



Islam and Plurality in the Context of Communication, Comparison of the Interpretations of Al-Misbah and AlAzhar

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Abstract

Background: Indonesia's plural society—comprising diverse ethnicities, religions and cultures—demands an ethical and inclusive Islamic communication. Q 49:13 and Q 30:22 are taken as theological bases regarding diversity as a divine sunna that must be met through mutual knowledge and respect. This study compares the interpretations of two contemporary tafsirs—Tafsir al-Misbah by M. Quraish Shihab and Tafsir al-Azhar by Buya Hamka—to extract Islamic communication principles for a multicultural society.

Method: Descriptive-analytical library research with a thematic-interpretive approach. Primary data were the two commentaries on the selected verses highlighting human diversity; comparative analysis identified similarities, differences and communicative relevance.

Results: Al-Misbah stresses universal equality, reciprocal ta'āruf (mutual recognition) and piety as the sole measure of honour, yielding rational-humanist communication. Al-Azhar adds a moral-spiritual dimension: physical differences stem from one biological origin; language and skin colour are divine aesthetic signs; diversity must be appreciated to strengthen social bonds.

Conclusion: Both tafsirs agree that Islamic communication is not merely message delivery but a space for forging just, tolerant and empathetic social ethics. The principle of ta'āruf serves as a cross-cultural bridge, prevents digital polarisation and guides the building of social cohesion in the multicultural era.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is comprised of diverse ethnicities, languages, customs, and social practices. Currently, Indonesia has over 1,300 ethnic groups forming distinct social groups, each with its own unique internal culture, from social structures to cultural traditions (Hidayah & Sholikhah, 2024). This diversity is not merely a matter of ordinary learning but also a reality of everyday life within society, influencing social interactions and community identity (Komala et al., 2025). With the diversity of ethnicities, races, and religions in Indonesia, this plurality presents a challenge in itself for building relationships between social groups in the modern era (Mulyawan et al., 2021).

In contrast to pluralism, plurality refers to the real and factual diversity in society, while pluralism is more about the attitude or ideology of accepting and respecting that diversity. (Zainuri & Al-Hakim, 2021) Plurality in Indonesia is a social reality that must be accepted and appreciated as a gift. Managing plurality means acknowledging diversity without imposing uniformity, as well as building inclusive and responsive communication to the challenges of the modern era (Anshari, 2025). This requires a shared awareness from all elements of society to maintain harmony and prevent conflicts that are detrimental to all parties.

Islamic teachings view plurality as *sunnatullah*, namely God's decree that created humans of diverse ethnicities, nations, and religions so that they can know and respect one another, as explained in QS Al-Hujurat verse 13. (Firdaus et al., 2025) The values contained in QS al-Hujurat [49]:13 are indeed very relevant to the principles of Islamic communication. This verse teaches the importance of *ta'aruf* (getting to know each other), which in the context of communication means building relationships based on mutual respect and understanding of differences. This principle forms the basis for inclusive cross-cultural and interfaith communication in a pluralistic society.

In Islam, plurality is not considered a threat but a social reality that must be faced with an open, just, and tolerant attitude. Islam does not reject plurality and even regulates it within the framework of *ukhuwah insaniyah* (Aswarm et al., 2024). In today's digital era, communication often gives rise to misunderstandings, polarization, and identity conflicts due to the misuse of social media. Therefore, the communication values derived from the Quran are crucial to reintroduce as moral and ethical guidelines for interactions between social groups.

To understand the Quran's message about plurality more deeply, an interpretive approach is needed that can explain the meaning of the verses according to the social and cultural context of society. Interpretation is an important tool for exploring the universal values of the Quran so that they can be applied to modern life, including in building cross-cultural and interfaith communication. In this regard, *Tafsir al-Misbah* by M. Quraish Shihab and *Tafsir al-Azhar* by Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (Buya Hamka) are two important references with different styles and approaches. *Tafsir al-Misbah* displays a rich scholarship with a rational and contextual approach that highlights the social and humanitarian values of the Quran,

while Tafsir al-Azhar stands out for its beautiful language and emphasis on moral and spiritual dimensions. The combination of the two is considered capable of providing a comprehensive understanding of the message of plurality in Islam. Various studies have addressed the issue of plurality from an Islamic perspective. Yasyva and Yusniar, for example, examine the role of intercultural communication in building attitudes and thinking about pluralism and tolerance among religious communities in Indonesia. (Nizar & Rofiqoh, 2021) Meanwhile, Erwin examines how Islamic teachings play a role in fostering tolerance and solidarity in a pluralistic society. (Notanubun, 2020) Another study by Alfan Zamzami Fadlilah and Ali Abdur Rohman highlights the concept of religious pluralism in the Quran through a comparative analysis of the interpretations of Sayyid Qutb and M. Quraish Shihab, which demonstrates differing approaches to understanding the values of diversity. (Fadlilah & Rohman, 2024) Research by Khalil Nurul Islam emphasizes the concept of religious moderation in the context of the plurality of the Indonesian nation and emphasizes the importance of a mental revolution based on Quranic values to foster tolerance and prevent interfaith conflict. (Islam, 2020)

However, most of this research focuses on theological and general social aspects, failing to deeply examine how the values in QS al-Hujurat: 13 can be interpreted as principles of communication in the context of modern society. Therefore, this study offers a new perspective by analyzing plurality from the perspective of Islamic communication through a comparison of Tafsir al-Misbah and al-Azhar to explore Islamic communication messages that can be applied in building harmonious social relations in a pluralistic society. This study uses a thematic-interpretive approach, namely a method that examines the verses of the Qur'an based on a specific theme, in this case about plurality and communication. Through this approach, the researcher analyzes the meaning of QS al-Hujurat verse 13 and Ar-Rum verse 22 as interpreted in Tafsir Al-Misbah and Tafsir Al-Azhar, in order to explore the values of Islamic communication contained therein and their relevance to the life of a pluralistic society in the modern era.

METHOD

This study uses a library research method with a descriptive-analytical approach. The research data are classified into two types, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data are sourced from the book Tafsir Al-Misbah by M. Quraish Shihab and Tafsir Al-Azhar by Hamka, while secondary data are obtained from various books, journal articles, and other scientific sources relevant to the research focus. The analytical technique used is comparative analysis, namely by comparing the interpretations of the two commentators of the verses studied to find similarities, differences, and characteristics of each interpretation.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Plurality in Islamic Communication

Derived from English, Plural means multiple, compound, and diverse. Plurality is the essence of diversity within society, encompassing ethnicity, race, and culture. Meanwhile, pluralism is an understanding or ideology and attitude that addresses diversity through respect and tolerance (Ghofir, 2022). The concept of plurality is explained in Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13 of the Quran, and also in Surah Ar-Rum, verse 22. These verses serve as the primary foundation for how communication occurs in such a diverse society. In Islam, communication is not merely about speaking or interacting. It is a way for humans to build relationships, interact, and send and receive messages based on noble morals, regardless of background, culture, or skin color. Through communication, humans establish vertical communication with Allah SWT, known as *hablumminallah*, and horizontal communication with other humans, also known as *hablumminannas* (Nuriana & Salwa, 2024).

Living in an environment with diverse social conditions, humans must understand the principles of equality and mutual respect to form a dynamic and peaceful society. Differences in the environment should not be seen as obstacles or opportunities to create intolerance, but rather as opportunities to build rich social relationships and make good communication and mutual respect a forum for building brotherhood (Syahriani et al., 2023). During the Farewell Hajj, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) advised that in social life, all have equal status; no group is more noble than another.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَلَا إِنَّ رَبُّكُمْ وَاحِدٌ وَإِنَّ أَبَاكُمْ وَاحِدٌ، أَلَا لَا فَضْلَ لِعَرَبِيٍّ عَلَى أَعْجَمِيٍّ وَلَا لِعَجَمِيٍّ عَلَى عَرَبِيٍّ وَلَا
لأَحْمَرَ عَلَى أَسْوَدَ وَلَا أَسْوَدَ عَلَى أَحْمَرَ إِلَّا بِالتَّقْوَى

"O mankind, know that your God is one. Your ancestors are also one. Know that no Arab is superior to any other Arab, and no other nation is superior to an Arab. No white person is superior to a black person, nor is a black person superior to a white person, except in piety." (Narrated by Ahmad, 22978).

This hadith emphasizes that the only difference between individuals is their level of piety; beyond that, all humans are equal. Therefore, in Islam, communication should be built on tolerance and equal respect for fellow human beings, regardless of culture, race, or wealth. In such a diverse society, communication is a crucial tool for building social integration. Islam views communication as a medium for avoiding and correcting misunderstandings, building social relations between individuals and groups. Communication in Islam is not only about conveying messages but also about strengthening the values of brotherhood (*ukhuwah*) and social responsibility among human beings. Not only fellow Muslims, but also brotherhood among fellow countrymen, and also of a universal nature.

Profile of Tafsir Al-Misbah and Al-Azhar

a. Al-Misbah Interpretation

Tafsir Al-Mishbah is a Quranic commentary by Indonesian scholar Prof. Dr. Muhammad Quraish Shihab. Published by Lentera Hati, this commentary comprises a comprehensive interpretation of all 30 chapters of the Quran, written systematically over a period of approximately 30 years. The name "Al-Mishbah" itself comes from Arabic for "lamp," symbolizing the purpose of this commentary to illuminate the

meaning of the Quranic verses. This commentary utilizes the tahlili method, a verse-by-verse interpretation based on the sequence of the Ottoman manuscripts, with a meticulous approach to *ijtima'i* and clear, engaging language (Purwaningrum & Muhammad, 2022). This commentary integrates the opinions of prominent classical and modern commentators, providing an argumentative and accessible explanation for a wide range of audiences, from academics to the general public. Methodologically, the *Al-Mishbah* commentary also emphasizes the correlation between verses and surahs, helping to unravel the framework of harmony and continuity of the Quran, thus rejecting the assumption that the Quranic verses are arranged randomly. This commentary is also known for presenting a contextual and humanistic understanding, in accordance with the conditions and needs of Muslims in Indonesia without neglecting the principles of classical scholarship. Muhammad Quraish Shihab has succeeded in producing a monumental work that not only serves as a primary reference for researchers and academics but is also understandable to the wider public, making the *Al-Mishbah* commentary one of the most important works of Quranic commentary in modern Indonesia.

Muhammad Quraish Shihab's profile is closely linked to this commentary. He was born in Rappang, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, on February 16, 1944, into a family of scholars. His father, Abdurrahman Shihab, was also a professor of tafsir, who influenced his love of tafsir from childhood. Muhammad Quraish Shihab graduated from Al-Azhar University in Cairo with an MA in 1969 and a doctorate in Qur'anic studies, *summa cum laude*, in 1982. In addition to his work as a scholar and commentator, he also served as Minister of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (1998), Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), and Rector of the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) in Jakarta. His academic and religious career has been prominent in enriching understanding of the Qur'an in Indonesia.

b. Al-Azhar Interpretation

Tafsir al-Azhar is a monumental work of interpretation of the Qur'an and is one of the greatest works of Prof. Dr. Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, better known as Buya Hamka. Written in Indonesian, this tafsir uses the tahlili method which interprets verse by verse analytically (Firdausiyah, 2021). Buya Hamka combines various approaches such as interpretation of verse by verse, hadith of the Prophet, opinions of friends and *tabi'in*, as well as referring to *muktabar* tafsir books. In his interpretation, he also inserts a critical personal view but still maintains neutrality in the sectarian debate (Hidayati, 2018). The main advantage of Tafsir al-Azhar is its ability to relate the teachings of the Qur'an to the social, cultural and historical context of Indonesia, making it accessible to general readers without losing the depth of meaning (Purwaningrum & Muhammad, 2022). Furthermore, Buya Hamka delivered his interpretation with a beautiful and communicative style, making it relevant and lively in addressing the challenges of the times and explaining the dynamics of Muslims in Indonesia from both a religious and national perspective. (Umar, 2019)

Buya Hamka's profile as the author of Tafsir al-Azhar is also very interesting. He was born on February 17, 1908, in West Sumatra, and was the son of a prominent

cleric, Dr. Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah. Buya Hamka was not only a cleric but also a prominent Indonesian Muslim writer, philosopher, and thinker. He was active as a journalist, writer, teacher, and even involved in politics through the Masyumi party. (AJMAIN, 2024) He also became the first Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and a prominent figure in Muhammadiyah. He acquired his religious education through self-study after a long journey to Mecca. Buya Hamka was known for his firmness in upholding Islamic faith and his extensive works, including renowned novels such as "Under the Protection of the Kaaba" and "The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck Ship," which influenced Indonesian Islamic literature and thought.

In addition to his academic and leadership achievements, Buya Hamka also played a significant role in Indonesia's religious and socio-political life. He received honorary doctorates from Al-Azhar University and the National University of Malaysia, as well as a professorship from Moestopo University. His name is immortalized in Hamka University, which is under the auspices of Muhammadiyah. In his various roles, Buya Hamka was known as a figure of broad insight and strong social sensitivity. He often linked Islamic teachings to social and political realities in Indonesia and remained firm in upholding Islamic principles despite facing political pressure, such as his resignation from the position of Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) in 1981 for upholding a previously issued fatwa.

Comparative Analysis of Two Interpretations of Plurality

Al-Hujurat verse 13

a) Equality of Degree

In a diverse society, Islam encourages its followers to communicate with each other and build relationships, as in the following verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَىٰ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind, indeed, We created you from male and female. Then We made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble among you in the sight of Allah is the most pious. Indeed, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.

In the Tafsir Al-Misbah, in this verse, the Quran does not address believers only; rather, this call is universal, as seen in the phrase "O mankind." Then, the excerpt from Allah's Word, "We created male and female..." as the beginning, affirms that the status of every created human being is equal without distinction of gender (Shihab, 2002).

In the Tafsir Al-Azhar, the beginning of verse 13 of Al-Hujurat is interpreted with two meanings: first, that all humans on earth originate from one ancestor, Adam and Eve. The second verse is generally interpreted to mean that all humans come from a male and a female (a father and a mother). The combination of these two distinct genetic makeups leads to various genetic mutations, resulting in the birth of individuals with black or white skin, narrow or wide eyes (Amrullah, 2003b). However, these differences are not yet visible until the human fetus is fully

developed. Therefore, although there is diversity at birth, all humans initially come from the same origin (a blend of paternal and maternal origins), which initially exhibits no differences in appearance.

Table 1. Comparison of Interpretations of Equality

Aspect	Al-Misbah Interpretation	Al-Azhar Interpretation
The Target of the Call	The universal call, "Yā ayyuhan-nās," encompasses all humanity.	Affirms that all humans share the same origin, starting with Adam and Eve.
The Meaning of the Creation of Man and Woman	It demonstrates the equality of all human beings, regardless of gender.	Demonstrates that all humans come from a father and a mother, and physical differences arise from genetic mutations/variations.
Main Message	Equality and equality before God.	All humans come from the same source, so physical differences are not a basis for discrimination.

In the context of communication, Surah Al-Hujurat verse 13 emphasizes the principle of inclusivity and equality in human interactions. The universal call "Yā ayyuhan-nās" indicates that the message of the Qur'an is addressed to all humans without exception, so that good communication must reach all parties and be open. Tafsir Al-Misbah emphasizes the equality of human dignity without distinguishing gender, which from a communication perspective means that every individual must be treated equally and valued, creating fair and discrimination-free interactions. Meanwhile, Tafsir Al-Azhar emphasizes the same biological origins of humans, so that physical or genetic differences are only part of the diversity of God's creation, not a basis for discrimination. This is relevant to cross-cultural communication, where diversity has the potential to expand relationships, get to know each other, and foster empathy. Therefore, this verse provides guidance that effective and ethical communication must recognize diversity as part of creation, respect equality, and utilize differences as a means of building harmonious relationships.

b) Get to know each other

In the verse "And the Most High, and the Most High," Tafsir Al-Misbah states that "And the Most High, and ... In Al-Azhar's interpretation, differences are not meant to alienate or differentiate between people, but rather to enable people to know one another and understand their origins. Wherever they are, people tend to seek out kinship and ancestral ties, so that those who are far away feel close and those who are strangers become familiar (Amrullah, 2003b).

Table 2. Comparison of Interpretations of the Command to Know One Another

Aspect	Al-Misbah Interpretation	Al-Azhar Interpretation
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The Meaning of "tā'arafū"	Using a reciprocal pattern, meaning getting to know each other.	Ethnic differences are meant to help people recognize their origins and kinship, not to alienate them.
The Purpose of Getting to Know Each Other	So that humans can exchange benefits, lessons, and experiences toward piety.	To make the distant feel close and the unfamiliar feel familiar.
Focus of Interpretation	Focus on the methods and benefits of the getting to know process.	Focus on social wisdom: strengthening human relationships.

From a communication perspective, this message emphasizes the importance of reciprocal relationships, where each party not only speaks but also listens and opens themselves to the experiences and perspectives of others. This process of getting to know each other becomes the foundation of empathetic communication, because the more we understand someone's background, the greater the potential for cooperation, trust, and mutual understanding. It also emphasizes that diversity is not a barrier, but rather a bridge that allows for the formation of a broader network of social relations. Humans naturally seek common ground, kinship, or similarities in interactions, and the Qur'an affirms this tendency as something positive for strengthening social ties. Thus, this verse encourages the creation of inclusive cross-cultural communication, where dialogue, understanding, and acceptance of differences are key to building harmony. The process of ta'arafū is not just "getting to know each other," but building relationships that erase distances, make the unfamiliar familiar, and make communication a means of strengthening common humanity.

c) Degree of Piety

In the Tafsir Al-Misbah, the piety contained in the fragment of Allah's Word in verse 13 of Surah Al Hujurat means eternal glory in the sight of Allah. Because basically humans tend to compete to collect worldly glory that is limited only while still alive and is transitory. And to achieve this eternal glory, it can only be achieved by carrying out His commands and avoiding His prohibitions. In the Tafsir Al-Azhar, the end of this verse explains to humans that true glory in the sight of Allah is not measured by one's origin, tribe, nation, or social status, but rather by their moral and spiritual qualities, namely a clean heart, noble morals, and obedience to Allah SWT (Amrullah, 2003b).

Table 3. Comparison of Interpretations of Piety

Aspect	Al-Misbah Interpretation	Al-Azhar Interpretation
Meaning of Glory	True glory is eternal glory in the sight of Allah through	Glory in the sight of God is not determined by race, ethnicity, or

	piety.	social standing, but by morality and spirituality.
The Measure of Glory	Carry out His commands and stay away from His prohibitions.	Purity of heart, noble character, and obedience.

In the context of communication, the emphasis on piety as a source of true nobility in verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat highlights that human interactions should be based on moral and spiritual qualities, not on social status, ethnicity, or origin. In the practice of communication, interactions are built with integrity, ethics, and good intentions, not simply seeking recognition or worldly gain. Every message conveyed in human interaction should reflect moral and spiritual qualities, so that communication does not become a tool to demean, judge, or differentiate people based on external factors, but rather as a means of building just, harmonious, and beneficial relationships for all parties.

Ar-Rum Verse 22

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَالْوَأْنِكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences in your languages and skin colors. Indeed, in this are signs for a people of knowledge.

This verse explains the signs of Allah SWT's greatness and power, which can be seen in His creation, both in the heavens, the earth, and in humans. Al-Misbah interprets that the heavens and the earth were created in a very orderly system, not colliding with each other, rotating according to a predetermined order, demonstrating the strength and precision of Allah's power. The differences in human language and skin color also testify to Allah's power. Although humans come from the same origin, Allah created them with diverse languages, dialects, voices, and skin colors. This demonstrates the beauty of His creation and wisdom. The word "alsinatikum" (your tongues) refers not only to the tongue, but also to language and voice. Each person has a unique voice; no two are alike, just like fingerprints. This is also one of the wonders of Allah's creation. The final verse states that these signs are for "people of knowledge," those who are willing to think and understand the meaning behind the differences and regularities of nature.

In the Tafsir Al-Azhar, this verse explains the signs of God's greatness and oneness, which we can see in the creation of the heavens, the earth, and the diversity of humanity. God created the heavens and the earth with a meticulous and orderly system. Everything runs smoothly without collision, like the orbits of the sun and the planets. This demonstrates His power and greatness. God also demonstrates His power through the differences in human language (alsinatikum) and skin color (alwanikum). All humans come from the same origin, but God has made us different in language, voice, and skin color. These differences are beauty and evidence of God's power, not to be debated, but to be grateful for (Amrullah, 2003a).

Table 4. Comparison of Interpretations of Diversity as Evidence of the Power of Allah SWT

Aspect	Al-Misbah Interpretation	Al-Azhar Interpretation
The Creation of Heaven and Earth	Created with a highly ordered system, without any conflict.	The perfectly regular rotation of the heavens and the earth demonstrates God's precision and greatness.
Differences in Language and Skin Color	"Alsinatikum" is not just the tongue, but languages, dialects, and voices; each human voice is unique.	Language, voice, and skin color are the beauty of God's creation and evidence of His power.
The Roots of Human Differences	Despite their common origin, God created humans in diversity to demonstrate the power and beauty of His creation.	All humans come from the same origin, and God has given us variations as a sign of His greatness.
Concluding Verse Message	These signs are understood by those of knowledge who are willing to contemplate the order of nature and human diversity.	Differences are not to be argued about, but to be celebrated as a sign of God's power.

From a communication perspective, the verses explaining the differences in language, voice, and skin color emphasize that diversity is part of the means of communication created by God. Therefore, it is important to appreciate the diversity of communication methods, whether in language, tone, or style. Thus, diversity of language and voice does not hinder dialogue but rather enriches human interaction, enabling inclusive, empathetic, and tolerant cross-cultural communication.

CONCLUSION

A study of QS al-Hujurat verse 13 and QS ar-Rum verse 22 in Tafsir al-Misbah by M. Quraish Shihab and Tafsir al-Azhar by Buya Hamka shows that plurality in Islam is understood as sunnatullah which contains ethical messages in building communication in a pluralistic society. Both commentators agree that diversity of ethnicity, language, and skin color is not the basis for differences in status, but rather a means to get to know each other, build empathy, and strengthen social relations. Tafsir al-Misbah emphasizes a contextual and humanist approach by highlighting the principles of equality, ta'aruf, and piety as the foundation of fair and inclusive communication, while Tafsir al-Azhar emphasizes the moral and spiritual dimensions by placing diversity as a form of the beauty of God's creation that must be appreciated and its harmony maintained. Comprehensively, the findings of this discussion confirm that communication from an Islamic perspective functions not merely as a means of conveying messages, but also as a space for developing social ethics oriented toward justice, tolerance, and humanitarian responsibility,

particularly in facing the challenges of cross-cultural communication and digital interaction. Therefore, Islamic communication values derived from the Qur'an and its interpretations need to be actualized in social practice to prevent conflict and polarization, and to serve as a basis for further development of Islamic communication studies by expanding the verses, interpretations, and approaches used.

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