

Various Approaches to Understanding Religion

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Abstract

There are many approaches to understanding religion. This is necessary because these approaches enable believers to experience the functional presence of religion. Without knowledge of these various approaches, it is possible that religion will become difficult for non-functional communities to understand, and ultimately these communities will seek solutions to their problems outside of religion, which should not happen. These approaches include theological-normative, anthropological, sociological, philosophical, historical, cultural, and psychological approaches. This research aims to strengthen beliefs by referring to authoritative sources such as the Qur'an, Hadith, ijma, and qiyas; the research was conducted through literature and text studies, producing a solid doctrinal foundation but one that is prone to exclusivity. Therefore, it needs to be combined with other approaches to be more contextually inclusive. This research employs a qualitative method focused on practices and symbols in daily life. Data sources are collected through field observations and interviews. This approach fosters a rich understanding of religious cultural expressions and promotes an inclusive attitude toward the diversity of religious practices. The results indicate that religion plays a role in strengthening collective solidarity and social mobilization. The implications support the development of adaptive religion-based social policies.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding religion is a necessity because religion is human nature (Lailatul Mufidah et al., 2020; Rambe et al., 2024; Trisnawati & Pratama, 2023; Yanti et al., 2021). Furthermore, understanding religion is necessary so that the function of religion as a medium to guide humanity toward worldly and eternal happiness is not limited to mere concepts and ideas. However, how does this function manifest in the reality of human life and address the challenges faced by humanity Given the vast scope of religion and the complexity of human life, achieving such a function requires various approaches to understanding religion (Ahmad Budiyo, 2019; Pendidikan et al., 2021; Rochim & Tolcah, 2024). Without knowledge of these various approaches.

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it is not impossible for religion to become difficult for society to understand, rendering it non-functional, leading society to seek solutions outside of religion—and this must not happen. If such a situation were to arise, religion would be abandoned or reduced to merely a supplementary aspect of identity.

The approaches referred to here include normative theology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, culture, and psychology. An approach, or in English “approach,” in the context of understanding religion, is a perspective or paradigm found in a field of study that is then used in understanding religion. Thus, these approaches can be illustrated as the lenses used in understanding religion.

Religion is not merely a system of belief, but rather an exploration of the deepest aspects of humanity. Through the normative theological approach, religion reinforces belief by referring to authoritative sources, such as the Qur'an and Hadith (Al Ayyubi et al., 2024). thereby establishing solid moral and spiritual standards. However, to ensure that these teachings do not remain confined to the textual realm, they must be combined with approaches that open up rational and contextual horizons.

Philosophical and historical approaches play an important role in enriching our understanding of religion. The philosophical approach guides humans to think critically about the meaning of God, ethics, and existence through logic and rational reflection, as studied in the philosophy of religion. Meanwhile, the historical approach traces the journey of religion from the past to the present, examining the transformations in meaning and context that have shaped it. The combination of both keeps religion alive as a guide for thinking across time, not just as ancient texts.

Equally important, sociological and anthropological approaches allow us to understand religion more concretely in everyday life. The sociological approach examines how religion shapes social structures, collective values, and the social roles of individuals and religious institutions. On the other hand, the anthropological approach explores religious rituals, traditions, and symbols in the context of local culture, showing how religious practices live in social interactions (Engkizar et al., 2018; Htay et al., 2025; Jaafar et al., 2025; Okenova et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2025).

The psychological approach reveals the personal dimensions of religion, namely motivation, spiritual experience, and inner peace achieved through religious practices. William James, for example, shows that individual religious experiences provide a source of understanding about religion as a universal psychological phenomenon. Thus, religion is not merely manifested through external rituals but also through deep and personal inner experiences (Engkizar et al., 2021, Engkizar et al., 2022; Putri et al., 2025; Ummah et al., 2025).

Theological, philosophical, historical, sociological, anthropological, psychological, and cultural approaches work together as complementary lenses. Through theological and philosophical lenses, we affirm beliefs with rational meaning. Historical, sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches connect religious teachings to the context of human life and social and personal experiences. Thus, religion is not merely an abstract idea or a symbol of identity, but is rooted in the reality of life and can serve as an essential medium for problem-solving for humanity (Baroud & Aljarmi, 2025; Kaputra et al., 2021).

METHODS

This study uses qualitative methods, with data sources taken from various books, scientific articles, and journals. The normative theological approach is an effort to understand religion using a theological framework based on the belief that the empirical manifestation of a religious belief is considered the most accurate compared to others (Akmal et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2023; Istiqamah et al., 2024; Mustafa et al., 2025). In addition to the normative theological approach, there is also the anthropological approach, which can be interpreted as the biological and

physiological characteristics of humans and their evolution. The sociological approach, often abbreviated as social science, is a group of academic disciplines that study aspects related to humans and their social environment. Philosophical research, philosophy, or philosophy is a methodology that examines general and fundamental questions. Historical research also refers to short stories that draw material from history, including figures, events, and other sources. Finally, this study adopts a cultural and psychological approach, where culture is defined as a complex that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, abilities, and habits acquired by humans as members of society. Psychology, on the other hand, refers to conditions related to the mind or mental phenomena as the subject matter of psychology (Engkizar et al., 2024; Guspita et al., 2025; Ikhlas et al., 2025; Khairunisa et al., 2025; Salih, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Normative Theological Approach

As is well known, theology deals with the fundamental teachings of a religion. Etymologically, theology comes from the Greek language and consists of two words, namely “theos,” which means God, and “logos,” which means science. Thus, theology is the science of God or the science that discusses God. Terminologically, theology refers to the academic discipline that examines God (or the reality of God) and God's relationship with the world. In Islam, theology is known as tauhid, a science that examines the existence of Allah SWT, His necessary attributes, the permissible (“ja'iz”), and the impossible attributes that pertain to Him. Sometimes tauhid is also referred to as “Ilmu Kalam” (Engkizar, et al., 2025; Fauzi, 2023; Ramadani Mallo, 2025).

The theological approach to understanding religion can be interpreted by using theology or the science of divinity as a paradigm in understanding a religion. The theological approach employs deductive reasoning, which begins with beliefs that are deemed true and absolute, as well as teachings from God, which are inherently true and thus require no prior questioning. Instead, the process starts with these beliefs, which are then reinforced with evidence and arguments. With the belief in absolute truth and starting from that belief, this theological approach shows some shortcomings, such as being exclusive, dogmatic, unwilling to acknowledge the truth of other religions, and so on. These shortcomings can be addressed by complementing them with a sociological approach. On the other hand, the advantage of this theological approach is that it fosters a militant attitude toward religion, meaning one remains steadfast in their belief that their religion is the true one, without dismissing or belittling other religions. With such an approach, one develops a fanatical attitude toward the religion they practice.

This theological approach is closely related to the normative approach, which views religion from the perspective of its fundamental teachings and original message from God, in which human reasoning has not yet been incorporated. Meanwhile, a more accurate definition of the normative approach according to Syariffudin Ondeng in “Theories of Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies” (Anam & Santosa, 2023; Bahrol ‘Ulum & Mawardi, 2025; Devi & Andrian, 2021; Engkizar, Jaafar, et al., 2025; Mawardi et al., 2023). The normative approach is an approach that emphasizes the normative aspects of Islamic teachings as found in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

In this theological approach, religion is seen as an absolute truth from God, without any flaws and appearing ideal. In this context, religion appears very pristine with its distinctive characteristics. Islam, for example, is normatively true and upholds noble values. In the social sphere, Islam offers values of humanity, mutual respect, mutual aid, togetherness, and religious tolerance. In the economic sphere, Islam offers justice, honesty, togetherness, and mutual benefit. In the field of science and technology, Islam encourages humanity to pursue the highest levels of

knowledge and technology. Similarly, in other fields. Islam is present in an ideal and steadfast manner in all aspects and fields of human life.

The normative theological approach in Islamic studies methodology can be classified into three types. First, the traditional missionary approach, which aims to convert a society to a particular religion while emphasizing the importance of missionary civilization, as the Dutch did when they colonized Indonesia. Second, the apologetic approach, which aims to strengthen the faith of a community overwhelmed by modernity so that they can rise up and believe in their Islamic identity. Third, irenic, which is an approach aimed at uniting non-Muslims who have a negative orientation towards Muslims with Muslims who have a deviant orientation. This is so that national peace can be achieved and prejudice, resistance and mutual insults can be eliminated. The second and third approaches, as widely practiced by contemporary Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and thinkers such as Syed Naquib Al-Attas with his concept of the “Islamic Worldview,” Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qardawi, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyib, Muhammad Qurasih Shihab, and others.

Anthropological approach

Anthropology comes from the words *anthropos* (human) and *logos* (science), literally meaning the science of humans. In terms of terminology, anthropology or “the science of humans” originally had a different meaning, namely “the science of human physical characteristics” (Engkizar et al., 2021; Harahap & Kahpi, 2021; Kaputra et al., 2021). In the third phase of anthropology's development, this term began to be used primarily in England and America with the same meaning as ethnology had originally. In England, the term anthropology eventually supplanted ethnology, while in America, anthropology acquired a very broad meaning, encompassing both the physical and social aspects of the “science of humanity.” In Western and Eastern Europe, the term anthropology was interpreted solely as “the science of human races as viewed from their physical characteristics.”

From the description above, we can understand that anthropology is a science that studies humans in terms of their physical characteristics as well as their social and cultural lives, history, and development. The anthropological approach to studying various societies has been used by social and cultural researchers in the West, and in turn, the anthropological approach has also been used to study or understand religion.

According to Abuddin Nata, the anthropological approach to understanding religion can be interpreted as an effort to understand religion by observing the forms of religious practice that grow and develop within society. Thus, the anthropological approach to understanding religion also means using the methods employed by the discipline of anthropology in examining issues related to understanding religion. Such an approach is essential in understanding religion, as many religious issues and teachings can be thoroughly explained with the assistance of anthropology and other social sciences.

One of the most important keys in modern anthropology is holism, which is the view that social practices must be studied in context and essentially seen as practices that are related to others in the society being studied. Thus, in an effort to understand religion through an anthropological approach, religion cannot be viewed autonomously, separately, and unconnected from other social practices. Instead, religion is viewed “in conjunction” with agricultural, economic, political, and family practices, among others. In addition to its holistic nature, anthropology, as stated by Dawam Rahardjo in Abuddin Nata, prioritizes direct observation, even participatory observation. From this arise inductive conclusions that balance the deductive approach typically used in sociological observation.

Through the anthropological approach described above, we can see the relationship between religion and social organization. Clifford Geertz's explanation

of society in Muslim communities in Java is an interesting example in this field, as described in his work “The Religion of Java.” Geertz, in his research, viewed Javanese society in Mojokuto as a social system, with an acculturative Javanese culture and syncretic religion, consisting of sub-Javanese groups, each representing a different social structure: Abangan (centered in rural areas), Santri (centered in commercial areas or markets), and Priyayi (centered in cities and government offices). In the Mojokuto community, where 90% of the population is Muslim, there are variations in beliefs, values, and rituals related to this social structure. In religious rituals, Abangan emphasizes animism, Santri emphasizes Islamic teachings, and Priyayi emphasizes Hinduism.

In addition, through an anthropological approach, we can also see the correlation between religion and the work ethic and economic development of a society. Similarly, there is a relationship between religion and economic and political conditions. The less fortunate and poor segments of society are generally attracted to messianic religious movements that promise social change. Meanwhile, the wealthy (capital owners) are more inclined to maintain the established economic order because it benefits them. Karl Marx (1818-1883), for example, viewed religion as an opiate for certain societies, leading him to introduce the theory of conflict, or what is commonly referred to as the theory of class struggle. According to him, religion was misused by certain groups to support the capitalist system in Christian Europe. Meanwhile, Max Weber saw a positive correlation between Protestant teachings and the emergence of modern capitalism.

Through the anthropological approach mentioned above, the relationship between religion and various issues in human life is clearly evident, and religion is seen as familiar and functional in relation to various phenomena in human life. Specifically in understanding Islam, Nurcholish Masjid reveals that an anthropological approach is very important for understanding Islam because the concept of humans as khalifah (God's representatives) on earth, for example, is a symbol of the importance of the position of humans in Islam.

Sociological Approach

Sociology is part of the social sciences. Etymologically, sociology comes from Latin, consisting of the words *socius*, meaning friend, and *logos*, meaning to speak or converse (Hasni & Kambali, 2023; Labiba et al., 2021). Thus, sociology means talking about humans who are friends or live in society. Terminologically, experts have different views on the definition of sociology. According to Roucken Warren, sociology is the science that studies the relationships between people in groups. Pitirim Sorokin defines sociology as a science that studies: i. The relationships and reciprocal influences between various social phenomena; ii. The relationships and mutual influences between social phenomena and non-social phenomena; iii. The general characteristics of all types of social phenomena. Meanwhile, Soerjono Soekanto concludes that sociology, from the perspective of its essential nature, is a categorical, pure, abstract social science that seeks general, rational, and empirical understandings and is of a general nature.

From the explanation of the meaning of sociology above, it can be understood that sociology is a science that studies society, its conditions, structure, layers, and all the dynamics and social phenomena that occur within it. The sociological approach refers to researchers using sociological logic and theories, both classical and modern, to describe religious social phenomena and the influence of one phenomenon on another. The sociological approach in research does not only examine human behavior from what is visible, but also explicitly and implicitly. In the sociological approach, at least three theories are used, namely:

First, functional theory, which assumes that society is an ecological organism that experiences growth. The greater the growth, the more complex the problems

faced. Second, interactionism theory, which assumes that in society there must be relationships between society and individuals, and between individuals and other individuals. Interactionist Theory is often identified as an interpretive description, an approach that offers analysis that draws significant attention to the freezing of reality. Third, Conflict Theory, which is a theory that believes that every society has interests and power that are at the center of all social relationships. According to proponents of this theory, values and ideas are always used as weapons to legitimize power.

Furthermore, the sociological approach can be used as one approach in understanding religion. This is understandable, given that many religious studies can only be understood professionally and accurately with the help of sociology. In relation to the study of Islam, this sociological approach is very useful for the development of Islamic teachings related to social issues. This is evident in the Qur'an, which contains many verses related to social and muamalah issues. If Islam is indeed a form of resistance to the social conditions of a jahiliyyah society.

Philosophical Approach

Literally, the word philosophy comes from the words philo (lover, seeker) and sophia (wisdom, knowledge). In addition, philosophy can also be interpreted as seeking the essence of something, trying to link cause and effect, and trying to interpret human experiences. The commonly used definition of philosophy is the opinion expressed by Sidi Gazalba. According to him, philosophy is deep, systematic, radical, and universal thinking in order to seek truth, essence, wisdom, or the nature of everything that exists.

Philosophical activity is contemplation, but contemplation is not daydreaming, nor is it random thinking that is based on luck. Rather, it is done deeply, radically, systematically, and universally. Deep means it is done in such a way that it is pursued to the limit where reason can no longer reach. Radical means it is pursued to the point where nothing remains. Systematic means it is done in an orderly manner using a specific method of thinking. And universal means it is not limited to the interests of a particular group, but for the whole.

In general, this philosophical approach has four branches of philosophical activity. The first is logic, which is the art of rational and coherent argument. The second is metaphysics, which deals with the most fundamental questions about life, existence, and the nature of being. The third, which is related to logic and metaphysics, is epistemology. Epistemology focuses on what we can know and how we know it. Fourth is ethics, which literally means the study of "behavior." Ethics focuses on questions about duty, justice, love, and goodness. This philosophical way of thinking can then be used to understand religion. Thus, the wisdom, essence, or truth of a religious teaching can be understood. Basically, this approach has been widely used by experts, especially Sufis. Sufis always try to find out the meaning and wisdom of religious teachings.

Muhammad Al-Jurjawi, in his book entitled "Hikmah al-Tasyri'wa Falsafathu," attempts to reveal the wisdom contained in Islamic law and teachings. For example, Islamic teachings encourage congregational prayer, one of the purposes of which is for people to experience the beauty of living side by side with others. In the field of exegesis, Al-Tustari employs a philosophical approach in his interpretations. Al-Tustari seeks to uncover the wisdom contained in the texts, messages, and teachings of the Quran through his exegesis. Through this philosophical approach, one will not be trapped in a formalistic religious experience but will also recognize and feel the spiritual values and wisdom behind the religious practices.

Historical Approach

History, in a lexical sense, is knowledge or an account of events or occurrences that actually took place in the past. Terminologically, history is the story and events of humanity's past, whether related to political, social, economic events, or natural phenomena. According to Ibn Khaldun, history is not merely understood as a record of past events but also as critical reasoning to uncover the truth behind a past event. Thus, the essential elements of history include the events themselves, the location, time, objects, background, and the human actors involved in those events, as well as the critical analytical ability of the historian.

The historical approach is a perspective used to reconstruct the past of humankind, viewing events from the perspective of the social consciousness that supports them. This approach is more commonly referred to as “social history” or “socio-historical.” This approach is the best alternative for explaining historical developments and changes in the past in a more actual and comprehensive manner. Through the historical approach, one is invited to delve from the realm of identity into the empirical and global realm. From this state, one will see the gaps or similarities between what exists in the idealistic realm and what exists in the empirical and historical realm.

The historical approach to understanding religion is an effort to understand religion from a perspective familiar in historical sciences, in which history is influenced by many factors, including the era and ways of thinking at that time, and so on. This historical approach is certainly very necessary in understanding religion, because religion emerged in a concrete situation and is even related to social conditions. In the Qur'an, there are several verses or surahs that were revealed as a response to the societal issues of that time. To understand these verses accurately and comprehensively, knowledge of the socio-historical conditions of society at the time of their revelation is required. This knowledge forms part of the science of *asbab al-nuzul*, which essentially encompasses the historical context behind the revelation of a verse. Similarly, in the hadith, this is known as *asbab al-wurud*.

The Qur'an also devotes considerable space to discussing stories and events from the past. In this regard, Kuntowijoyo, as quoted by Nata, concluded after conducting an in-depth study of the Qur'an that it is essentially divided into two parts. The first part contains concepts, and the second part contains historical stories and parables. The concepts in the Qur'an aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the values and teachings of Islam, while the second part contains the stories narrated in the Qur'an. The stories in the Qur'an can be divided into three parts. First, the stories of the prophets and messengers, as well as the righteous people. Second, the stories of the disobedient. Third, the stories of the creation of the universe and its contents.

Cultural Approach

The word “culture” comes from the Sanskrit word *buddhayah*, which is the plural form of *budhi*, meaning intellect or reason. In foreign languages, culture is referred to as *culture*, which comes from the Latin word *colere*, meaning to cultivate, to work, and especially related to the cultivation of land or farming. Therefore, in general, culture can be defined as everything produced by human intellect (mind) with the aim of cultivating the environment and their place of residence. It can also be interpreted as all human efforts to sustain and maintain their lives within their environment.

Culture is a complex that encompasses knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and other abilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society. In other words, this definition states that culture is everything that humans acquire and learn as members of society. Meanwhile, Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana defines culture more broadly. He states that “culture is a manifestation of the way of thinking.” From this definition, culture encompasses all actions and deeds, and can be

expressed in terms of the basis and manner of thinking, feelings, and intentions. Thus, culture is the result of human creativity using and mobilizing all of their inner potential. Culture includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, customs, and so on. All of these are then used as a frame of reference by a person in responding to the problems they face. Thus, culture serves as an intermediary that is continuously maintained by its creators and the subsequent generations who inherit that culture.

Culture as one approach to understanding religion can be understood as a way of understanding religion by looking at the empirical form of religion or the form of religious practice that grows and develops in a society. Religious practices found in society are processed by their adherents from religious sources, namely revelation through reasoning. For example, when we read a book on fiqh, which is a manifestation of the texts of the Qur'an and hadith, it already involves elements of reasoning and the capabilities of society. Thus, religion becomes part of the culture within society. Through the teachings of religion that have become part of the culture and an understanding of that culture, an individual can practice the teachings of religion. The cultural approach as intended is highly necessary. At the very least, the first objective is to understand the religious character of a society, and the second, building on the first, is to guide and strengthen the religious beliefs of the members of that society in accordance with the correct teachings of that religion, if it turns out that the society has not been practicing religion correctly without causing conflict. In daily life, we encounter cultures that are integrated with religious elements, such as clothing, socializing, and so on. Conversely, without cultural elements, it is difficult to clearly see the religious aspect. For example, mosques, prayer mats, caps, and sarongs are cultural products.

Psychological Approach

Etymologically, psychology is derived from the English word “psychology,” which originates from the Greek words “psyche,” meaning soul or mind, and “logos,” meaning knowledge. Thus, psychology refers to the science that studies the soul or mind, commonly known as the science of the soul. Scholars of psychology do not differ greatly in their definitions of psychology. Lahey, a psychologist, defines psychology as “the scientific study of behavior and mental processes.” Behavior refers to all observable actions or activities, while mental processes encompass thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

Thus, the formal object of psychology is the human soul. Since the human soul cannot be observed directly, its material object is human attitudes and behavior, which are reflections or manifestations of the human soul itself. Furthermore, psychology can also be used as a method of approach in understanding religion. The psychological approach is an approach that uses the perspective of psychology. Since psychology is a science that studies the human soul, the psychological approach limits itself to the study of the human soul. If religion is approached by a psychological approach, then the object of study is the human soul as seen in relation to religion. The psychological approach is an approach that aims to see the state of the souls of religious individuals. In this approach, what is interesting to researchers is the state of the human soul in relation to religion. Furthermore, the psychological approach aims to explain the phenomenon of human religiosity by analyzing the state of the human soul (Febriani et al., 2022; Suprianto et al., 2023).

According to Zakiah Daradjat, a person's outward behavior is influenced by their beliefs. When people meet, they greet each other. Respect for parents, teachers, covering one's body, being willing to sacrifice for the truth, and so on are religious phenomena that can be explained through religious psychology. Religious psychology, according to Zakiah Daradjat, does not question the validity of a person's religion, but rather focuses on how that religious belief influences the behavior of its adherents. In religious teachings, terms that describe a person's inner

attitude are often encountered. For example, the attitude of faith and piety toward Allah. As a righteous person, one who does good, is honest, and so on. All of these are psychological phenomena related to religion.

As an autonomous discipline, religious psychology also has several approaches, including: first, the structural approach, which aims to study a person's experience based on certain levels or categories. Second, the functional approach, which is used to study how religion can function or influence an individual's behavior in their life. Third, the psychoanalytic approach, which is used to explain the influence of religion on an individual's personality and its relationship to mental illnesses.

Through the psychological approach, we can determine the level of religiosity that a person experiences, understands, and practices. Additionally, it can be used as a tool to instill religious values and teachings into a person's soul according to their age. By utilizing this knowledge, religion can find the appropriate and suitable methods to instill its values and teachings. For example, we can understand the influence of prayer, fasting, zakat, hajj, and other religious practices through psychology. With this knowledge, new and more efficient steps can be developed to instill religious teachings.

CONCLUSION

From the description of approaches to understanding religion, it can be concluded that approaches to understanding religion are efforts to understand religion from the perspective of various disciplines. This is very important considering that religion and its teachings are very complex. Therefore, various approaches are needed to understand religion in order to avoid narrow-mindedness in understanding religion. Some of the approaches to understanding religion discussed in this paper are: the theological-normative approach, the anthropological approach, the sociological approach, the philosophical approach, the historical approach, the cultural approach, and the psychological approach. Furthermore, from the description of these approaches to understanding religion, it can be seen that religion can be understood through various approaches. Through these approaches, one can understand religion. Thus, religion is not the sole domain of theologians and normativists. Rather, sociologists, anthropologists, cultural scholars, and psychologists can also understand religion correctly through their respective disciplines. These approaches to understanding religion also provide us with a comprehensive understanding of religion and emphasize that religion especially Islam—is a religion that is appropriate for every time and place.

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