

Cultivating Reflective Islam

Ngaji Filsafat and Eclectic Religious Expressions among Urban Muslim Youth in Digitalizing Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates the growing popularity of *Ngaji Filsafat*, a phenomenon cultivating a reflective Islam that offers an alternative study group for young Muslims in Yogyakarta and beyond. This mosque-based gathering eschews conventional texts like the Qur'an, instead exploring ideas from thinkers both Muslim and non-Muslim, from Greek philosophers to contemporary intellectuals. Its rise presents an anomaly within the conservative-turn thesis, given its broad appeal and promotion of pluralist teachings. Drawing on observations and in-depth interviews with initiators and attendees, the study finds its appeal lies not in aspirations for heightened piety or religious activism. Rather, for urban Muslim youth, it functions as a space offering interpretive resources for navigating everyday challenges within a neoliberal context. These findings highlight the need for alternative frameworks, beyond piety-centered or conservative-pluralist paradigms, to understand diverse Islamic expressions in digitalizing post-New Order Indonesia. Furthermore, against scholarship emphasizing the state's coercive role in civic pluralism, this study illuminates how non-state actors mainstream pluralist Islamic engagements.

Keywords: *Ngaji Filsafat*, Muslim youth, civil Islam, conservative turn, digital media, Indonesia



Introduction

Studies on Islam in post–New Order Indonesia have long been dominated by the thesis of a “conservative turn” (Abdullah and Osman, 2018; Hamayotsu, 2014; Hasan, 2008; Hefner, 2019; Lindsey et al, 2023; Saat and Burhani, 2020; Sebastian et al., 2020; Qodir, 2025; van Bruinessen, 2013). Martin van Bruinessen argues that conservative Islam has become increasingly dominant in Indonesia’s public sphere, a development that contrasts sharply with the New Order period (1965–1998). Under the authoritarian New Order regime, the forms of Islam that were visible in public life tended to be tolerant and inclusive, a phenomenon that Robert Hefner (2000) conceptualized as “civil Islam”. By contrast, the conservative turn during Indonesia’s democratizing Reformasi era is generally identified with two major expressions of conservatism. First, there are practices of “active piety”, in which Muslims strictly adhere to the Qur’an and Sunnah (prophetic traditions) while remaining largely quietist in their political orientation, as exemplified by Salafi groups (Chaplin, 2018; Hasan, 2007; Howell, 2010; Iqbal, 2014; Rijal, 2025; Sunarwoto, 2021). Second, there are Muslims who seek to promote Islam beyond the personal and communal spheres so that it influences society at large or even the state. This latter expression is commonly associated with groups that pursue the implementation of Islam through political movements, either by employing violence, such as Laskar Jihad, or through non-violent means, such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) (Hasan, 2006; Hilmy, 2020; Muhtadi, 2009; Nurdin, 2015; Osman, 2018; Rijal, 2022; Ward, 2009).

In recent years, however, the conservative turn thesis has been increasingly questioned in light of socio-political developments since 2016. During this period of heightened political contestation, Islamist groups were able to mobilize what became the largest mass demonstrations in Indonesian history, gathering hundreds of thousands of participants (Ahyar, 2019; Hadiz, 2019; Lim, 2017; Miichi, 2019; Nuryanti, 2021; Osman, 2018). These demonstrations were directed against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), a Chinese-Christians politician who ran for governor of Jakarta in the 2017 gubernatorial election. Beyond his status as a double minority, Ahok was accused of defaming the Qur’an in one of his public speeches, an allegation that intensified religious polarization (Hosen, 2016; Peterson, 2020; Suryani and Rohman, 2025). Indonesian society became sharply divided into two opposing camps: those who framed the protests as a defense of Islam and those who upheld inclusive nationalism (Burhani, 2016; Duile, 2017; Nurfitriya, 2024; Soderborg and Muhtadi, 2023). In response, the government under President Joko Widodo adopted a hard-line stance by officially banning Islamist organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and the Front Pembela Islam (FPI) (Diprose et al, 2019; Fealy, 2020; Mietzner, 2018). At the same time, the state actively promoted moderate or wasathiyya Islam through governmental institutions and major Islamic mass organizations, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as a means of countering Islamist interpretations of Islam (Akmaliah et al, 2024; Anoraga, 2023; Hoesterey, 2021; 2023; Menchik, 2019; Nubowo, 2023; Rosyid and Anoraga, 2023; Schmidt, 2018; Sumiati and Nawawi, 2024).

Against this backdrop, one growing initiative that complicates the conservative turn

thesis in Indonesia is *Ngaji Filsafat*, a study circle that has gained popularity among urban Muslim youth at the grassroots level since 2013. This pengajian was initiated by the Masjid Jenderal Sudirman (MJS) committee and is delivered by Fahrudin Faiz, a lecturer at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, every Wednesday night at the mosque in Yogyakarta. In addition to its offline gatherings, *Ngaji Filsafat* is disseminated through various social media platforms, enabling its audience to extend far beyond the city of Yogyakarta. Unlike pengajian in general, which typically involve Qur'anic recitation or the study of classical Islamic texts (Pribadi, 2020; Weix, 1998), *Ngaji Filsafat*, as its name suggests, focuses on philosophical ideas and social theories drawn from a wide range of intellectual traditions, not limited to Muslim thinkers. Its success in attracting urban youth participation constitutes an anomaly amid prevailing trends of conservatism in Indonesia, particularly given that philosophy is often associated with deviance or misguidance, and intellectual Islamic activism has frequently been labeled heretical (Ali, 2005; Amin and Syarifah, 2021; Hasyim, 2015; Muzakki, 2007). Amid the state's recent tendencies toward repressive pluralism (Aspinall and Mietzner, 2019; Diprose et al., 2019; Fealy, 2020; Hadiz, 2017), this study also contributes by highlighting the involvement of non-state, grassroots actors in promoting pluralist Islamic engagements. Specifically, this study aims to analyze the factors underlying the popularity of *Ngaji Filsafat*.

This article argues that piety alone cannot be treated as a determining factor of a Muslim's Islamic orientation. In the case of *Ngaji Filsafat*, its ability to respond to the aspirations and frustrations of urban Muslim youth emerges as one of its primary sources of appeal. As a consequence, eclectic expressions of Islam can emerge and gain influence, including forms of Islam that are open and intellectually oriented, such as *Ngaji Filsafat*. In this respect, grassroots Muslims do not easily fit into the binary categories of civil Islam or conservative Islam. Rather, they tend to gravitate toward Islamic orientations that resonate with and address their everyday concerns. Nevertheless, *Ngaji Filsafat* has indirectly contributed to the mainstreaming of pluralist Islamic discourses in the public sphere, particularly through its extensive use of digital media.

Methodologically, this study draws on data collected not only from Fahrudin Faiz and the MJS committee but also from participants of *Ngaji Filsafat*, both offline and online, to examine the factors shaping its appeal. To this end, we conducted six months of participatory observation at the mosque until the end of 2022. In addition, we carried out in-depth interviews with various actors, including Faiz, members of the MJS committee, and participants of *Ngaji Filsafat*. In total, approximately twenty individuals were interviewed for this study.

The article is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the second section outlines the analytical framework for studying Muslims in Indonesia, beginning with a discussion of civil Islam and the conservative turn in contemporary Indonesia. It then examines the history of Masjid Jenderal Sudirman (MJS) and Faiz's intellectual profile in order to contextualize the emergence and development of *Ngaji Filsafat*. The third section analyzes the factors underlying the popularity of *Ngaji Filsafat*, focusing on Islamic legitimation,

the use of simple and relevant narratives, and its capacity to address youth anxiety. This is followed by a reflective discussion of the program's impact on Muslim youths' Islamic orientations. The article concludes by highlighting how youth engagement with everyday issues shapes Islamic orientations and, in turn, influences the diversity of Islamic expressions in post–New Order Indonesia.

Civil Islam, the Conservative Turn and Ambivalence in Digitalizing Post–New Order Indonesia

Scholarship on Islam and civic pluralism in Indonesia has been significantly shaped by Robert Hefner's (2000) concept of civil Islam. Hefner (2019 p. 7) argues that civil Islam rests on two main foundations: the presence of "exemplary individuals", including Muslim intellectuals, activists, and organizations, and the production of normative Islamic interpretations that legitimize pluralism. In the Indonesian case, figures such as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid and major organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) exemplified this model, particularly during and after the New Order period (Azca, 2021; Barton, 1997, 2014; Hasan, 2018). For Hefner, the compatibility between Islam and civic pluralism is sustained through religious legitimation and elite moral leadership.

However, Hefner's framework has been increasingly contested in the post–New Order era, marked by rising religious intolerance and the declining public influence of established Muslim intellectuals and organizations (Brown and Fauzia, 2019; Fealy, 2004; Hasan, 2006; Hefner, 2012). Scholars have highlighted the ambiguities and limitations of civil Islam promoted by Muhammadiyah and NU, arguing that their authority has been challenged by internal negotiations and Islamist groups (Akmaliyah, 2020; Brown, 2019; Zuhdi, 2018). This shift has given rise to the conservative turn thesis, which portrays Indonesian Islam as moving away from pluralism and toward more rigid religious orientations (Sebastian et al., 2020; van Bruinessen, 2013).

At the same time, the rise of digital media has transformed religious authority in ways not fully captured by either civil Islam or conservative-turn paradigms. The Internet has enabled the emergence of Muslim influencers who often lack formal religious training but gain authority through digital visibility, affective appeal, and algorithmic strategies (Akmaliyah, 2025; Nisa, 2018; Wai Weng, 2024). Yet recent anthropological and media studies caution against assuming heightened piety or ideological Islamization (Nisa, 2018; Slama and Barendregt, 2018; Soares and Osella, 2009). Instead, they highlight Muslim ambivalence where religious practices are negotiated alongside aspirations for wealth, popularity, and modern lifestyles (Jung et al, 2014; Kailani, 2020; Schielke, 2009).

This ambivalence suggests that Islamic legitimation alone is insufficient to explain contemporary religious influence, particularly online. Authority today depends not only on being "Islamic", but also on performance, emotional resonance, and relevance to everyday concerns (Bunt, 2024; Rozehnal, 2022; Pribadi, 2020; Sakai and Fauzia, 2014). In a sat-

urated digital environment, religious actors must compete for attention, making affective and pragmatic strategies as important as doctrinal grounding (Hasan and Anoraga, 2024; Juhri and Hariani, 2023; Maulana and Samaila, 2024). This condition calls for an analytical framework that moves beyond civil Islam and piety-focused or conservative-turn approaches and instead foregrounds everyday negotiations in shaping Islamic expressions in Indonesia.

Brief History of Masjid Jenderal Sudirman and *Ngaji Filsafat*

Mosques have long served as important loci of Muslim youth activism in Indonesia (Burhani, 2013; Chaplin, 2023; Hasan, 2016; Latief, 2010; Rosyad, 2007; Zuhri, 2013). During the New Order period, campus mosques in particular functioned as fertile ground for the development of campus Islam, providing spaces for Islamic engagement amid the authoritarian regime's repression of overt Islamist activism (Hasan, 2010; Liddle, 1996; Machmudi, 2008). Following the political liberalization of the Reformasi era, mosques increasingly became sites for more eclectic expressions of Islam, especially in major urban centers in Java where students from across Indonesia pursue higher education (Arifianto, 2019).

Masjid Jenderal Sudirman (MJS) is one such mosque. Built in 1974 and located in Sleman, Yogyakarta, a province widely known as a "city of education" due to its concentration of public and private universities, MJS has undergone significant transformations. In its early years, MJS was used as a gathering place and organizational base for radical Muslim activists of Darul Islam. However, the Darul Islam movement that operated from MJS did not persist for long, as it was eventually dismantled by state security forces. Following this period, the mosque's committee sought to reclaim MJS as a space for broader religious activities, gradually distancing it from its earlier association with radical Islamist mobilization.

Over time, MJS's image as a mosque closely tied to activist movements has increasingly faded from public perception. Under new leadership, efforts were made to reposition MJS as a religious space that is not aligned with either right-leaning Islamist traditions or left-oriented Islamic currents. This reorientation became particularly visible from 2013 onward, when MJS was chaired by Yaser Arafat, an alumnus of UIN Sunan Kalijaga. Since then, the mosque has introduced a range of distinctive programs that differentiate it from mosques more generally. These initiatives have been organized around three core orientations: spiritual, intellectual, and cultural, which were formally articulated as MJS's guiding framework in 2020.

Within the spiritual orientation, MJS has organized study sessions on classical mystical texts, such as *Tarjuman al-Asywaq* (The Interpreter of Desires) by Ibn 'Arabi and the *Rubā'īyyāt* (Quatrains) of Jalaluddin Rumi. In the cultural domain, MJS has hosted programs including *Sinau Mocopat* (learning traditional Javanese poetic chants), *Ngaji Serat Jawa* (study of Javanese classical manuscripts), *Zikir "Joget Sholawat Mataram"* (Mataram-style devotional dance), and *Ngaji Budaya Wayang* (study of shadow puppet traditions).

Meanwhile, the intellectual orientation has been expressed through initiatives such as *Ngaji Studi Qur'an* (Qur'anic studies) in a campus-style format and *Ngaji Pascakolonial* (post-colonial studies). Among these intellectual programs is *Ngaji Filsafat* (philosophy study circle), which has been held since 2013 and is delivered by Fahrudin Faiz, a lecturer at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, every Wednesday night after the evening prayer.

Most MJS programs are not confined to offline activities within the mosque. The committee regularly uploads recordings of completed programs to its official YouTube channel, MJS Channel, which currently has approximately 359,000 subscribers. Full-length videos of mosque-based study sessions are centrally archived and disseminated through this channel. In addition, MJS manages another official YouTube account, *Ngaji Filsafat Official*. However, this latter channel primarily features shortened clips or excerpts from *Ngaji Filsafat*, while the complete recordings remain available on MJS Channel.

Beyond YouTube, MJS maintains an official website (mjscolombo.com) as well as social media accounts on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. These digital platforms are generally used to circulate study schedules, promotional materials, and short video excerpts, as well as to share links directing audiences to the full-length recordings hosted on MJS Channel. In this sense, MJS's broader digital ecosystem functions primarily as a dissemination network that amplifies mosque activities, rather than as independent repositories of complete program content. Despite the availability and promotion of various programs across MJS's offline and online platforms, only one initiative has managed to capture sustained attention from a wider public, both on-site and digitally which is *Ngaji Filsafat*.

Fahrudin Faiz and *Ngaji Filsafat*

Ngaji Filsafat is the most popular program at Masjid Jenderal Sudirman and has been running for hundreds of sessions since 2015. In its early stages, however, *Ngaji Filsafat* was not the product of careful long-term planning. Rather, the MJS committee initially sought to fill a gap in the mosque's activities by introducing a program that differed from conventional mosque-based study circles. There was no intention to develop *Ngaji Filsafat* into the serialized program it has since become. When the sessions were first held, attendance was limited to around 10–20 participants. Over time, participation increased significantly, to the point that attendees now frequently exceed the mosque's physical capacity and spill into its surrounding areas.

In *Ngaji Filsafat*, Faiz typically selects a broad theme to be explored over the course of one month. Each weekly session is then devoted to a particular thinker or conceptual perspective related to that theme. In a given month, participants are thus exposed to approximately four different intellectual traditions or figures. For instance, in a series on "happiness", Faiz examined the concept through the perspectives of Plato, al-Farabi, al-Ghazali, and Ki Ageng Suryomentaram. These figures represent a deliberate juxtaposition of Western philosophy, Islamic intellectual traditions, and indigenous Javanese thought.

The dialogical presentation of diverse intellectual perspectives constitutes one of the defining features of *Ngaji Filsafat*. Rather than treating philosophical ideas in isolation, Faiz actively places them in conversation with Islamic sources and everyday moral experience. For example, when explaining Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, he draws on a hadith describing how the heart becomes gradually darkened through repeated sinful acts, thereby illustrating how dispositions are formed through habituated practice. This pedagogical style reflects Faiz's background as a lecturer at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, an institution that emphasizes multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches to Islamic studies (Abdullah, 2014). His intellectual orientation was further shaped by his experience as an assistant to Amin Abdullah, who played a central role in popularizing this epistemological framework within Indonesian Islamic higher education.

Faiz explicitly frames this approach in relation to Seyyed Hossein Nasr's notion of "passing over", which refers to the practice of seeking truth by engaging seriously with multiple intellectual and religious traditions. From this perspective, even Muslims are encouraged to explore the wisdom embedded in non-Muslim cultures, religions, and systems of thought (Nasr, 1989; see also Hidayat, 2023). This philosophical orientation has clearly influenced both Faiz's teaching style and the intellectual scope of *Ngaji Filsafat*. As a result, the program engages not only with convergent traditions but also with contrasting and even opposing perspectives, including atheism and theism, communism and capitalism, as well as religious traditions such as Shinto in Japan and Taoism in China. According to Faiz, familiarity with this diversity of thought is intellectually empowering and can function as a resource to be mobilized in appropriate social and ethical contexts.

In this sense, *Ngaji Filsafat* can be considered anti-mainstream within the landscape of contemporary Indonesian Islam. For many conservative Muslims, philosophy is often perceived as incompatible with religious faith, let alone as a subject appropriate for discussion within a mosque. Yet, when situated within a longer historical trajectory, the content of *Ngaji Filsafat* resonates with earlier forms of Indonesian Muslim intellectualism that gained prominence during the New Order period. One notable example is Nurcholish Madjid's Paramadina Foundation, which offered executive-style classes on Islam to Jakarta's urban Muslim middle class (Bakti, 2004; Hasan, 2009). Faiz himself has acknowledged this continuity, jokingly remarking that while the intellectual substance may be similar, the context and remuneration differ. *Ngaji Filsafat* is held in a mosque, whereas Cak Nur's classes were conducted in five-star hotels.

Finally, in the context of what Azhar Ibrahim (2020) describes as the condition of Muslim intellectuals as "authoritative but without authority", *Ngaji Filsafat* represents a compelling case for further scholarly attention. Amid the strengthening of conservative Islamic orientations in the post-New Order era, the sustained popularity of a philosophy-based study circle that openly embraces intellectual plurality is striking. Rather than being rejected, this pluralist and reflective approach has been embraced by urban Muslim youth, suggesting the presence of alternative Islamic sensibilities that coexist with, and at times quietly challenge, dominant narratives of conservatism in contemporary Indonesia.

Muslim Youth and the Appeal of *Ngaji Filsafat*

Ngaji Filsafat, held every Wednesday evening at Masjid Jenderal Sudirman (MJS), has attracted an increasingly wide audience, both online and offline. Participation is dominated by young people. More than 250 attendees, men and women alike, regularly fill the mosque's prayer hall as well as its front courtyard. The participants are not limited to students from nearby universities. They also include individuals from diverse occupational backgrounds, such as market traders, architectural surveyors, and delivery service entrepreneurs. Beyond its growing offline presence, *Ngaji Filsafat* also reaches a much larger audience online. The sessions are rebroadcast every Sunday via the MJS Channel on YouTube and have been followed by millions of viewers over the years.

This section argues that the active participation of young people in *Ngaji Filsafat* does not necessarily render them more pious, more intellectual, or fully resolved in terms of what they seek. Rather, *Ngaji Filsafat* functions as a comfortable and accessible space that offers multiple Islamic interpretations for addressing everyday concerns, particularly those experienced by young people navigating the transition to adulthood in contemporary Indonesia.

Islamic Legitimation

Ngaji Filsafat is not simply a forum for the study of philosophy in a narrow or abstract sense. As several participants emphasized, the program simultaneously engages religious teachings, particularly Sufism. According to Hendra and Hamami, *Ngaji Filsafat* cannot be understood as philosophy detached from Islam. Hendra explained:

Yes, it's not limited to philosophy. If you look at it from the perspective of Sufism, it really goes deeply into Sufism. The teachings are basically the same, almost the same, just using different terms.

Similarly, Hamami noted:

The philosophy delivered by Faiz is closely related to the world of Sufism. So when a theme is discussed, it always connects to philosophical traditions that also exist within the Islamic world.

This perception is reinforced by other participants such as Bayu, a master's student in psychology and Irfan, who both emphasized the rational quality of the religious discourse conveyed by Faiz. Bayu remarked, "With Faiz, religion can be rationalized and made relevant to contemporary developments." Irfan similarly observed, "People usually think philosophy is the opposite of religion. Faiz doesn't just combine them, he shows that you can be religious with logic. Religion is not presented merely as dogma."

These reflections point to Islamic legitimation as a crucial factor in the appeal of *Ngaji Filsafat*. As discussed earlier, Faiz frequently connects philosophical ideas, whether derived from Muslim or non-Muslim thinkers, to Qur'anic verses or prophetic traditions. As a result, participants perceive the messages conveyed in *Ngaji Filsafat* as being compatible with Islamic teachings. This framing effectively counters conservative suspicions that phi-

losophy is misleading or dangerous for Muslims. Moreover, the emphasis on rational explanation resonates strongly with the educational background of urban Muslim youth in Yogyakarta, many of whom have been trained in academic and analytical modes of thinking.

Simple and Relevant Narratives

Second, beyond assumptions regarding the substance of *Ngaji Filsafat* itself, many young participants are drawn to the program because of the pedagogical style of Faiz. Participants consistently emphasized Faiz's ability to convey complex ideas in a casual, unhurried, and accessible manner. His use of simple language, clear structure, practical examples, and everyday analogies was repeatedly highlighted as making philosophical discussions comprehensible to a broad audience. This perception was articulated by our several informants.

Hendra, for instance, noted:

The language is easy. There is no judgment. Usually, people say, "this is not allowed, that is not allowed." Here, the way of thinking is built slowly. The construction of ideas is gradual. It starts from the basics and moves step by step. The explanations are slow but clear, and the analogies are direct. So even ordinary people can understand.

Similarly, Anam emphasized the practical and relatable nature of Faiz's delivery:

The way it is delivered really resonates with me. First, the teaching is easy to catch. The language is easy to understand, and the analogies are simple, not grand or abstract. The theory feels very close to our daily lives, very practical, and easy to grasp.

Irfan likewise remarked that "Faiz explains things in language that is easy to understand and coherent". Hamami echoed this view, stating, "His delivery is relaxed and casual, and because of that, the material becomes even easier to understand." Wahyudi offered a similar assessment: "Even though the lecture is about philosophy, it is easy to digest and not delivered in a heavy or intimidating way".

These accounts suggest that simplicity and relevance function as a key mediating factor in the appeal of *Ngaji Filsafat*. Rather than diluting intellectual content, Faiz's pedagogical approach translates complex philosophical ideas into forms that feel approachable and relevant. This style lowers the cognitive and symbolic barriers often associated with philosophy, enabling urban Muslim youth, many of whom may lack formal training in philosophy, to engage confidently with abstract concepts without feeling excluded or intimidated.

Answering Youths' Everyday Issues

The alignment between Faiz's teachings and the everyday struggles of young Muslims constitutes one of the central attractions of *Ngaji Filsafat*. Faiz frequently illustrates philosophical concepts through simple yet resonant examples. For instance, he suggests that during periods of struggle, young people may find existentialist thought, such as that of Martin Heidegger, useful for grappling with anxiety, choice, and responsibility. Conversely,

when individuals find themselves waiting for outcomes beyond their control, Faiz emphasizes a Sufi orientation that diminishes excessive selfhood and affirms the absoluteness of God. In conveying these ideas, he consistently draws on situations familiar to his audience, including student life in boarding houses, romantic relationships, and other challenges faced by urban youth in Indonesia.

Many informants reported that they attended *Ngaji Filsafat* while experiencing emotional distress, often related to family, romantic relationships, or employment. Such conditions are closely tied to the structural pressures young people face during their transition to adulthood, particularly in a neoliberal socio-economic context (Anoraga and Sakai, 2023; Bayat and Herrera, 2010; Rakhmani and Utomo, 2023). Youth are expected to secure stable livelihoods while simultaneously meeting social expectations surrounding marriage, which is widely regarded as a marker of adulthood (Robinson, 2015). As Pam Nilan (2008) notes, marriage in Indonesia is often associated with demonstrable competencies in faith, family responsibility, and financial stability, including home ownership and access to private transportation. These intersecting pressures generate heightened psychological vulnerability, prompting young people to seek spaces that can provide both meaning and emotional relief.

Hendra, a long-time participant from Magetan, East Java, illustrates this dynamic vividly. He first encountered *Ngaji Filsafat* in 2015 through short video clips circulated on Instagram, which he discovered via his then-girlfriend. However, he began attending in-person sessions at MJS only in January 2017, shortly after his marriage was cancelled in December 2016. This personal crisis led him to search for something that could restore a sense of calm and direction. Shortly after he began attending *Ngaji Filsafat*, the theme for February 2017 centered on love, particularly the Philosophy of Love through the works of Jalaluddin Rumi. Hendra described this encounter as profoundly meaningful, stating:

Yes, Jalaluddin Rumi, it's really complete. Very deep and complex. You learn a lot here. At that time, the theme was love, but divine love. It doesn't stop at human love. It turns out there is something beyond that, divine love. And that became an escape. You can't stay sad.

For Hendra, *Ngaji Filsafat* functioned as an emotional refuge. As he put it, "At the beginning, participating in *Ngaji Filsafat* was really like an escape."

A similar connection between personal crisis and the appeal of *Ngaji Filsafat* was expressed by Aji, a seasoning market trader. He explained that the program resonated deeply with his experiences, noting, "When I listened to this study, it felt very connected to my own life." At the time, Aji was facing a convergence of severe family and romantic problems, including his father's substantial debt, his parents' impending divorce, his mother's victimization by a shaman, and the termination of a romantic relationship. Overwhelmed by these circumstances, he experienced confusion and even suicidal thoughts. Although he initially sought solace through various religious study circles, none of them felt appropriate or helpful.

Aji's eventual encounter with *Ngaji Filsafat* occurred through a friend at the market

who recommended a YouTube video of Faiz discussing Stoicism. At first, Aji found the material difficult and unappealing, describing it as too heavy. However, over time, as he repeatedly listened to *Ngaji Filsafat* recordings on the MJS Channel, often before going to sleep, and received assistance from his friend in understanding the discussions, his interest gradually deepened. By mid-2022, this sustained engagement motivated him to attend *Ngaji Filsafat* sessions in person.

These narratives suggest that *Ngaji Filsafat* operates as a meaningful affective space for young Muslims experiencing anxiety and uncertainty. Rather than offering doctrinal prescriptions or moral judgments, the program provides interpretive resources through which participants can reframe personal crises, making it particularly resonant for youth navigating the precarious conditions of contemporary adulthood.

Ngaji Filsafat and Muslim Youths' Religious Ambivalence

Although the content and delivery of *Ngaji Filsafat* successfully attract young people to participate, engagement with the program does not imply uncritical acceptance of everything conveyed by Faiz. Participants do not necessarily align themselves fully with *Ngaji Filsafat*, nor do they automatically reorient their religious understanding in a comprehensive or permanent way. Participation also does not guarantee the immediate resolution of the personal problems that initially brought them to the forum.

The experiences of Anam and Bayu illustrate this selective mode of engagement. After regularly attending *Ngaji Filsafat*, neither abandoned the religious study circles they had previously attended. They continue to participate intermittently in study sessions at Salafi-oriented mosques. For Bayu, sustained participation in multiple study circles is a deliberate strategy to broaden his intellectual and religious horizons. As he explained, “We don’t need to move orientations; we just need to expand and broaden our perspectives.” Similarly, Anam emphasized that religious learning should not be confined to a single forum. He remarked, “Studying religion shouldn’t be selective. We need to filter what we need for our lives, that’s what we look for.”

Rather than signaling a shift from one religious orientation to another, participation in *Ngaji Filsafat* appears to foster a more flexible and reflective mode of religiosity. Both Anam and Bayu described themselves as less rigid than before, particularly in moving away from a narrowly legalistic focus on halal (permissible) and haram (forbidden). They now approach religious understanding and practice in a more rational and contextual manner. For Anam, this change began after attending a session of *Ngaji Filsafat* on the philosopher Diogenes, while for Bayu it followed a session on Layla and Majnun.

Importantly, becoming less hostile toward philosophy does not necessarily translate into a sustained interest in philosophy as an academic discipline. Most informants in this study do not pursue independent study of philosophy through books, academic articles, or formal philosophical training. Instead, their engagement is largely confined to philosophy as mediated through Faiz’s lectures. In other words, participants tend to appreciate “Faiz’s philosophy” rather than philosophy in a broader scholarly sense.

This pattern cannot be separated from the way *Ngaji Filsafat* is positioned by Faiz himself. On many occasions, both implicitly and explicitly, Faiz frames *Ngaji Filsafat* as an “oasis” that offers multiple intellectual options rather than a prescriptive framework. Participants are encouraged to take what resonates with them and to leave aside what does not. This open-ended positioning enables young people to navigate religious and philosophical ideas selectively, using them as resources to address specific concerns in both their religious lives and everyday experiences. This aligns with contemporary scholarship that conceptualizes Muslims as active subjects who engage with and negotiate religious doctrines (Hosen, 2008; Jung et al, 2014; Kailani, 2020; Slama and Barendregt, 2018). It is precisely this plurality of choices and the absence of doctrinal closure that have contributed to the growing popularity of *Ngaji Filsafat*. In the context of repressive pluralism and conservative Islamic discourses in the public sphere, *Ngaji Filsafat* has emerged as an alternative mode of Islamic engagement that resonates strongly with urban Muslim youth.

Conclusion

This article has examined the eclectic religious orientations of urban Muslim youth through the case of *Ngaji Filsafat*, a philosophy-based study circle delivered by Fahrudin Faiz at Masjid Jenderal Sudirman (MJS). We demonstrate that urban Muslim youths’ engagement with particular Islamic teachings or expressions cannot be reduced to doctrinal binaries of right and wrong, orthodox and deviant, or civil and conservative. Instead, their religious interests emerge from a complex interplay of intellectual curiosity, emotional needs, educational background, life-stage challenges and reflective Islam. *Ngaji Filsafat* offers a compelling case for a program that openly engages diverse, and at times non-Islamic, philosophical traditions, which has gained remarkable popularity among urban Muslim youth, both offline and online, despite prevailing conservative discourses that often frame philosophy as misleading or un-Islamic.

The analysis has identified several interrelated factors that underpin the appeal of *Ngaji Filsafat*. First, Faiz’s consistent effort to connect philosophical ideas with Islamic teachings, particularly through Qur’anic verses, hadith, and Sufi traditions, provides a form of Islamic legitimation that renders philosophy acceptable to young Muslims. The logical and rational framing of religious ideas also resonates strongly with participants’ educational trajectories, most of whom are university students accustomed to analytical modes of reasoning. Second, Faiz’s pedagogical style, characterized by clarity, simplicity, emotional attunement, and the use of everyday examples, lowers the symbolic and intellectual barriers often associated with philosophy. Finally, the themes discussed in *Ngaji Filsafat* directly address the anxieties and uncertainties faced by urban Muslim youth as they navigate issues of love, family, work, and selfhood during their transition to adulthood. Taken together, these factors help explain the sustained popularity of *Ngaji Filsafat* in contemporary Indonesia.

These findings suggest that urban Muslim youth are not solely drawn to religious expressions characterized by active piety or Islamic political activism. As Bayat and Herrera

(2010 p. 5) highlight, “There is more to the lives of Muslim youth . . . than mere religiosity, conservative cultural politics, and extremism.” This study shows that Muslim youths’ religious engagements are deeply shaped by everyday concerns and existential questions accompanying their life-stage transitions. *Ngaji Filsafat* provides a form of agency through which young people negotiate these challenges by selectively engaging with a plurality of ideas mediated to them both online and offline. These ideas are simultaneously logical, religiously resonant, and emotionally supportive, and align with their class and educational backgrounds. In this sense, participants show that religious meanings are actively interpreted and reconfigured in specific social contexts and personal needs.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that youth status, particularly the precarious transition to adulthood, plays a crucial role in shaping religious orientation. Islamic outreach that can address the affective, intellectual, and everyday anxieties faced by youth, as exemplified by *Ngaji Filsafat*, is therefore more likely to gain traction among young people who are active actors in digital media. In doing so, such initiatives contribute to the diversification of Islamic expressions and complicate the dominant narratives of civil Islam (Hefner, 2000) and conservative turn (van Bruinessen, 2013) in the post-New Order Indonesia.

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Declaration of AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT for language proofreading and assistance with referencing. All content generated or modified using this tool was reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final version of the article.

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