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The Boundaries of Legitimate Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Authority, Pluralism, and the Politics of Interpretation

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines how Islamic intellectual tradition distinguishes legitimate knowledge from mere opinion and how this distinction regulates interpretive authority, intellectual pluralism, and the boundaries of interpretation. It addresses the contemporary tension between unrestricted interpretive plurality and monopolistic claims to religious authority.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs conceptual-historical textual analysis of classical Sunni legal and theological sources alongside contemporary scholarship on knowledge, authority, and tradition. Particular attention is given to intellectual contributions associated with the Malaysian and ISTAC traditions, especially Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, Osman Bakar, and Imtiyaz Yusuf. **Findings** – The study demonstrates that the Islamic intellectual tradition neither endorses unrestricted interpretive pluralism nor permits the absolute closure of meaning. Instead, it accommodates principled plurality grounded in revelation, methodological discipline, scholarly validation, and ethical accountability. Contemporary interpretive disputes become particularly difficult when interpretive freedom is detached from epistemic discipline or when epistemic authority is conflated with political power. To address this tension, the study develops a four-layer model of legitimate knowledge that integrates revelation, methodological competence, scholarly validation, and ethical responsibility. **Research implications/limitations** – The proposed framework provides a conceptual basis for distinguishing legitimate intellectual diversity from epistemic relativism and interpretive dissolution. However, its conceptual and text-based design requires further testing through empirical studies of contemporary Muslim scholarly and educational institutions.

Originality/value – The article contributes a systematic model of legitimate knowledge that preserves juristic and intellectual plurality while maintaining the truth claims, methodological discipline, and ethical accountability central to Islamic reasoning. It offers an alternative to both anti-pluralist rigidity and unrestricted relativism.

Keywords: Islamic epistemology; authority; pluralism; interpretation; legitimate knowledge; ISTAC.

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Introduction

Questions of who may speak authoritatively in the name of Islam and by what criteria such authority may be recognised have never been peripheral to the Islamic intellectual tradition. They stand close to its heart because the tradition did not treat knowledge as a merely individual possession or a neutral accumulation of information. Knowledge was understood as normatively charged, hierarchically ordered, and ethically consequential. To ask what counts as legitimate knowledge, therefore, is simultaneously to ask how truth is known, who may interpret the sources of religion, how disagreement is regulated, and where the limits of pluralism lie. These questions have acquired new urgency in modern settings, but their underlying grammar is deeply classical [2].

Modern scholarship often frames Islamic debates over authority in one of two insufficient ways. The first treats authority primarily as a sociological or political problem: a contest over institutions, state regulation, charisma, social movements, and public legitimacy. The second treats plurality chiefly as a normative demand of late modernity, asking whether Islam can accommodate diversity, toleration, and coexistence on terms acceptable to contemporary liberal discourse. Both perspectives illuminate important dimensions of the problem, but neither by itself captures the inner epistemic logic through which Islamic thought has historically differentiated between valid diversity and illegitimate innovation, between disciplined interpretation and arbitrary opinion, between recognition of disagreement and dissolution of normative truth. In other words, the issue is not only *who* speaks for Islam, but also *what sort of knowledge* may rightly claim to do so [3].

This distinction becomes clearer when one compares contemporary debates with earlier Sunni juristic and theological practice. Classical scholars disagreed often and sometimes sharply, yet that plurality did not imply epistemic anarchy. The tradition developed categories through which difference could be situated: decisive and speculative evidence, fundamentals and branches, consensus and *ijtihād*, qualified interpretation and blameworthy conjecture. Diversity was neither denied nor absolutised. It was disciplined. The existence of multiple *madhāhib*, competing legal opinions, and varied theological formulations shows that Islamic thought long recognised interpretive multiplicity. Yet this multiplicity was housed within what may be called an architecture of legitimacy: shared commitments to revelation, language, legal method, scholarly transmission, and moral responsibility [4].

The present article arises from that problem. While recent work, including a forthcoming study co-authored with Imtiyaz Yusuf, has examined the transformation of religious authority under digital conditions, the present

inquiry deliberately shifts the focus from media disruption to epistemological foundations [5]. Its main concern is not the technological distribution of authority, but the normative boundaries within which authoritative knowledge may be recognised in Islamic thought. The argument advanced here is that Islamic tradition affirms a form of principled pluralism but does so within bounded epistemic and ethical structures. These structures are not reducible to state control, majoritarian feeling, or individual authenticity. They are instead anchored in revelatory normativity, disciplined interpretive method, communal validation by qualified scholars, and public ethical accountability.

The article pursues four objectives. First, it reconstructs the classical architecture through which legitimate knowledge was distinguished from mere assertion. Secondly, it clarifies how plurality was historically permitted in some domains and tightly restricted in others. Thirdly, it analyses how modern debates over interpretation are shaped by political and institutional forces that often distort the older distinction between epistemic authority and coercive power. Fourthly, it argues that the Malaysian and ISTAC-linked intellectual tradition – particularly in the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, Osman Bakar, and Imtiyaz Yusuf – offers a contemporary vocabulary for preserving diversity without relativism and authority without authoritarianism [6].

The thesis of the study may be stated succinctly. Legitimate knowledge in Islamic thought is not simply that which is sincerely proposed, institutionally powerful, or socially widespread. It is that which remains accountable to revelation, proceeds through intelligible and disciplined methods, is tested within qualified interpretive communities, and manifests ethical responsibility toward persons and the common good.

Such a conception allows for juristic plurality, civilisational encounter, and reasoned reform, but it also rejects two opposing reductions: the reduction of truth to sheer power and the reduction of interpretation to unrestricted individual choice. The paper thus aims to contribute both to the study of Islamic epistemology and to current debates about the future of authority, pluralism, and intellectual responsibility in Muslim thought.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Legitimate Knowledge between ‘*Ilm*, *Ḥaqq*, and *Ḥujjah*

A useful point of departure lies in the conceptual universe of the Islamic tradition itself. The Arabic term *‘ilm* exceeds the modern sense of information. It implies warranted knowledge, intelligibility, and often moral seriousness. The Qur’ān repeatedly differentiates between those who know and those who do not, directs the ignorant to ask the people of remembrance, and warns against speaking about God without knowledge (Qur’ān 16:43; 39:9; 7:33). In this scriptural horizon, epistemology is already tied to authority and moral restraint. Knowledge is not democratically flattened into opinion; nor is authority detached from learning. The normative distinction precedes later institutional elaboration [7].

Closely allied to *‘ilm* are *ḥaqq* and *ḥujjah*. The first points to truth, rightness, or that which is due; the second suggests proof, authoritative argument, or a binding demonstration. Together they indicate that knowledge in Islam is not merely descriptive but normatively weighted. A claim becomes legitimate not because it is uttered by a passionate believer, but because it possesses a relation to truth and can be defended through recognised evidentiary and methodological procedures. This is why legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) emerged not only as a science of rules but as a discipline for determining what counts as evidence, how texts signify, who may reason from them, and under what conditions plurality of conclusions is tolerable [8].

The classical jurists were therefore not simply guardians of law. They were custodians of an epistemic order. Al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Risālah* is a paradigmatic example because it is concerned less with isolated rulings than with the architecture of valid inference: the relation of Qur’ān to Sunnah, the value of language, the nature of consensus, and the scope of analogical reasoning. What emerges from such works is a refusal of interpretive improvisation. The law may generate multiple opinions, but those opinions must arise from evidence and method rather than from desire, partisanship, or rhetorical force [9].

The same point is visible in the scholarly literature on adab and the ethics of learning. Al-Ghazālī’s treatment of knowledge in the opening book of the *Iḥyā’* and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s discussions of the jurist and student alike insist that learning is inseparable from moral discipline, humility, proper intention, and the ordering of knowledge according to its proper rank. That ordering is not a decorative concern. It prevents the inversion whereby secondary questions displace foundational ones, polemical excitement outruns careful reasoning, or the ambitious but unqualified usurp the function of those properly trained. In

this sense, legitimate knowledge is at once substantive and ethical: right content must be joined to proper formation [10].

This epistemic-moral nexus is especially important for the present study because it clarifies why the problem of legitimate knowledge cannot be solved by appealing either to brute textualism or to institutional monopoly alone. A text without method does not yield trustworthy interpretation, and an institution without adab does not guarantee truth. The tradition required both epistemic competence and moral fitness. It also recognised that evidence itself appears in different grades. Not every text is equally decisive, not every domain is equally open to contestation, and not every disagreement belongs to the same order. The boundary problem is thus internal to the structure of Islamic reasoning itself.

Authority, Plurality, and the Politics of Interpretation

Recent scholarship has enriched these classical insights by exploring the social and political dimensions of tradition. Talal Asad's influential account of Islam as a discursive tradition redirected attention from essentialist definitions of Islam toward the historically embodied practices through which authoritative argument is transmitted, contested, and reworked [11]. The significance of this move lies in its refusal to detach doctrine from lived authority. A tradition is not merely a set of propositions. It is a continuing argument over correct practice oriented toward formative texts, historical exemplars, and communal procedures of recognition. This helps explain how plurality can exist without abolishing normativity: debates occur within a discursive field already shaped by transmitted criteria.

Yet Asad's framework, helpful as it is, does not by itself answer the normative question of which interpretations should count as legitimate. For that, one requires a more explicitly internal account of evidence, method, and moral responsibility. Wael Hallaq's work on Islamic law is especially valuable here because it shows that authority in the pre-modern legal tradition was neither atomised nor centralised into a single sovereign institution. It was distributed across juristic communities, scholarly lineages, and procedures of argument that made continuity and change possible without severing the law from its inherited epistemic forms [12]. Authority, on this view, is not identical with command. It is an achieved credibility rooted in discipline, continuity, and communal recognition.

Khaled Abou El Fadl adds a further dimension by analysing the moral pathology of authoritarian interpretation. His critique is not directed against authority as such but against the usurpation of divine speech by interpreters who collapse their own preferences into the will of God. Legitimate interpretation, in

his account, requires honesty, comprehensiveness, self-restraint, and a disciplined awareness of the gap between finite human judgement and divine omniscience [13]. This is deeply relevant to the problem of legitimate knowledge because it shows that epistemic validity cannot be reduced to technical competence alone. Authoritative interpretation must also be ethically accountable.

The question of pluralism enters at this point. Islamic thought clearly accommodates a range of forms of diversity: multiple legal schools, variant judgments in matters of speculation, and political coexistence with religious others. But this plurality is not equivalent to modern epistemic relativism. Kamali, Abdulaziz Sachedina, and Andrew March – despite their differences – each show that Islamic resources for tolerance, citizenship, and peaceful coexistence are most persuasive when they are grounded in the internal language of Islamic ethics and jurisprudence rather than imposed as external tests of acceptability [14]. The challenge, however, is to articulate a pluralism that neither erases doctrinal differences nor converts every difference into an incommensurable truth-claim.

The politics of interpretation complicates this challenge. Modern states, ideological movements, transnational networks, and academic discourses all attempt to define what counts as “authentic” Islam. This is why the present article uses the phrase “politics of interpretation” not to deny truth, but to recognise that interpretation is always embedded within structures of power, institutional access, and discursive competition. The central question is whether such politics are ordered by valid epistemic criteria or whether they overwhelm them. When the latter occurs, institutions become instruments of coercive doctrinal control, while at the opposite extreme interpretive individualism dissolves the very idea of scholarly responsibility. The task of the present study is to think beyond this binary.

Method, Scope, and Corpus

Methodologically, this article is a conceptual-historical study based on close textual reading rather than a sociological survey or legal doctrinal catalogue. It focuses primarily on Sunni intellectual tradition because the categories of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *ijtihād*, *taqlīd*, consensus, and juristic plurality there provide a clear framework for analysing the epistemic problem. The inquiry is, however, not restricted to legal theory narrowly understood. It also draws on works of theology, adab, education, and civilisational thought because the legitimacy of knowledge in Islam has never been confined to jurisprudence alone [15].

The sources were selected according to three related criteria. First, the classical texts included here are works that shaped Sunni discussions of evidence, interpretive competence, scholarly formation, disagreement, and the ethical ordering of knowledge. Secondly, the contemporary sources were selected because they address authority, tradition, pluralism, public reason, and the modern politics of interpretation in ways directly relevant to the article's central question. Thirdly, the Malaysian and ISTAC-related materials were chosen because they provide a contemporary Muslim intellectual vocabulary for reconnecting classical epistemology with educational reform, civilisational dialogue, and plural public life.

The analytical procedure follows four steps. It first reconstructs the internal categories by which Islamic thought distinguishes knowledge from opinion and disciplined interpretation from arbitrary assertion. It then compares how those categories function across legal, theological, ethical, and institutional contexts. Thirdly, it identifies recurring distortions produced when authority is reduced either to coercive power or to unbounded individual preference. Finally, it synthesises these findings into the four-layer model proposed in the article. The model is therefore not imposed externally on the sources; it is an analytical reconstruction of patterns already present across the textual corpus.

The emphasis on Malaysian and ISTAC-linked scholarship is deliberate rather than regionalist. It reflects the importance of a non-Arab, postcolonial, and internationally engaged Muslim intellectual tradition that has addressed the crisis of knowledge, adab, pluralism, and civilisational encounter without abandoning the epistemic categories of Islam. This focus allows the article to connect classical Sunni sources with contemporary debates in Southeast Asia, global Islamic higher education, interreligious relations, and transnational Muslim public reasoning.

The primary textual field includes al-Shāfi'ī, al-Ghazālī, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Ibn Taymiyyah, and al-Qarāfī, each of whom helps clarify a different aspect of legitimate knowledge: evidentiary method, ethics of learning, scholarly qualification, causes of juristic disagreement, and the classification of legal distinctions [16]. These are placed in conversation with contemporary scholarship by Asad, Hallaq, Abou El Fadl, Anjum, Kamali, Sachedina, and March. The article also gives particular weight to Malaysian and ISTAC-related thinkers because the current question is not merely classical-historical. It concerns the contemporary reformulation of legitimate knowledge in contexts of diversity, modernity, and civilisational encounter.

The corpus from this Malaysian and ISTAC orbit includes Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas on adab and the hierarchy of knowledge, Wan

Mohd Nor Wan Daud on the educational consequences of epistemic confusion, Osman Bakar on diversity and civilisational dialogue, and Imtiyaz Yusuf on religious pluralism and Muslim-Buddhist understanding [17]. These figures are especially useful because they neither abandon truth claims in the name of openness nor deny the realities of modern pluralism, inter-civilisational contact, and contested public reason. They thus help bridge the gap between classical epistemology and contemporary intellectual responsibility.

Table 1 below summarises the major layers through which the Islamic tradition has historically tested claims to legitimacy.

Layer	Guiding question	Principal criterion	Typical carriers	Pathology when severed from discipline
Revelatory normativity	Is the claim accountable to Qur'ān and Sunnah?	Fidelity to authoritative sources	Qur'anic exegesis, ḥadīth, legal and theological reasoning	Scriptural citation used rhetorically without method
Methodological discipline	How is the claim derived, weighed, and limited?	Uṣūl al-fiqh, language, logic, hermeneutic restraint	Jurists, theologians, mujtahids	Arbitrary literalism or free-form subjectivism
Communal scholarly validation	Who has tested, transmitted, and recognised the claim?	Scholarly formation, peer correction, isnād, institutional credibility	Madhhab traditions, teaching circles, universities, councils	Self-authorising authority, charisma without competence
Ethical accountability	Does the claim exhibit adab, justice, and moral responsibility?	Humility, honesty, public responsibility, avoidance of harm	Scholars, judges, teachers, public intellectuals	Authoritarianism, polemics, knowledge divorced from virtue

The table is analytical rather than exhaustive. It shows that “legitimate knowledge” is layered rather than singular: a claim may be textually resonant yet methodologically weak, institutionally supported yet ethically compromised. Figure 1 complements this point by visualising the convergence required for a claim to become authoritative.

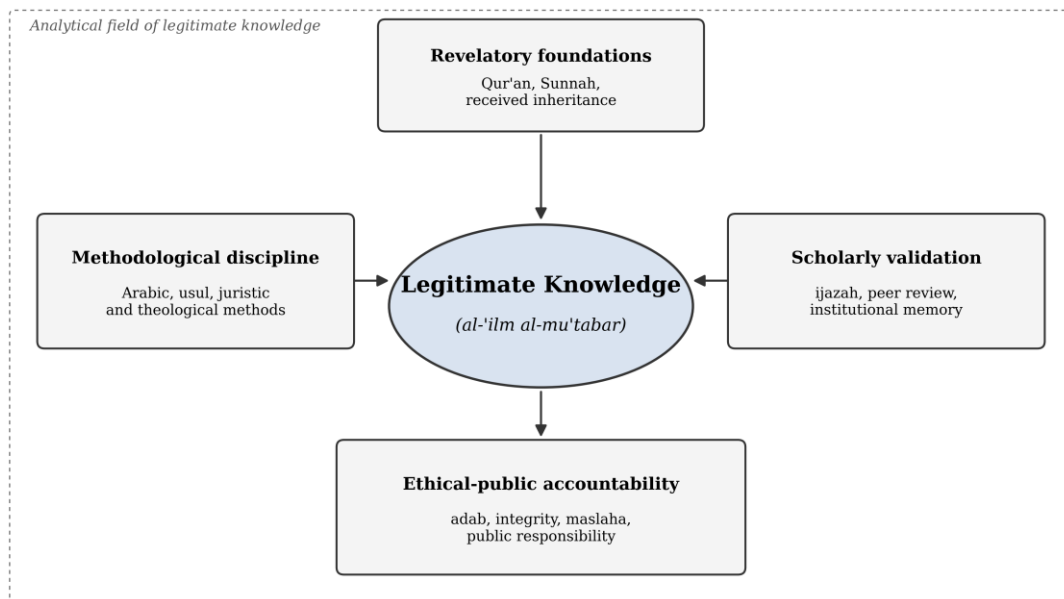


Figure 1. Analytical field of legitimate knowledge in Islamic thought (author's synthesis).

Analysis and Discussion

The Classical Architecture of Legitimate Knowledge

The first major finding of this study is that Islamic thought did not imagine legitimacy in a flat or undifferentiated way. It distinguished between kinds of evidence, kinds of reasoning, and kinds of claims. This is visible in the juristic distinction between what is decisive (*qaṭʿī*) and what is speculative (*ẓannī*), a distinction that had direct implications for the scope of disagreement. Decisive texts and principles were not ordinarily treated as open to indefinite reinterpretation, whereas speculative matters generated greater space for juristic reasoning. The result was neither epistemic closure nor unrestricted fluidity, but a graded map of interpretive possibility [18].

This graded map helps explain why the *madhhab* system could sustain durable plurality without collapsing into relativism. Schools of law disagreed over particular rulings, principles of preference, the weight of local practice, or the scope of analogy, yet these disagreements were not random. They were structured by shared commitments to revelation, transmitted learning, and recognisable modes of legal argument. The jurist did not begin from the sovereign self, but from inherited discourse and disciplined competence. That is why the rise of the *madhāhib* should not be read as fragmentation but as a historically successful mechanism for organising lawful diversity [19].

The classical doctrine of *ijtihād* further confirms this point. *Ijtihād* was never a licence for unbounded originality. It described strenuous reasoning by one qualified to undertake it, and qualification itself presupposed extensive mastery of language, sources, jurisprudential method, and the aims and structure of the law. Even when later jurists debated the practical openness of *ijtihād*, they did so against a shared assumption: genuine interpretation is inseparable from scholarly competence. To detach interpretive freedom from this discipline is not to democratise the tradition but to alter its epistemic foundations [20].

The literature on the causes of disagreement among the jurists is equally revealing. Ibn Taymiyyah's *Raf' al-Malām* famously explains why leading imams may differ without any of them being condemned for error in a morally culpable sense. They may not have received a relevant report; they may have judged its authenticity differently; they may have understood its applicability through distinct legal principles. The point is not that every disagreement is justified, but that qualified disagreement has intelligible causes internal to the method. This turns plurality into a sign of disciplined reasoning rather than of doctrinal chaos [21].

Al-Ghazālī and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī add a further layer by showing that the scholar's epistemic legitimacy depends not only on technical expertise but also on moral character. The knower must recognise the rank of different sciences, the limits of one's own competence, and the spiritual danger of speaking beyond knowledge. Such concerns are not marginal pieties. They prevent a recurring pathology of religious discourse: the inflation of confident but unformed opinion. When later Muslim thinkers worried about false leadership or confusion in knowledge, they were often reactivating this older adab-based concern [22].

In this light, the classical architecture of legitimacy may be summarised in four propositions. First, truth is not self-legitimising in the social sense; it requires procedures of recognition and articulation. Secondly, not every claim about religion enjoys the same epistemic status. Thirdly, plurality is most stable when tied to clear distinctions between domains and evidentiary grades. Fourthly, scholars are authorised not merely by what they know but by how they know and how they conduct themselves. The architecture is therefore at once textual, methodological, communal, and ethical. This fourfold character is what later sections of the paper will recover in a contemporary key.

Pluralism within Bounds: Valid Diversity and Its Limits

The second major finding concerns pluralism. Islamic thought has long lived with diversity, but the meaning of that diversity differs across domains. It is analytically unhelpful to speak of “pluralism” in the singular, as though legal differences within Sunni jurisprudence, theological debates over divine attributes, and interreligious coexistence with non-Muslims all belonged to the same conceptual order. They do not.

Some forms of plurality concern competing interpretations within a shared doctrinal and methodological framework; others concern political coexistence, moral recognition, and the limits of coercion in a religiously diverse world. Legitimate knowledge must distinguish among these levels rather than conflate them.

The clearest example of bounded plurality remains juristic disagreement. Diversity among the schools did not imply that all positions were equally strong, still less that legal reasoning lacked norms. It meant rather that the revealed sources, when mediated through language, evidentiary theory, and variable contexts, could sustain more than one defensible judgment in matters not settled decisively. This is a plurality of disciplined conclusions. It is bounded because it excludes claims that dispense with proof, invert basic principles, or dissolve the hierarchy of the sources. Juristic plurality, therefore, is a model of how Islam can sustain multiplicity without sacrificing epistemic order [23].

Theological plurality is more delicate. Classical Islam witnessed substantial disagreement over divine attributes, free will, reason, causality, and the status of grave sinners. Yet theological argument also operated under clearer boundaries around what counted as sound belief, heresy, or unacceptable innovation. The narrower scope of plurality here reflects the fact that theology concerns foundational claims about God, revelation, prophecy, and salvation. Nonetheless, even in theology, the tradition rarely functioned as a single voice. It housed contesting grammars of sound belief and a history of disciplined disputation. Frank Griffel’s study of al-Ghazālī usefully demonstrates that robust theological reasoning did not necessarily entail epistemic laxity; rather, it could intensify concern for how certainty, demonstration, and spiritual truth relate [24].

A third level concerns ethical and political coexistence. Here the vocabulary of justice, mercy, covenant, public order, and human dignity becomes more prominent than the language of doctrinal adjudication. Modern Muslim thinkers have frequently turned to these resources to articulate an Islamic account of coexistence in plural societies. Kamali stresses the Qur’ānic foundation for tolerance and justice; Sachedina attempts to derive democratic pluralism from Islamic moral reasoning; March investigates the conditions under

which Muslims may affirm citizenship in liberal states without surrendering their religious identity [25]. These are not identical projects, but they share an important assumption: coexistence must be justified in a way that remains normatively persuasive from within the tradition.

The Malaysian and ISTAC-related literature enriches this discussion by refusing the false choice between isolationism and relativism. Osman Bakar's writings on diversity and civilisational dialogue argue that Islam has internal resources for encountering religious and cultural difference without abandoning its own truth claims. Diversity, in this view, is not merely a sociological fact to be endured but part of a providential order that summons moral striving, comparative learning, and mutual restraint [26]. That argument is not a surrender to the thesis that all doctrines are equally true. It is instead a call to locate difference within a higher moral and civilisational horizon.

Imtiyaz Yusuf advances this line further through his work on Islamic theology of religious pluralism and Muslim-Buddhist understanding. His contribution is especially significant for the present framework because he does not advocate a weak pluralism based on doctrinal indifference. Rather, he begins from Qur'ānic anthropology, shared human dignity, and historical coexistence, and then asks how Islam can encounter religious others without erasing theological difference [27]. This is a crucial distinction. The tradition may affirm the reality of religious diversity and the ethical demand of just coexistence while still maintaining the normativity of revelation and the asymmetry of doctrinal truth claims. Yusuf's work is therefore valuable precisely because it demonstrates how interreligious openness need not dissolve epistemic boundaries.

His study of the Rohingya crisis reinforces the point from a different angle. There he shows that conflicts often described simplistically as "religious" are in fact shaped by nationalism, exclusionary citizenship, and politicised identity [28]. The relevance to legitimate knowledge is profound. Claims about religion frequently acquire public force through political narratives rather than through disciplined theological reasoning. When that occurs, interpretations can become socially powerful while epistemically weak. The boundary between legitimate knowledge and ideological mobilisation is therefore a central component of any serious theory of pluralism in Islam. These distinctions may be clarified in Table 2.

Table 2. *Modes of Pluralism and Their Epistemic Limits*

Mode of plurality	Sphere	Basis of legitimacy	Boundary condition	Typical distortion
Juristic plurality	Fiqh, fatwā, legal preference	Recognised method, evidence, qualified ijtihād	Cannot negate decisive texts or shared legal fundamentals	Treating every opinion as equally sound
Theological plurality	Kalām, creed, philosophical theology	Disciplined reasoning within transmitted doctrinal horizons	Narrower tolerance around foundational beliefs	Expanding speculative difference into doctrinal relativism
Ethical-political coexistence	Citizenship, minority rights, public order	Justice, covenant, dignity, non-coercion, public welfare	Does not require erasure of religious truth claims	Conflating coexistence with doctrinal sameness
Interreligious dialogue	Civilisational exchange, mutual understanding	Knowledge of self and other, adab, moral reciprocity	Dialogue cannot rest on ignorance or forced equivalence	Sentimentalism without theological seriousness
Individual opinion	Personal judgement detached from training	Sincerity alone	Not sufficient for public religious authority	Subjectivism, charisma, ideological capture

The table shows that plurality in Islamic thought is differentiated rather than unlimited. Its scope depends on domain, evidence, competence, and the object under discussion. Figure 2 translates this argument into a simple interpretive map: Islamic thought seeks disciplined plurality, not relativistic fragmentation or monopolistic closure.

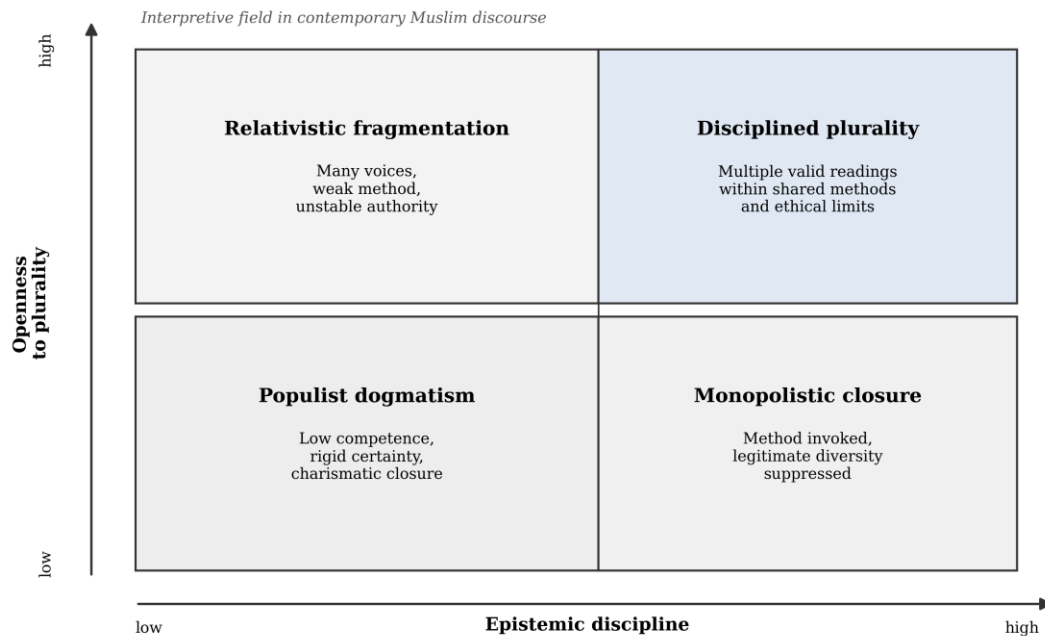


Figure 2. *Interpretive field of authority and plurality in contemporary Muslim discourse (author's synthesis).*

The Politics of Interpretation: Between Epistemic Authority and Power

The third major finding is that interpretation in Muslim contexts cannot be analysed apart from power. Yet power does not nullify the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. Rather, it threatens to displace that distinction. Modernity has intensified this risk because religious interpretation now circulates through institutions shaped by the state, the market, transnational networks, ideological movements, and public controversy. In each of these locations, claims to authority may gain force for reasons other than epistemic merit.

Asad's notion of discursive tradition helps us see that authority is never purely textual. It is embodied, transmitted, and socially situated. But once that point is admitted, one must ask how traditions defend themselves against two opposite distortions. The first is authoritarian consolidation, where the state or a dominant institution claims the exclusive right to define authoritative doctrine and suppresses the complexity of inherited debate. The second is atomised individualisation, where every articulate believer claims equal interpretive standing and the distinction between trained scholarship and moral sincerity disappears. Both distortions damage the internal grammar of legitimate

knowledge. The first conflates truth with coercive power; the second confuses accessibility with authority [29].

The pre-modern juristic tradition, whatever its limits, generally avoided both extremes. No single sovereign body monopolised legal interpretation across the Sunni ecumene, yet neither could any individual plausibly claim interpretive authority without formation, recognition, and participation in scholarly discourse. Hallaq has shown that juristic authority was diffuse but not disorderly. It was embedded in institutions of learning, social prestige, professional ethics, and the cumulative weight of schools of law [30]. This explains why legitimate knowledge in Islam has historically been more closely aligned with scholarly publics than with centralised bureaucratic command.

Modern political conditions have altered this balance. Codified law, bureaucratic state institutions, nationalist projects, and mass publics have all transformed how Islamic claims are articulated and adjudicated. Nathan Brown's analysis of "official Islam" in the Arab world is illuminating here, even when one's own normative conclusions differ. It shows how religious authority can be incorporated into state projects of order, legitimacy, and ideological management [31]. The point is not that official institutions are necessarily false, but that political centralisation can pressure them to privilege stability, uniformity, and state interest over the more distributed and internally corrective logic of scholarly reasoning.

The other distortion is less statist but equally serious. In many contemporary settings, interpretive authority is claimed on the basis of charisma, activism, affective resonance, or identity performance. This may produce intense public influence without corresponding epistemic depth. The problem here is not merely sociological popularity. It is that the social validation of an interpreter can become detached from the criteria by which the tradition historically tested knowledge: mastery of the sources, methodological training, and accountability to peers. The result is not a democratisation of knowledge so much as a displacement of its standards. The politics of interpretation in this form is not imposed from above but generated through dispersed publics, ideological solidarities, and symbolic capital.

Abou El Fadl's warning against authoritarian hermeneutics is especially apt in relation to both tendencies. Authoritarianism does not belong only to the state. It can appear wherever interpreters collapse their own contingent judgments into incontestable divine command. This occurs in rigid institutional settings, but also in populist or movement-based forms of religious speech. The deeper issue is moral and epistemic: the refusal to acknowledge the interpretive

labour, uncertainty, and responsibility that stand between revelation and contemporary judgment [32].

What then is the proper relation between epistemic authority and politics? The answer suggested by the tradition is neither withdrawal from public life nor naïve confidence that institutions automatically guard truth. Politics is unavoidable because interpretation shapes law, ethics, citizenship, communal boundaries, and public order. Yet epistemic authority must remain distinguishable from mere political efficacy. A claim becomes normatively persuasive in Islam not because it is backed by state sanction, activist fervour, or media circulation, but because it can be shown to arise from valid sources, disciplined method, qualified judgment, and morally responsible intention. The politics of interpretation becomes legitimate only when it remains subordinate to that deeper order.

Malaysian and ISTAC Contributions to the Question of Legitimate Knowledge

The fourth major finding of the study is that recent Malaysian and ISTAC-linked scholarship offers an especially fruitful vocabulary for restating the classical logic of legitimate knowledge under modern conditions. These thinkers do not merely repeat medieval formulations. They translate them into a language capable of addressing the crises of secular knowledge, civilisational encounter, educational disorder, and interpretive confusion that mark modern Muslim life. For that reason, their work is not a peripheral supplement to the classical tradition but an important contemporary extension of it.

The pivotal figure here is Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. His importance for the present discussion lies in the way he re-centres *adab* as an epistemic category. Al-Attas does not use *adab* in the narrow sense of etiquette. Rather, he presents it as the recognition and acknowledgement of proper places—of things within the order of being, of sciences within a hierarchy of knowledge, and of persons within structures of responsibility [33]. Once this is grasped, the relation to legitimate knowledge becomes unmistakable. Illegitimate knowledge is not merely false information. It is also disordered knowledge: knowledge stripped of hierarchy, detached from metaphysical truth, or placed in the hands of those unfit to bear its authority.

Al-Attas's famous diagnosis of the "loss of *adab*" is therefore highly relevant to the politics of interpretation. When *adab* is lost, confusion enters not only manners but the order of knowledge itself. The result is the rise of false leaders, the inversion of priorities, and the inability to discriminate between higher and lower forms of knowing [34]. This diagnosis provides a conceptual

bridge between the classical concern for qualified scholarship and contemporary anxieties about interpretive disorder. It also helps explain why the problem of pluralism cannot be solved by multiplying voices alone. Without *adab*, plurality becomes noise rather than disciplined diversity. Legitimate knowledge, by contrast, presupposes a rightly ordered relation among revelation, reason, tradition, and moral responsibility.

Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud develops this insight by showing that the educational project of Islam is inseparable from epistemic discipline. His exposition of al-Attas's educational philosophy demonstrates that the crisis of knowledge in Muslim societies cannot be reduced to curricular weakness or institutional decline. It reflects deeper failures in the formation of persons who can place things in their proper order and recognise the distinct ranks of the sciences [35]. The point is vital for the present argument because legitimate knowledge is never simply "there" in texts waiting to be extracted. It is mediated by institutions of formation and by persons shaped to receive, interpret, and transmit it properly. If educational forms fail, epistemic legitimacy becomes harder to sustain.

Osman Bakar makes a complementary contribution from the angle of diversity and civilisational encounter. His writings on pluralism do not advocate the suspension of Islamic doctrinal conviction. Instead, they insist that a civilisationally mature Islam can encounter diversity through confidence rather than fear, moral seriousness rather than reductionism, and dialogue rather than capitulation [36]. Bakar's approach is particularly helpful because it preserves a strong notion of truth while refusing both isolationist rigidity and the flattening of difference into a shallow universalism. In epistemic terms, he reminds us that legitimate knowledge can be dialogical without becoming relativist.

This same balance is visible in the work of Imtiyaz Yusuf, whose scholarship deserves central attention in the present article. Yusuf's writings on religious pluralism are noteworthy because they proceed from careful Qur'ānic and theological reflection while also taking seriously the demands of interreligious understanding in Asian contexts [37]. He neither collapses all religions into an abstract sameness nor retreats into polemical exclusivism. Rather, he asks how Muslims may remain doctrinally grounded while recognising the ethical and intellectual necessity of understanding their religious others, especially in multi-religious societies such as Malaysia and across Buddhist-majority Asia.

This is not a minor matter. It demonstrates that the boundaries of legitimate knowledge must account for two distinct but related demands: first, fidelity to revelation and the self-understanding of Islam; second, adequate

knowledge of the social and religious worlds in which Muslims actually live. Yusuf's work therefore expands the meaning of epistemic legitimacy beyond intra-Muslim polemics. An interpretation may be textually self-assured yet still epistemically deficient if it is ignorant of history, context, and the lived reality of the religious other. Such ignorance can produce not only bad scholarship but also ethically disastrous public reasoning. Yusuf's analysis of the Rohingya crisis makes this explicit by showing how religious narratives become politically weaponised when citizenship, nationalism, and exclusion are interpreted through distorted moral frameworks [38].

One may add that these Malaysian and ISTAC-oriented thinkers also help rescue the question of authority from a sterile binary between "traditionalism" and "modernism." Their writings do not propose that one simply repeat the old formulas unchanged, nor do they ask that one dissolve inherited structures into contemporary ideological categories. Rather, they undertake a work of retrieval and re-articulation. Al-Attas retrieves hierarchy, metaphysics, and adab; Wan Mohd Nor underscores formative education; Bakar widens the civilisational horizon; and Yusuf demonstrates how a theologically serious Islam may address pluralism, coexistence, and Asian realities without sacrificing doctrinal coherence. Taken together, they offer resources for a renewal of legitimate knowledge that is both faithful and responsive.

Toward a Four-Layer Model of Legitimate Knowledge

The argument of this article may now be consolidated into a constructive proposal. If the previous sections are correct, then legitimate knowledge in Islamic thought is best understood through a four-layer model. The first layer is revelatory normativity. Any claim to religious authority must remain accountable to the Qur'ān and Sunnah, not in the simplistic sense of merely citing them, but in the thicker sense of entering the inherited disciplines by which their meanings have been discerned. Revelation sets the horizon of possibility and limits the range of acceptable theological and legal innovation.

The second layer is methodological discipline. No appeal to revelation becomes normatively persuasive unless it proceeds through intelligible methods of interpretation. These include the sciences of language, ḥadīth criticism, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, legal maxims, distinctions between levels of evidence, and—where appropriate—theological and philosophical reasoning. Method is what transforms textual reference into argument. Without it, one has slogans rather than scholarship, and assertion rather than proof. The classical tradition's tolerance of diversity depended precisely on the existence of such methods, because they enabled disagreement to be argued rather than merely performed [39].

The third layer is communal scholarly validation. Islamic thought did not imagine the authoritative knower as an isolated individual. Knowledge was received, tested, corrected, and transmitted in communities of learning. The jurist, theologian, and teacher were legitimised not only by private accomplishment but also by recognisable participation in interpretive publics. In the classical period this involved *isnād*, circles of instruction, and the reputational ecology of the *madhhab*. In modern settings it may also involve universities, peer review, research cultures, and recognised councils of scholarship. The specific institutional forms may change, but the principle remains: knowledge that cannot withstand correction by the qualified is not fit to guide the many [40].

The fourth layer is ethical-public accountability. The Islamic tradition consistently resisted the separation of knowledge from virtue. This is why al-Ghazālī's discussions of the scholar's intentions, al-Attas's theory of *adab*, and Abou El Fadl's insistence on honesty and self-restraint all converge. A claim may be textually sophisticated and methodologically careful, yet still be distorted by arrogance, injustice, sectarian malice, or instrumentalisation for worldly ends. Legitimate knowledge, therefore, must be judged not only by evidentiary form but also by public ethical consequence. Does it manifest humility? Does it honour the dignity of persons? Does it recognise its own limits? Does it guard against oppression, reckless accusation, or manipulative certainty? [41]

This four-layer model allows one to distinguish between principled pluralism and epistemic relativism. Principled pluralism arises when multiple positions remain accountable to the same revelatory horizon, employ recognisable methods, submit to scholarly testing, and sustain ethical responsibility. Epistemic relativism begins when one or more of these layers collapses – most commonly when method is abandoned, communal correction is rejected, or truth is reduced to personal authenticity or power. The model also allows one to distinguish between authority and authoritarianism. Authority remains interpretively serious and morally self-limiting; authoritarianism forecloses critique and conflates itself with truth.

The model has practical implications beyond theory. It suggests that disputes over pluralism in Islamic thought are best adjudicated not by asking whether Islam is "for" or "against" diversity in the abstract, but by asking: What is the domain in question? What is the evidentiary status of the relevant texts? What methods of reasoning are being used? Who is qualified to interpret? What ethical responsibilities attach to public religious speech? Such questions move the debate from slogans toward disciplined judgment. They also offer a more promising basis for renewal than the current oscillation between rigid centralisation and unbounded individualism.

Finally, the model clarifies the relation between the present article and broader contemporary debates. The future of Islamic authority will no doubt continue to be shaped by media, state institutions, transnational movements, and public controversy. Yet such developments cannot be evaluated adequately without a prior account of what makes knowledge legitimate in the first place.

In international terms, the model also speaks to current debates about digital religious authority, epistemic fragmentation, interreligious coexistence, and contemporary global pluralism. It shows why the circulation of religious claims across platforms, institutions, and transnational publics cannot be assessed only by visibility, popularity, or political effectiveness. The more fundamental question is whether such claims remain accountable to revelatory sources, disciplined procedures of reasoning, qualified scholarly correction, and ethical responsibility toward the wider public.

The present study has tried to provide that prior account. Its claim is not that classical categories can simply be transposed unchanged into the present. It is rather that they contain a durable epistemic grammar capable of governing adaptation, reform, and coexistence. Without that grammar, pluralism becomes formless and authority becomes raw power. With it, both can be morally and intellectually disciplined.

Implications for Scholarship, Institutions, and Public Reason

A theory of legitimate knowledge is only intellectually worthwhile if it can guide practical judgment. The present argument therefore carries implications for three overlapping arenas: the training of scholars, the operation of institutions, and the moral quality of Muslim public reasoning. The first implication concerns formation. If legitimate knowledge depends on revelatory normativity, method, communal correction, and ethical accountability, then the contemporary cultivation of scholarship cannot rest on the accumulation of information alone. Programmes of Islamic studies that produce textual familiarity without methodological literacy, or technical expertise without moral discipline, will not suffice. The older emphasis on formation remains indispensable, even if the social forms of that formation have changed. The task is not to replicate the pre-modern madrasa mechanically, but to preserve its underlying wisdom: that authority belongs to those whose knowledge has been trained, tested, and ethically ordered [42].

This implies that curricula should resist two temptations. One is the technicist temptation, in which students acquire fragments of jurisprudence, ḥadīth, or theology without learning how the disciplines interrelate. The other is the activist temptation, in which urgency and public relevance eclipse the patient acquisition of interpretive craft. A scholar formed under such conditions may

become rhetorically effective yet epistemically unstable. Al-Attas's insistence on hierarchy and proper placement is useful precisely because it directs attention to integration rather than fragmentation [43]. The revival of legitimate knowledge thus requires integrative pedagogy: one that links law to theology, textual interpretation to ethics, and doctrinal fidelity to civilisational responsibility.

The second arena concerns institutions. Modern Muslim institutions often oscillate between brittle control and diffuse permissiveness. Some attempt to secure authoritative doctrine through bureaucratic centralisation, while others defer so heavily to public sentiment that expertise loses its force. The four-layer model developed in this article suggests a more balanced institutional philosophy. Institutions ought to see themselves not as monopolists of truth but as guardians of procedure, competence, and accountability. Their legitimacy depends less on claims to absolute finality than on their capacity to host serious scholarship, cultivate internal critique, and maintain moral credibility before the communities they serve [44].

Such a philosophy is especially important for fatwā councils, religious universities, and public scholarly bodies. Their role should not be reduced to the production of official positions. They should also clarify the evidentiary status of issues, distinguish settled from speculative questions, explain why disagreement exists where it exists, and make visible the methods by which conclusions are reached. Public trust increases when institutions demonstrate how they reason rather than merely announcing what they decide. This does not democratise *ijtihād* in the crude sense. It rather re-establishes the educative dimension of authority. The public learns not only *what* the institution says, but *why* certain claims are stronger than others and why some issues admit diversity while others do not.

The third arena concerns public reason in plural societies. The preceding sections have argued that ethical-political coexistence does not require doctrinal flattening. Yet coexistence does require a quality of public reasoning capable of distinguishing between theological commitment and social injustice. Here the work of Imtiyaz Yusuf and Osman Bakar is especially instructive, because both demonstrate that serious interreligious engagement requires knowledge, historical awareness, and moral reciprocity rather than apologetic reflexes or sentimental formulas [45]. Public religious discourse becomes epistemically legitimate when it knows both its own tradition and the world to which it speaks. Ignorance of the other is not a mark of fidelity; it is often a mark of intellectual insufficiency.

The same point may be reinforced by bringing Chandra Muzaffar into the conversation. Although he writes more as a public intellectual than as a specialist

in legal theory, his repeated emphasis on human dignity, justice, and moral reform is a salutary reminder that knowledge claims are tested not only in classrooms or seminar rooms but in the ethical texture of public life [46]. When scholarly discourse becomes indifferent to the vulnerable, or when religious arguments are deployed without regard to their social consequences, legitimacy is eroded even if doctrinal vocabulary remains intact. Public reason in Islam, therefore, must be both principled and humane. It must retain the courage to affirm truth while also restraining itself from turning every difference into exclusion or every disagreement into moral panic.

These implications also clarify what this article does *not* propose. It does not propose an anti-pluralist restorationism in which a single institution, school, or ideological tendency is authorised to settle every matter for all Muslims. Nor does it propose a romantic return to pre-modern conditions as though the intervening transformations of statehood, higher education, global exchange, and mass literacy could simply be ignored. What it proposes instead is a recovery of criteria. The crisis of legitimate knowledge is not solved by nostalgia, but it also cannot be solved by procedural openness alone. It requires renewed agreement on what counts as evidence, who is competent to interpret, how disagreement is to be classified, and what ethical obligations attach to public religious speech.

A final implication concerns the relation between scholarship and reform. Reform in Islam is often framed as a choice between uncritical preservation and bold innovation. The argument of this paper suggests a more disciplined view. Reform becomes legitimate when it is internally reasoned, textually anchored, methodologically explicit, communally answerable, and ethically serious. It is illegitimate when it proceeds by bypassing these conditions, whether in the name of authenticity or progress. This is where the boundary language of the article becomes most useful. Boundaries are not merely restrictive lines; they are conditions of meaningful movement. Without them, reinterpretation becomes arbitrary. With them, renewal becomes intelligible and morally credible.

In that sense, the recovery of legitimate knowledge is itself a reformist project—but one of a particular kind. It seeks not the abolition of hierarchy, but its purification; not the denial of pluralism, but its ordering; not the retreat from modern complexity, but the disciplined engagement of it.

That is why the classical and contemporary sources considered in this article, especially within the Malaysian and ISTAC tradition, remain so important. They show that one can speak of truth without triumphalism, authority without domination, and dialogue without epistemic surrender. For

contemporary Islamic thought, that may be one of the most urgent intellectual tasks of all.

Limitations and Future Research

The argument developed in this article is intentionally conceptual and historical. Its purpose is to reconstruct criteria of legitimate knowledge from selected Sunni legal, theological, ethical, and contemporary intellectual sources, not to measure empirically how particular institutions currently apply those criteria. For this reason, the four-layer model should be read as an analytical framework rather than as a completed sociological account of all Muslim interpretive communities. The study also does not claim to exhaust the full diversity of Islamic intellectual traditions, regional contexts, or institutional arrangements. Its focus on Sunni epistemological categories and Malaysian/ISTAC-related scholarship is justified by the article's research question, but it necessarily leaves other corpora and comparative traditions for further investigation.

These limitations point toward several fruitful directions for future research. The framework may be tested empirically through case studies of contemporary fatwā councils, Islamic universities, religious education curricula, mosque-based scholarly networks, and digitally mediated forms of religious authority. Such studies could examine how revelatory normativity, methodological discipline, communal scholarly validation, and ethical-public accountability are maintained, weakened, or reconfigured in concrete institutional settings. Comparative research may also explore how the model operates in Muslim minority contexts, Southeast Asian plural societies, transnational scholarly networks, and online environments shaped by algorithmic visibility and fragmented public trust.

Future work may further examine the implications of this model for interreligious coexistence, artificial intelligence in religious knowledge production, and the governance of digital religious communication. Such applications would not replace the conceptual argument advanced here; rather, they would extend it by asking how the boundaries of legitimate knowledge are negotiated under contemporary conditions of technological acceleration, institutional contestation, and global pluralism.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the problem of legitimate knowledge in Islamic thought cannot be reduced either to the sociology of religious authority or to a generic celebration of pluralism. Islamic tradition historically sustained a more demanding account of legitimacy: one that tied interpretive authority to revelation, disciplined method, qualified communities of transmission, and moral responsibility. Such an account made plurality possible, but only within structured limits. Diversity in legal reasoning, theological debate, and civilisational encounter was accepted where evidence and method allowed it; it was not extended indiscriminately to every domain or every claimant.

The article has also shown that contemporary debates become distorted when this internal architecture is forgotten. On one side, centralised institutions may collapse legitimate authority into political power and mistake uniformity for truth. On the other, interpretive individualism and populist charisma may detach religious speech from the disciplines that once made it trustworthy. Both tendencies erode the distinction between valid plurality and epistemic disorder. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between authority and pluralism, but to recover a conception of authority capable of housing principled pluralism without surrendering normativity.

In that recovery, the Malaysian and ISTAC-linked tradition offers especially valuable resources. Al-Attas restores the hierarchy of knowledge through *adab*; Wan Mohd Nor clarifies the educational preconditions of epistemic order; Osman Bakar widens the horizon of civilisational dialogue without relativism; and Imtiyaz Yusuf demonstrates how theological seriousness can coexist with interreligious understanding and critical attention to political injustice. Their combined contribution shows that the renewal of legitimate knowledge in Islam is not an antiquarian exercise. It is a living intellectual task.

The four-layer model proposed in this study – revelatory normativity, methodological discipline, communal scholarly validation, and ethical-public accountability – offers one way of conceptualising that task. It does not eliminate disagreement, nor should it. Rather, it provides criteria for distinguishing productive diversity from dissolutive relativism, and authority from authoritarianism. Future work may apply this framework empirically to specific institutions, *fatwā* cultures, curricular traditions, and digitally mediated interpretive fields. For the present, however, the central point is clear: the boundaries of legitimate knowledge in Islam are neither arbitrary nor infinitely elastic. They are morally charged, intellectually disciplined, and historically mediated boundaries, and the health of Muslim intellectual life depends upon their careful preservation and renewal.

Author Contributions

The author was solely responsible for the Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization, and Project Administration of this study.

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- ⁴⁶ Chandra Muzaffar, *Rights, Religion and Reform: Enhancing Human Dignity through Spiritual and Moral Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2002).

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