serves as a powerful source of religious legitimacy, allowing him to present his teachings and directives as unquestionable truths. This representation illustrates how religious authority can be constructed and sustained through narratives that encourage conformity, reinforce followers' trust in charismatic leaders, and limit opportunities for critical reflection (Hasan, 2009). This position causes all his teachings and actions to be regarded as part of the divine will that congregants are obliged to follow. The concept of "institutions of belief" explains that legitimacy in religious institutions is built on the interaction among authority, belief, and leadership; when the source of legitimacy is claimed to derive directly from the divine, authority becomes extremely powerful and tends to be immune from critique (Aoun, 2026). This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of the monopoly of religious authority as explained by Susanti and Rohwat (2025), when a religious figure succeeds in concentrating all legitimacy of truth in himself, criticism of the leader is regarded as equivalent to opposing religious teaching. Hambali, who returns from Yemen with a more critically grounded Islamic understanding, represents a form of resistance against this domination. His presence demonstrates that even in the midst of powerful power relations, the possibility of resistance against deviant religious practice always exists.

### **Abuse of Religious Authority in the Drama Series Bidaah**

The abuse of religious authority is one of the most prominent central themes in Bidaah. The character of Walid is depicted as a religious figure who exploits his spiritual influence to acquire power, obedience, and personal benefit, while cloaking every action in the mantle of religious legitimacy. The series illustrates how religious authority can transform into an instrument of domination when religious teaching is no longer used as a moral guide but as a means of maintaining power over followers. The most explicit form of religious authority abuse visible in the series is the manipulation of religious texts for personal benefit. Walid consistently employs symbols, religious language, and spiritual claims to justify actions that ultimately serve his own interests. Religious teaching is no longer positioned as a guide toward truth but is instrumentalized as a means of constructing congregational obedience. This is evident in the practice of matchmaking within the Jihad Ummah group. In one scene, Abi Saifullah announces that the selection of women is carried out on the authority of Walid and through the direct guidance of the Prophet Muhammad, for

the sake of obtaining blessing and heaven (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 2). The use of the terms heaven and blessing in this context constitutes a subtle strategy of manipulation, since the subordination of women is wrapped in a spiritual narrative that appears sacred and noble.

This manipulation is further intensified through the ritual of spiritual marriage (*nikah batin*) led directly by Walid, in which he claims that the marriage is witnessed by the Prophet Muhammad (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 2). This claim demonstrates how spiritual authority is used to create an absolute legitimacy for the actions of the group's leader. From the perspective of Michel Foucault (1980), this practice represents a form of power or knowledge, when an individual monopolizes religious knowledge in order to maintain power, such that his actions become impossible for followers to question. The phenomenon depicted in the series bears resemblance to various cases of religious authority abuse in religious institutions, particularly when spiritual legitimacy is used to silence critique and normalize deviant behavior. Lesthari (2023) explains that power relations in religious environments frequently make it difficult for victims to resist, because perpetrators are positioned as sacred figures who are assumed to be incapable of error.

In addition to manipulating religious texts, Walid consolidates his dominance through the construction of a regime of truth that positions him as the sole legitimate authority within the group. This dominance is evident when Hambali's father states that Walid is the Imam Mahdi and that all congregants must remain loyal to him (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 4). This statement demonstrates that the congregants' belief in Walid has developed into a form of absolute obedience that is difficult to question. Within the theory of power relations, truth is formed when an individual succeeds in determining what is considered true by society through control over discourse (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). By claiming to be the Imam Mahdi, Walid positions himself as a figure with direct access to the divine will, rendering all his words and actions correct and beyond contestation.

Walid's dominance is further reinforced through the exclusion of those who attempt to question his teachings. Hambali, who returns from Yemen with a more critically grounded Islamic understanding, is regarded as a threat to the community precisely because he begins to question whether Walid's teachings are consistent with the Quran and Sunnah. This situation demonstrates that religious dominance within the group is maintained not through open dialogue, but through the suppression of dissenting discourse. Priyanto (2017) describes this mechanism as a strategy of

discourse domination: power is maintained by weakening positions that might threaten the primary authority.

The abuse of religious authority in *Bidaah* is also manifest in the exploitation of women's bodies as objects of power. Young women in the Jihad Ummah group are matched with sheikhs in order to strengthen the group's loyalty networks and serve its interests. In this practice, women's bodies are positioned as tools for maintaining the networks of power and influence of the group's leader. This is visible through Salmiah Khairuddin's response, in which she expresses gratitude upon being matched by Walid, perceiving the decision as a form of spiritual grace rather than pressure or compulsion. The scene illustrates how power relations operate in a subtle manner through the process of normalization is rendering practices of domination appear natural and acceptable to the dominated subject. Power relations may operate through the shaping of individual consciousness and patterns of thought, influencing how people perceive religious authority, truth, and social reality (Kusuma & Sudikan, 2023).

### **Fanaticism toward Religious Figures in Religious Practice**

Fanaticism toward religious figures is one of the important themes depicted in *Bidaah*. This fanaticism is not only visible in the form of excessive reverence for the religious leader, but is also reflected in the disappearance of congregants' critical attitude toward the teachings and actions of Walid. The series illustrates how power relations can produce total obedience, to the point that congregants are no longer able to distinguish between authentic religious teaching and the discursive construction produced by the religious figure. The loss of congregants' critical attitude is clearly evident in the dialogue between Baiduri and her mother. The mother states that all of Walid's teachings must be correct and consistent with the Quran, Sunnah, and Hadith (*Bidaah*, 2025, Ep. 1). This statement demonstrates the existence of absolute conviction in the authority of the religious figure, without any attempt at independent verification. Congregants accept all of Walid's teachings as final truth, closing off the space for dialogue and critique. In this condition, the authority of the religious figure is no longer understood as a source of guidance but has become a center of truth that must not be questioned.

This phenomenon demonstrates that fanaticism in *Bidaah* is constructed through religious practice that is more emotional and dogmatic than rational and critical. The followers of Jihad Ummah carry out teachings based on respect, fear, and emotional conviction directed at Walid. This is evident when Hambali questions a ritual practice that has no basis in Islamic law, yet the congregants continue to defend

Walid on the grounds that they wish to receive the blessing of their mursyid (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 7). This response shows that loyalty to the group's leader has displaced the congregants' orientation from the pursuit of truth to absolute obedience toward a particular figure. Fanaticism is also evident in the congregants' acceptance of Walid's claim to be the Imam Mahdi. In one scene, Hambali's father states that Walid is the Imam Mahdi and that all congregants must remain loyal to him (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 4). This claim is accepted as a dogma that requires no debate. This condition demonstrates how religious authority can influence collective understandings of truth, allowing a particular figure to define acceptable beliefs and practices through the dissemination of religious narratives and interpretations.

Bidaah also depicts the destructive impact of fanaticism on individual lives and family relationships. The conflict between Hambali and his father illustrates how fanaticism can destroy family ties because of differing perspectives on religious teaching. Hambali's father views his son's critical thinking as a threat to the group's beliefs, while Hambali endeavors to restore religious practice to more authentic Islamic teachings. This situation demonstrates that fanaticism not only produces psychological dependence on religious figures, but can also create social exclusion of individuals who dare to think critically. This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Fitriyah & Hamdan (2025), who show that many viewers relate Bidaah to social realities in their communities, particularly with regard to religious groups that position their religious leader as an absolute figure. Bidaah is shown not merely to be fiction, but to open a space for reflection on similar phenomena in society.

Religious fanaticism in the digital age is increasingly intensified as individuals remain within information environments that reinforce their existing beliefs. This aligns with Andok's (2023) study on echo chambers and filter bubbles, which demonstrates that digital algorithms and user choices create homogeneous information communities, reinforce biases, and promote religious exclusivism. Such interactions amplify polarization and exclusive religious narratives. In this context, Bidaah functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium of social critique that encourages more rational, open, and critical religious engagement.

## **Soekarno's Islam Sontoloyo Critique of Religious Practices in the Drama Series Bidaah**

### ***Historical Roots and Substance of Islam Sontoloyo***

The concept of "Islam Sontoloyo" introduced by Soekarno emerged as a critique of religious practices that use religion to justify personal interests. The term "sontoloyo" in the Javanese language refers to something disordered, absurd, and

contrary to common sense. Soekarno employed this term to challenge a way of practicing religion that is formalistic, dogmatic, and devoid of humanitarian values (Soekarno, 2015). Soekarno emphasized the importance of reason and intellectual freedom in understanding religion. He criticized Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and patterns of religious education that are indoctrinatory, anti-critical, and closed to independent legal reasoning (*ijtihad*), because such approaches produce a passive, powerless community that merely imitates received authority (Sukardi, 2019).

The emergence of the Islam Sontoloyo concept was inseparable from Soekarno's deep unease about the phenomenon of religious figures exploiting the legitimation of religion for personal benefit. In his essay in the magazine *Pandji Islam* in 1940, Soekarno criticized a kiai who married his female students (*santriwati*) under a religious pretext. According to Soekarno, such a practice constituted an abuse of religion because Shari'a texts were used to justify actions that actually served personal desires and interests (Soekarno, 2015). In his writings on Islam Sontoloyo, Soekarno further highlighted the tendency of *fiqh* scholars to refuse to take initiative through their own reasoning in anticipating the development of the times. They even exploited the legitimacy of their jurisprudential school (*mazab*) for personal interests and the satisfaction of their own desires, legitimizing their actions through religious claims, including by introducing mystical elements whose truth could not be substantiated.

Substantively, the critique of Islam Sontoloyo encompasses several important aspects. First, it critiques the narrow and formalistic use of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Soekarno argued that some Muslims excessively position *fiqh* as the center of religion, whereas the essence of religiosity lies in the submission of the soul to God and in humanitarian values. Second, it critiques blind imitation (*taklid*) that eliminates critical thinking and closes the door of *ijtihad*. Third, it critiques excessive veneration of religious figures, which can corrupt monotheism (*tauhid*). Fourth, it advances the conception of Islam as a humanitarian religion that must embody social justice and civilizational progress. Fifth, it embraces the principle of Islam as Progress, which refers to the conviction that Islam should be capable of responding to changing times while preserving its fundamental values (Dani, 2021).

### ***Analysis of Islam Sontoloyo Applied to the Phenomena in the Drama Series Bidaah***

When Soekarno's Islam Sontoloyo critique is applied to the phenomena that emerge in *Bidaah*, a very strong connection becomes visible between Soekarno's critiques of past religious practice and the phenomenon of religious manipulation in the contemporary era. The series demonstrates that the problems Soekarno criticized

are not merely historical matters but constitute structural problems that recur continuously in the religious life of society. One of the most concrete manifestations of Islam Sontoloyo in *Bidaah* is the use of religion to justify personal interests. The practices of forced matchmaking and spiritual marriage carried out by Walid illustrate how religious texts and spiritual claims are used as tools of legitimation to control congregants. In one scene, Walid claims that the marriage is conducted under the direct guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (*Bidaah*, 2025, Ep. 2). This claim reveals how religion is no longer employed as a moral guide but has been transformed into an instrument for maintaining domination and personal interest. This condition aligns with Soekarno's critique of the tendency to justify any means through *fiqh*, in which religion is used to legitimize actions that actually contradict humanitarian values and principles of justice (Soekarno, 2015).

For Soekarno, *fiqh* that is interpreted rigidly could weaken the very spirit of Islam. In such a condition, religion is no longer understood as a living force that encourages renewal, but is reduced to a set of rules that constrains intellectual freedom. A society trapped in this pattern, in Soekarno's view, would lose its vitality, resembling the Islamic world of his time, which he described as "half dead" without fire, without spirit, and without the courage to soar freely like a garuda toward Levend Geloof is a living, dynamic Islam oriented toward progress (Soekarno, 2005). This critique was also reflected in his views on the model of *fiqh* education in traditional Islamic boarding schools, which he considered too archaic, out of step with the spirit of the times, inclined to constrain thought, and still separating religion from knowledge in a dichotomous fashion. As a result, *fiqh* taught in such traditional educational settings risked leaving students ill-prepared to adapt to social change, scientific development, and the needs of the age (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

Soekarno drew attention to the tendency to understand *fiqh* rigidly, as though its entire formulation were beyond touch or critique. For Soekarno, such a perspective was dangerous because it could cause religious teaching to be exploited by particular parties to justify personal interests and desires. Soekarno rejected a mode of religiosity that stopped at symbols, rituals, and outward displays of piety while injustice, oppression, and the abuse of power were left unchallenged. According to him, Islam should be a religion that promotes progress, justice, and the liberation of humankind, not a tool for maintaining practices that damage human dignity (Mawangir, 2016). For Soekarno, Islam was a religion of progress, as reflected in his conviction that "Islam is progress" is Islam must move forward, remain open to renewal, and not become trapped in the repetition of the past. A progressive Islam

does not mean erasing all of the old heritage but rather presenting something better, more mature, and more attuned to the needs of the age. Islam must therefore produce new thought and new creation, rather than simply reproducing old views without critique; it must be dynamic, rational, and progressive in addressing the problems of life (Soekarno, 2005).

Another phenomenon that reveals the relevance of the Islam Sontoloyo critique is the congregants' blind imitation (taqlid) of Walid. They accept all of their leader's teachings without critically examining the sources from which those teachings are claimed to derive. Baiduri's mother's statement that "all of Walid's teachings must be correct" illustrates the weakening of the congregants' critical capacity in interpreting religious teachings. (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 1). Even when Hambali questions practices that he considers inconsistent with the Quran and Hadith, the congregants still choose to obey their mursyid rather than pursue an independent search for truth. In Soekarno's view, conditions such as this constitute the gateway through which religious manipulation enters, because the community no longer dares to think critically and depends entirely on the authority of the religious figure (Soekarno, 2015). Soekarno criticized blind imitation as a form of religiosity that uncritically follows scholarly authority without the courage to exercise independent reasoning. In Soekarno's view, intellectual freedom and knowledge are essential for Muslims to overcome stagnation and to reinterpret religious practices that are no longer aligned with the spirit of progress (Sukardi, 2019).

Soekarno's critique of the excessive veneration of religious figures is also relevant to the cult of Walid in the Bidaah series. Walid is not only positioned as a religious leader, but is also believed to be the Imam Mahdi who must be completely obeyed (Bidaah, 2025, Ep. 4). This veneration demonstrates that the religious figure has been placed in a position virtually beyond the reach of criticism. Walid's claim to receive direct guidance from the Prophet Muhammad further reinforces his sacred standing in the eyes of his congregation. In Soekarno's perspective, practices of this kind risk corrupting monotheism because a human being is placed in a position that should belong only to God (Soekarno, 2015). Bidaah can therefore be understood as a medium of social critique that highlights the cult of leadership, the misuse of religious symbols, the domination of a single interpretation, and the blurring of the functions of Shari'a institutions such as marriage and family. This reading is consistent with the view of Fitriyah (2025), who argues that the series represents a

critique of the abuse of religious authority, the domination of a single interpretation, and religious practices that close off the space for rational thought.

Furthermore, *Bidaah* illustrates how religion can lose its humanitarian dimension. Women in the Jihad Ummah group are made objects of matchmaking and compelled to submit to group decisions without adequate freedom. Congregants are also conditioned to live in complete dependence on the sect's leader, causing them to lose the capacity for independent thought. This condition is contrary to Soekarno's vision of Islam as a religion of liberation, social justice, and humanity. For Soekarno, religion should liberate human beings from oppression, not serve as a tool of social and spiritual domination (Soekarno, 2005). Soekarno criticized the decline of Islam on the grounds that many believers merely inherited static cultural traditions while neglecting the essence of Islam as a force for liberation and progress. Accordingly, religious practices that restrict intellectual freedom, perpetuate blind imitation, and sustain structures of social oppression stand in clear contradiction to Soekarno's conception of Islam as Progress is a living and liberating Islam oriented toward human advancement (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

The characters of Baiduri and Hambali in *Bidaah* represent forms of resistance against the practices of Islam Sontoloyo. Baiduri is depicted as a figure who dares to question practices deemed irrational and inconsistent with the foundational values of Islam. Hambali, meanwhile, appears as a figure who endeavors to return religious practice to the Quran and Hadith in a more critical and rational manner. Both characters reflect the spirit of rethinking of Islam that Soekarno championed: the endeavor to understand religion in a more open, critical, and contextual manner without losing its spiritual values (Soekarno, 2005). Baiduri, who dares to question irrational and un-Islamic practices, can be read precisely as a manifestation of "intellectual freedom" and a rejection of anti-rationalism that Soekarno regarded as a disease afflicting the ummah. Islam must be understood through the freedom of the spirit, freedom of reason, and freedom of knowledge (Kurniawan et al., 2024). *Bidaah* teaches us to strengthen critical, rational, open, and dialogical religious literacy toward religious discourse, and demonstrates that religion can be misused when the community loses the capacity for independent thought and critical evaluation of teachings (I Wayan Salendra, 2024).

Ultimately, the phenomena in *Bidaah* demonstrate that religion can be transformed into an instrument of power and social manipulation when religious authority is excessively concentrated in a single figure. Walid uses religion not to cultivate the spiritual consciousness of his congregation, but to reinforce his

dominance over his followers. The popularity of Bidaah across various digital platforms illustrates that the critique of religious manipulation remains highly relevant in contemporary society. In this context, Bidaah may be read as a form of modern social critique that aligns with the spirit of Soekarno's Islam Sontoloyo, particularly in its rejection of manipulative and dogmatic religious practices that lack humanitarian values.

## **Conclusion**

This study analyzes the representation of religious practices in the drama series Bidaah through the perspective of Soekarno's Islam Sontoloyo. Based on the analysis presented above, several principal conclusions can be drawn. Bidaah represents diverse forms of deviant religious practice through the veneration of religious figures, congregational fanaticism, spiritual manipulation, and the instrumentalization of religion as a means of legitimating power. The character of Walid is depicted as a figure who builds absolute authority by exploiting religious symbols and claims in order to secure the total obedience of his followers. These practices illustrate how religion can be used not as a means of moral and spiritual cultivation, but as a tool of domination and social control over congregants.

Soekarno's concept of Islam Sontoloyo possesses strong relevance for reading the phenomena depicted in Bidaah. Soekarno's critiques of blind imitation, excessive veneration of religious figures, the misuse of fiqh for personal benefit, and the loss of humanitarian values in religious practice are clearly evident in various scenes of the series. The phenomena that Soekarno criticized as far back as 1940 continue to manifest in more complex forms in the modern era, particularly when religion is used to build influence, power, and social manipulation in the name of spirituality. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of the vision of Islam as Progress advanced by Soekarno as a foundation for building a rational, critical, and humanistic religious practice. For Soekarno, Islam must not be understood in a narrow, dogmatic, or anti-change manner, but must be capable of serving as a force that drives civilizational progress, the liberation of humankind, and the advancement of knowledge.

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