



MORAL BOUNDARIES OF HUMOR IN DIGITAL DA'WAH: AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS BASED ON MAQASID AL-SHARI'AH

Abstract. Contemporary Islamic Da'wah faces a complex ethical dilemma due to mediatization pressures demanding entertainment (*engagement*) while simultaneously maintaining moral integrity. This research aims to examine the ethical limits of humor (*mazhaba*) and mockery (*istibza'*) in Da'wah through the lens of Moral Philosophy. The method employed is qualitative normative-philosophical analysis, examining ethical imperatives based on *Maqasid al-Syari'ah* and Imam Al-Ghazali's *Tazkijah al-Nafs* theory. The findings confirm that *Istibza'* (mockery) based on the principle of Superiority, such as disparaging social status or profession, constitutes a direct violation of *Hifz al-'Irdh* (protection of dignity), which is categorized as *dharuriyyah* (primary necessity) in Shari'ah. Philosophically, *Istibza'* is a manifestation of the failure of *riyadhab al-nafs* (spiritual discipline) and contradicts the principle of *Tawhid and the ethics of Ihsan* which demand humility (*tawadhu'*) and the application of the Golden Rule of Ethical Reciprocity. Controversial cases in Indonesia serve as empirical evidence that the risk of collective harm (*mafsadah*), amplified by digital viral dynamics, outweighs the purported benefit of entertainment. Therefore, digital *Da'i* are mandated to implement Predictive Ethical Consequence Analysis to maintain authentic moral authority.

Keywords: *Maqasid al-Syari'ah*, Humor, *Istibza'*, Moral Philosophy, *Hifz al-'Irdh*, *Tazkijah al-Nafs*.

Author:Pebi Agustiana¹Siti Rahayu²**Affiliation:**^{1,2}UIN Fatmawati
Sukarno Bengkulu,
Indonesia**Corresponding author:**pebiagustiana@
gmail.com**How to cite this article:**Agustiana, Pebi.,
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Abstrak. Dakwah Islam kontemporer menghadapi dilema etis yang kompleks akibat tekanan mediatiasi yang menuntut aspek hiburan (keterlibatan audiens), sekaligus kewajiban untuk menjaga integritas moral. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji batas-batas etika humor (*mazhabah*) dan ejekan (*istibzā*) dalam dakwah melalui perspektif filsafat moral. Metode yang digunakan adalah analisis kualitatif normatif-filosofis, dengan menelaah imperatif etika berdasarkan kerangka *Maqāṣid al-Syā'i'ah* dan teori *Tazkiyah al-Nafs* Imam al-Ghazali. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *istibzā* (ejekan) yang didasarkan pada prinsip superioritas, seperti merendahkan status sosial atau profesi tertentu, merupakan pelanggaran langsung terhadap *hifz al-'ird* (perlindungan kehormatan), yang dikategorikan sebagai kebutuhan *darūriyyah* (primer) dalam syariat Islam. Secara filosofis, *istibzā* merupakan manifestasi kegagalan *riyādah al-nafs* (disiplin spiritual) dan bertentangan dengan prinsip tauhid serta etika *ihsān* yang menuntut sikap rendah hati (*tawādu'*) dan penerapan kaidah emas *resiprokitas etis* (Golden Rule). Kasus-kasus kontroversial di Indonesia menjadi bukti empiris bahwa risiko kerusakan kolektif (*mafsadah*), yang diperkuat oleh dinamika viral digital, jauh lebih besar dibandingkan manfaat hiburan yang diklaim. Oleh karena itu, para da'i digital dituntut untuk menerapkan Analisis Prediktif Konsekuensi Ethis (Predictive Ethical Consequence Analysis) guna menjaga otoritas moral yang autentik.

Kata Kunci: *Maqasid al-Syari'ah*, Humor, *Istibzā*, Filsafat Moral, *Hifz al-'Irdh*, *Tazkiyah al-Nafs*.



INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation has revolutionised all aspects of human life, including religious practices and expressions (Nurjanah & Atus Sholeha, 2024). Contemporary Islamic preaching has undergone a significant shift, moving from physical pulpits to virtual spaces that require adaptive communication formats. In this context, humour emerges as an effective rhetorical strategy to lighten the mood, reduce boredom, and strengthen the emotional bond between *the preacher* and the audience (*mad'u*) (Qudratullah, 2025).

However, the efficacy of humour is framed by inherent ethical risks. From an Islamic perspective, humour is permitted as long as it does not violate sharia law, especially the principles of honesty (*shidq*) and non-harm (*Adh-Dhirar*). Violating these boundaries can turn light-hearted jokes (*mazhabaka*) into prohibited mockery (*istibza'*).

This ethical crisis is clearly recorded in the case of Gus Miftah in Indonesia, where a joke aimed at a bottled iced tea seller, Sunhaji, sparked widespread controversy (Fahmi, 2025). Although intended as situational humour, the public interpreted it as an act of arrogance, conceit, and degradation of the dignity of the working class (Rosalinda, 2025). The ethical consequences of this incident were so severe that it prompted reprimands from the President and Prime Minister of Malaysia, ultimately leading to the dai's resignation from public office. (Rosalinda, 2025).

This phenomenon reflects a larger ethical challenge at the global level: the mediatisation of religion (Pranoto, 2023). Mediatisation changes the nature of public representation of religion, encouraging digital preachers to become "celebrity preachers" (*microcelebrity dai*) whose authority is based on digital popularity rather than solely on traditional hierarchy. This dependence on virality and *engagement* creates acute tension between theological integrity and *user-friendly presentation* (Taufikin & Nurhayati, 2025). When ethics are

violated, the charismatic authority quickly built around *preachers* can collapse just as quickly (Andok, 2024).

This ethical crisis of humour reveals a fundamental gap between Islamic moral principles (*ushuluddin*) and communication practices in the digital space. To address this gap, this study focuses on an in-depth moral philosophical analysis that goes beyond practical fiqh fatwas. The core of this study is to answer two main philosophical questions. First, how does Islamic Moral Philosophy (especially the *Maqasid al-Syari'ah* framework and Al-Ghazali's ethics) set absolute limits for *Istibza'* and Superiority humour? Second, why is the violation of dignity (*Hijz al-'Irdh*) through humour in the digital space considered a transgression against the essential objectives of Sharia, and what are its implications for the issues of social cohesion and religious moderation at the national level?

Theoretically, this study contributes to strengthening contemporary Maqasid al-Syari'ah literature by positioning *Hijz al-'Irdh* and *Hijz al-Lisan* as urgent *al-dharuriyyāt* (primary needs) in the digital ecosystem (Hamim, 2021). Practically, this study provides a Predictive Ethics Framework for digital da'wah, ensuring that Da'wah functions as a means to achieve *maslahah* (collective good) without causing *mafsadah* (social harm) (Razak et.al, 2025).

This study uses a Qualitative Normative-Philosophical Approach. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is on analysing the principles of ethics and morality from primary legal sources (*Ushuluddin*), namely the Qur'an and Sunnah, as well as classical Islamic Moral Philosophy works. The data in this study consists of primary literature (Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and quotations from classical works) and secondary literature (contemporary academic journals) discussing ethics, morality, *Maqasid al-Syari'ah*, Al-Ghazali's moral psychology, and the controversial phenomenon



of digital Da'wah in Indonesia and globally. The data analysis process was carried out in three main stages:

1. Normative Hermeneutic Analysis: Analysing *Ushuluddin* texts (Hadith, Al-Qur'an) to find ethical imperatives of humour (*Sidq*, *Adab-Dhirar*, *Ghayr Mufrid*).
2. Philosophical Moral Analysis: Using Imam Al-Ghazali's *Tazkiyah al-Nafs* Theory framework to identify *Istibza'* as a pathology of the soul (*kibr*, *ujub*) and a failure to apply the Golden Rule of Reciprocal Ethics.
3. Analysis of *Maqasid al-Syari'ah*: Applying a contemporary Maqasid framework to assess the impact of digital *Istikza'* on the objectives of Sharia, particularly *Hifz al-'Irdh* and *Hifz al-Lisan*, as the highest standards of morality.

A controversial case study in Indonesia (the Gus Miftah case) is used as empirical evidence (*phenomenological approach*) to validate the socio-political consequences of this philosophical ethical violation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Theological Analysis of Humour: *Sidq*, *Adab*, and the Limits of *Istihza*

Humour in Islam is categorised into *mazhaka* (permitted jokes) and *bużl* or *istibza'* (prohibited mockery/ridicule). The distinguishing criteria are based on three theological imperatives:

1. Imperative of Honesty (*Sidq*) and Non-Harm

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a model of ethical humour. His jokes were permissible because they were rooted in *shidq*, or truthfulness. This is emphasised in the hadith: "Verily, I also joke, but I say nothing except the truth" (HR. al-Tirmidhi). Philosophically, lying (*kizb*) in jokes is strictly prohibited because it damages the integrity of the *Da'i* and the message of da'wah,



making it a major sin that removes *gravitas* (authority) (Este Yusuf, 2010). Epistemologically, lying is a rejection of the actual reality (*baq*), which is the core of Tawhid

2. Absolute Prohibition of *Istihza'* (Mockery)

The Qur'an shows great concern for the prohibition of *Istihza'*, even more so than its emphasis on positive humour (Lintott, 2016). The Qur'an explicitly prohibits belittling other people: "Let not a group of people mock another group, it may be that the latter are better than the former" (QS. Al-Hujurat: 11).

This prohibition is an absolute rejection of the Theory of Superiority Humour, which is the view that laughter arises from feelings of superiority over the weaknesses of others (Lintott, 2016). Classical philosophers such as Aristotle even defined demeaning jokes as "*a kind of abuse*" (Smuts Aaron, 2009). Islam rejects this principle because humour based on superiority is inherently contrary to *Adab and Ihsan* (Kaniz, 2025). Prophetic humour, on the other hand, always aims to unite the weak and eliminate tension, not to exploit class differences (Amin Yasmin, 2021).

B. Al-Ghazali's Moral Philosophy: *Istihza'* and the Pathology of *Tazkiyah al-Nafs*

Imam Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) in *Ihya Ulumuddin* provides a profound moral psychological framework for analysing the roots of *Istihza'* as spiritual failure. For Al-Ghazali, the highest ethical goal is Purification of the Soul (*Tazkiyah al-Nafs*), which is achieved through self-discipline (*riyadhab al-nafs*).

1. The Greatness of *Riyadhab al-Nafs*

Al-Ghazali divides the soul (nafs) into several forces, which must be controlled in order to achieve *akhlak al-karimah*. Excessive humour (*muizzah*) and mockery are categorised as ailments *of the tongue*, because they reflect an imbalance of the soul. Al-Ghazali strongly criticises excessive laughter (*kathratu al-dabk*) because it is considered to "deadens the heart" (*deadens the heart*): Results, S_S6]. That is, it weakens spiritual sensitivity and ethical awareness. Excessive laughter, in the context of Al-Ghazali's pathology, is a sign that *qurrah syahwah* (desire for pleasure and popularity) has dominated reason and religion.

Furthermore, *Istihza'* is understood not only as a violation of communication ethics, but also as an external manifestation of deeper heart diseases, such as *kibr* (arrogance) and *ujub* (pride). An arrogant *Da'i* (istikhar) tends to view weaker audiences as tools, not a trust. The failure of *riyadhab al-nafs* makes *Istihza'* a spontaneous behaviour, indicating that bad character has taken root in the soul.

2. Violation of the Golden Rule of Reciprocal Ethics

Al-Ghazali strongly emphasised the importance of self-introspection (*mubasabah*) as a means of achieving good character. *Muhasabah* is directed at the application *of the Golden Rule of Reciprocity*: "Treat others as you would like to be treated", which in Al-Ghazali's framework serves as a measure of moral justice and spiritual sensitivity.

In cases where someone's professional status is belittled, *Da'i* morally fails in muhasabah because he is unable to feel the belittled social position (Fikriyah, et.al, 2024) *Istihza'* is a failure of transcendental empathy, which violates the principles of justice and



brotherhood (*Adab al-Ukhwah*) that must be upheld in Islamic social ethics.

C. *Maqasid Al-Syari'ah*: The Imperative of *Hifz al-'Irdh* in the Digital Ecosystem

The *Maqasid al-Syari'ah* framework is used to affirm *Istikza'* as a violation that has implications for the highest legal objectives.

1. *Hifz al-'Irdh* and *Karamah Insaniyyah*

Hifz al-'Irdh (Protection of Dignity and Honour) is a pillar of Maqasid that protects one's own dignity and that of others, and is a goal agreed upon by both classical and contemporary scholars (Pranoto, 2023). *Istihza* attacks honour, not just feelings. Human dignity (*Karamah Insaniyyah*), which is a divine right, demands that every individual be treated with respect (PBNU, 2017). *Istibza'* that demeans a profession (such as in the case of the tea seller) is a violation of *Irdh* because it damages an individual's image in the virtual public sphere, which is now included in the domain of contemporary *Irdh* protection (Hamdi Saibatul and Mustofa Khabib, 2025).

2. The Urgency of *Hifz al-Lisan* as Contemporary *Dhuriyyah*

In the digital age, *Hifz al-Lisan* (Control of Speech) has gained new urgency and must be recognised as *al-dhāriyyat* (Hamim Khairul, 2023). Speech in digital media has a mafsadah impact that is amplified by virality and decontextualisation (Felix, 2012). *Istibza'* triggers negative behaviours such as sarcasm, spreading slander, and hate speech (Hamim Khairul, 2023). Therefore, *Maqasid* demands Predictive Ethical Consequence Analysis (*Prevention of Mafsadah*). If



humour is prone to being misunderstood as insulting, *Maqasid* ethics require *Da'i* to eliminate it in order to maintain social cohesion (Muhammad Asyraf Mohd Ridzuan1, Muhd Imran Abd Razak2, Ahmad Firdaus Mohd Noor2, Khairunnisa A Shukor3, 2025).

D. Implications of Digital Ethics and the Contest of Authority

The controversy surrounding religious humour in digital spaces reflects a profound transformation in the structure of religious authority, both globally and nationally. Digital media not only reshapes modes of communication but also reconfigures how authority is constructed, contested, and delegitimised in contemporary Islamic discourse.

1. Mediatisation and Fragmentation of Religious Authority (International Context)

The phenomenon of mediatisation of religion has significantly altered traditional patterns of religious authority. Mediatisation refers to the process by which religious meanings, symbols, and authority are increasingly shaped by media logic rather than institutional frameworks. In this context, the authority of established religious institutions—such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah—faces erosion as religious influence shifts toward digitally mediated figures, including charismatic preachers, influencers, and independent *da'i* operating through social media platforms.

This transformation results in a fragmented authority landscape, where legitimacy is no longer derived primarily from scholarly lineage, institutional endorsement, or methodological rigor, but from visibility, virality, and emotional resonance. Consequently, religious authority becomes highly unstable and contingent, vulnerable to rapid accumulation as well as sudden collapse.



In such a fragmented environment, khuluq (moral character) emerges as the most authentic and enduring form of moral capital. Unlike symbolic authority or digital popularity, khuluq functions as an ethical foundation deeply rooted in Islamic normative theology. Classical Islamic scholarship consistently emphasises that the credibility of religious authority is inseparable from moral conduct (akhlaq), as reflected in the Prophetic tradition that places ethical excellence (*husn al-khuluq*) at the core of religious leadership (Al-Ghazali, 2005).

Within this ethical framework, *istikzā'*—manifested through arrogance, mockery, or condescension in public preaching—constitutes a critical moral failure. When a *da'i* displays arrogance or humiliates others through humour, such behaviour directly contradicts universal Islamic values such as *tawādu'* (humility) and *īhsān* (compassion and moral excellence). This ethical violation immediately delegitimises the religious authority that may have been accumulated through digital reach or popularity, as moral credibility is perceived as non-negotiable in Islamic ethical discourse. Thus, in the digital public sphere, ethical failure operates as an instant mechanism of authority erosion.

2. The Ethics of *Ihsan* and Religious Moderation (National Context: Indonesia)

In the Indonesian context, the practice of *istihzā'* in religious communication has direct implications for the national agenda of Religious Moderation (Moderasi Beragama). Religious Moderation, as promoted by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, emphasises balance (*tawassuṭ*), tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), and justice ('*adl*) in



religious expression, particularly within a plural and multicultural society (Nurjanah & Atus Sholeha, 2024).

From an ethical standpoint, Religious Moderation requires da'i to convey Islamic teachings through hikmah (wisdom) and ihsān (compassionate excellence). Effective da'wah is not merely concerned with doctrinal correctness but also with ethical sensitivity, social harmony, and emotional intelligence. Humour, when used appropriately, can serve as a pedagogical tool that humanises religious messages and enhances audience engagement.

However, *istibzā* that is exclusive, demeaning, or sarcastic toward certain groups fundamentally contradicts the ethos of Religious Moderation. Such humour reinforces symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them,” intensifies polarisation, and contributes to the formation of ideological echo chambers within social media ecosystems. Rather than fostering inclusivity, it risks amplifying sectarian sentiment and digital hostility.

Therefore, dakwah humour should function as a medium for disseminating values of pluralism, tolerance, and social cohesion, rather than as a tool for ridicule or moral superiority. When humour aligns with ihsān, it strengthens the ethical authority of the preacher and supports the broader national objective of maintaining religious harmony in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the limits of humour in preaching are a transcendental moral imperative rooted in *Maqasid al-Syari'ah* and Islamic Moral Philosophy. *Istibzā* (mockery), especially that which exploits power asymmetries, is not merely a rhetorical error, but a serious violation of Hifz



al-'Irdh (protection of dignity). Al-Ghazali's moral framework emphasises that Istikza' is a manifestation of the failure of tazkiyah al-nafs, where Da'i fails to internalise tawadhu' and muhasabah. In the digital context, *Da'i* must prioritise the ethics of *Ihsan* and *Hifz al-Lisan* over the demands of virality, applying Predictive Ethical Consequence Analysis to prevent collective *mafsadah*.

Theoretically, this study confirms the relevance of Maqasid *al-Syari'ah* as a normative and adaptive ethical framework for contemporary digital communication dynamics. These findings specifically reinforce the urgency of renewing the status of *Hifz al-Lisan as dharuriyyah* in the information age, given the enormous potential for moral and social damage caused by uncontrolled speech. Practically, this study recommends that preachers adopt inclusive humour standards that eliminate elements of superiority and contempt. Islamic educational institutions must emphasise Spiritual Discipline (*Riyadhab al-Nafs*) as the foundation for *Khuluq Da'i*, ensuring that moral character is a prerequisite before achieving digital authority.

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