

## **THE RULING ON WISHING MERRY CHRISTMAS TO NON-MUSLIMS: AN ANALYSIS OF M. QURAIISH SHIHAB'S INTERPRETATIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The debate on wishing Merry Christmas to non-Muslims has become a major focus in discussions among Muslims in Indonesia. The diverse perspectives on this issue reflect the tension between religious principles and the complex socio-cultural demands of a multicultural society. This study examines M. Quraish Shihab's views on the ruling of wishing Merry Christmas to non-Muslims, focusing on his inclusive interpretation, tolerance, and respect for religious diversity. This research employs a qualitative approach and uses hermeneutical analysis to explore the Qur'anic texts that form the basis of Quraish Shihab's views. The findings show that Quraish Shihab supports the practice of wishing Merry Christmas, considering it permissible in the context of strengthening social relationships, provided it is done with a clear intention and without acknowledging theological aspects that contradict Islam. A comparison with the views of other scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and Ahmed Kutty reveals a variety of opinions on this issue. The study concludes that Quraish Shihab's inclusive approach in his interpretation has made a valuable and positive contribution to understanding and applying Islamic values in a pluralistic society like Indonesia, while also emphasizing the importance of interfaith dialogue and maintaining harmonious social relationships.

**Keywords:** *Christmas, M. Quraish Shihab, Inclusive Interpretation.*

### **ABSTRAK**

Perdebatan mengenai mengucapkan selamat hari Natal kepada non-Muslim telah menjadi fokus utama dalam diskusi umat Islam di Indonesia. Pandangan beragam tentang hal ini mencerminkan ketegangan antara prinsip keagamaan dan tuntutan sosial budaya yang kompleks dalam masyarakat multikultural. Penelitian ini mengkaji pandangan M. Quraish Shihab terhadap hukum mengucapkan selamat Natal kepada non-Muslim, dengan fokus pada corak tafsir yang inklusif, toleransi, dan penghormatan terhadap keragaman agama. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan analisis hermeneutika digunakan untuk mengeksplorasi teks-teks Al-Qur'an yang menjadi dasar pandangan Quraish Shihab. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Quraish Shihab mendukung pengucapan selamat Natal, dan hukumnya boleh dalam konteks memperkuat hubungan sosial, asalkan dilakukan dengan niat yang jelas dan tanpa mengakui aspek teologis yang bertentangan dengan Islam. Perbandingan dengan pandangan ulama lain seperti Ibn Taymiyyah, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, dan Ahmed Kutty mengungkapkan variasi pandangan dalam isu ini. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendekatan inklusif Quraish Shihab dalam tafsirnya telah memberikan kontribusi berharga yang positif dalam memahami dan menerapkan nilai-nilai Islam dalam masyarakat yang pluralistik seperti Indonesia, sekaligus menegaskan pentingnya dialog antaragama dan memelihara keharmonisan hubungan sosial.

**Kata Kunci:** *Hari Natal, M. Quraish Shihab, Tafsir Inklusif.*

## A. Introduction

The issue of wishing Merry Christmas to non-Muslims has become a significant debate among Muslims, both in Indonesia and worldwide<sup>1</sup> Some view this action as a form of tolerance and respect for religious diversity, while others see it as an act that could weaken Islamic religious identity and beliefs. This debate reflects a broader tension within Islamic society on how to balance religious teachings with the demands of a pluralistic social life.<sup>2</sup>

The opposing opinions on wishing Merry Christmas also emerge among contemporary Islamic thinkers and figures, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Salih al-Uthaymeen. According to al-Qaradawi, there is no specific prohibition, either by institutions or individuals, against wishing Merry Christmas or other greetings to non-Muslims. Furthermore, al-Qaradawi also encourages being kind to non-Muslims who do not oppress Muslims. On the other hand, Sheikh Uthaymeen prohibits it, fearing that such actions might please the disbelievers and strengthen them. He also argues that it implies acknowledgment and acceptance of symbols of disbelief. Al-Qaradawi uses the method of *istishlahi* (jurisprudential preference) in deriving the ruling on this issue and linguistic reasoning based on textual indications. In contrast, Sheikh Uthaymeen uses the method of *mafhum mukhalafah* (argument from the opposite understanding) with apparent linguistic reasoning.<sup>3</sup>

Amid the complexity of this debate, M. Quraish Shihab, a prominent scholar and Qur'anic interpreter in Indonesia, contributes his opinion by providing a different and intriguing perspective on various religious issues. Quraish Shihab is known for his moderate and inclusive interpretative approach, often offering alternative views on contemporary issues faced by Muslims.<sup>4</sup> His approach to interpreting religious texts, including his views on wishing Merry Christmas to non-Muslims, provides valuable insights into how Muslims can coexist harmoniously with other religious communities without compromising their religious principles.<sup>5</sup>

This study aims to explore and analyze M. Quraish Shihab's interpretative approach regarding the ruling on wishing Merry Christmas to non-Muslims. Using hermeneutical theory and a qualitative approach, this research will evaluate how Quraish Shihab bases his views on Qur'anic and Hadith texts and how he interprets religious values within a broader social and cultural context.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rumadi Ahmad, 'Speaking the Unspeakable: The Status of "Non-Muslims" in Indonesia', *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam*, 6.2 (2022), 734 <<https://doi.org/10.22373/sjhk.v6i2.13576>>.

<sup>2</sup> Rahkman Ardi and others, 'Religious Schema and Tolerance towards Alienated Groups in Indonesia', *Heliyon*, 7.7 (2021), e07603 (p. 1) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07603>>.

<sup>3</sup> Agus Arif Sulaeman, 'HUKUM MENGUCAPKAN SELAMAT NATAL MENURUT YUSUF AL-QARADHAWI DAN SYAIKH MUHAMMAD IBN SHALEH AL-UTSAIMIN', *Al-Mazaahib: Jurnal Perbandingan Hukum*, 7.2 (2019), 131 (p. 131) <<https://doi.org/10.14421/al-mazaahib.v7i2.1880>>.

<sup>4</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan Dan Keserasian Al-Quran* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Demis E. Glasford and Justine Calcagno, 'The Conflict of Harmony: Intergroup Contact, Commonality and Political Solidarity between Minority Groups', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48.1 (2012), 323–28 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.10.001>>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Jamil and others, 'MUSLIM SCHOLARS INTERPRETATION OF DISCOURSE RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE VERSES: The Cases of Quraish Shihab, Yusuf Qaradawi, and Khaled Abou El-Fadl in Qur'an

Quraish Shihab's approach to this issue emphasizes the importance of universal Islamic values such as peace, tolerance, and respect for fellow human beings. According to him, wishing a Merry Christmas can be seen as a form of respect and a tangible expression of Islamic teachings that promote harmonious relations among religious communities.<sup>7</sup> However, Quraish Shihab also stresses the importance of intention and context in offering such greetings, emphasizing that the action should not contradict fundamental Islamic beliefs.

In the literature review, it was found that many scholars hold diverse views on this issue. Some scholars, like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, permit wishing Merry Christmas, citing reasons to maintain good relations and social peace,<sup>8</sup> whereas the Fatwa Council of Indonesia rejects it to preserve doctrinal purity.<sup>9</sup> Previous research indicates the need to delve deeper into these varied perspectives in more specific contexts.<sup>10</sup>

To address existing research gaps, this study will comprehensively examine M. Quraish Shihab's interpretations, which have not been extensively explored in previous research, particularly in the context of Islamic law regarding social interactions with non-Muslims.<sup>11</sup> The research methodology will involve textual analysis of Quraish Shihab's works and documentation through mass media sources.<sup>12</sup>

The data collected will be analyzed using a hermeneutical approach to understand how Quraish Shihab articulates his views on the legality of wishing Merry Christmas within the context of principles such as justice, balance, and humanity advocated by Islam.<sup>13</sup> The findings of this research are expected to make a significant contribution to broader discussions on interfaith relations and the role of religious interpretation in shaping harmonious social interactions.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, this study aims not only to evaluate legal perspectives but also to underscore the importance of inclusive and dialogical approaches in understanding and implementing Islamic teachings in pluralistic societies.<sup>15</sup>

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60: 8-9', *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*, 33 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.59670/jns.v33i.498>>.

<sup>7</sup> Buya Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar* (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Amna Khan, Andrew Lindridge, and Theeranuch Pusaksrikit, 'Why Some South Asian Muslims Celebrate Christmas: Introducing "Acculturation Trade-Offs"', *Journal of Business Research*, 82 (2018), 290–99 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.07.023>>.

<sup>9</sup> Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Cairo: Al-Falah Foundation, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Zakir Naik, *Common Misconceptions About Islam* (Mumbai: Islamic Research Foundation, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> John L. Esposito, 'Women in Muslim Family Law', *Verfassung in Recht Und Übersee*, 18.1 (1985) <<https://doi.org/10.5771/0506-7286-1985-1-78>>.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Cammack, *Islamic Law in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> David S. Powers, *Studies in Qur'an and Hadith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, *Mubādalāh: A New Approach to Gender Equality in Islam* (Jakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2011).

## **B. Discussion**

### **1. Biography of M. Quraish Shihab**

M. Quraish Shihab was born on February 16, 1944, in Rampang district, South Sulawesi, approximately 190 kilometers from Makassar.<sup>16</sup> His family comes from educated Arab descent. "Shihab" is their family name (his father's), commonly used in the Eastern regions (including the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia).<sup>17</sup>

His father, Abdurrahman Shihab (1905-1986), was a scholar and a grand master in the field of exegesis, actively involved in educational development. His father significantly shaped both his personality and his knowledge.<sup>18</sup> He completed his education at Jam'iyyah al-Khair in Jakarta, one of the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. His father was a professor of exegesis and served as the rector of IAIN Alaudin Ujung Pandang, and also founded the University of Muslim Indonesia (UMI) in Ujung Pandang.<sup>19</sup> His mother, Asma Aburisah, was also steadfast, especially in matters of religion, guided primarily by the Qur'an and Hadith in her life. He married Fatmawati in 1969 and they have five children: Najeela, Najwa, Nashwa, Ahmad Nizar, and Nahla.<sup>20</sup> They have pursued diverse careers, ranging from publishing directors to medical specialists. Quraish Shihab began his education at an elementary school in Ujung Pandang, South Sulawesi, then continued to secondary education in Malang while boarding at the Dar al-Hadis Al-Faqihiyyah Islamic boarding school.<sup>21</sup> Here, he was deeply impressed by his teachers, especially Habib Abdul Qadir bin Ahmad bin Faqih, who provided him with a strong personal foundation in practicing Islam and studying the Qur'an.<sup>22</sup>

Quraish Shihab and his brother departed for Cairo, Egypt, in 1958 with the assistance of a scholarship from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia.<sup>23</sup> In Egypt, he earned his Bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Usuluddin at al-Azhar University in 1967 and obtained his Master's degree in 1969, specializing in Quranic exegesis with a thesis titled "*al-I'jāz al-Tashri' li al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*".<sup>24</sup>

As a contemporary commentator and prolific writer, Quraish Shihab has produced a variety of works, including Quranic exegesis, critical studies, and writings related to Islam.<sup>25</sup> Some of his notable works include "*al-Quran: Fungsi dan Peranan Wahyu dalam*

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<sup>16</sup> M Djidin and Sahiron Syamsuddin, 'Indonesian Interpretation of the Qur'an on Khilāfah: The Case of Quraish Shihab and Yudian Wahyudi on Qur'an, 2: 30-38', *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 57.1 (2019), 143-66 (p. 145) <<https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2019.571.143-166>>.

<sup>17</sup> Saiful Amin Ghafur, *Profil Para Mufasssir Al-Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Insan Madani, 2008), p. 236.

<sup>18</sup> Sahiron Syamsuddin, 'Differing Responses to Western Hermeneutics: A Comparative Critical Study of M. Quraish Shihab's and Muḥammad 'Imāra's Thoughts', *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 59.2 (2021), 479-512 <<https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2021.592.479-512>>.

<sup>19</sup> Alwi Shihab, *Islam Inklusif: Menuju Terbuka Dalam Beragama* (Bandung: Mizan, 2020), p. v.

<sup>20</sup> Syamsuddin, p. 481.

<sup>21</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al Quran: Fungsi Dan Peran Wahyu Dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat* (Bandung: Mizan, 2013), p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Aiyub Aiyub and Isna Mutia, 'Muhammad Quraish Shihab's Methodology in Interpretation of The Qur'an', *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Mu Ashirah*, 20.1 (2023), 1 (p. 3) <<https://doi.org/10.22373/jim.v20i1.16891>>.

<sup>23</sup> Syamsuddin, p. 482.

<sup>24</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al Quran: Fungsi Dan Peran Wahyu Dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Djidin and Syamsuddin, p. 151.

*Kehidupan Masyarakat*" ("The Quran: Function and Role of Revelation in Society"), "*Wawasan Al-Quran: Tafsir Maudhu'i atas Berbagai Persoalan Umat*" ("Insights of the Quran: Contextual Exegesis on Various Issues of the Community"), and "*Filsafat Hukum Islam*" ("Philosophy of Islamic Law"). Additionally, he is active in writing for mass media and frequently delivers religious lectures in various forums.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Quraish Shihab's Interpretive Approach

Globally, there are three forms of interpretation. Firstly, the traditionalist objective approach typically uses discourse on linguistic approaches alone, where linguistic rules become crucial and serve as the benchmark for interpretation. Secondly, the revivalist objective methodology is textualist in its interpretation, flavored with ideological perspectives and presenting a firm interpretation, especially regarding issues of jihad and Sharia. Thirdly, the quasi-objectivist modern approach characterizes interpretations nuanced by societal and social contexts. Additionally, it discusses the relevance of verses and reasons for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), both in micro and macro contexts, and relates them to contemporary cases. Although it consistently begins with classical studies as an entry point, contextualization in the present era predominates in his methodology of interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

From the three forms of interpretation mentioned above, M. Quraish Shihab tends to favor the latter, namely the quasi-objectivist modernist approach, because through this method, interpreters can engage in dialogue with contemporary issues. By employing the quasi-objectivist modernist method, an interpreter can establish a dialogue between the text and its context, where the context is not only at the time the Quranic verse was revealed but also attempts to engage with the relevant context of the present era.<sup>28</sup>

Quraish Shihab agrees with the minority opinion of scholars who advocate *al-Ibrah bi Khuṣūṣ al-Sabab*, emphasizing the need for analogy (*qiyas*) to derive meanings from verses with backgrounds of *asbāb al-Nuzūl*, provided that such analogy meets its prerequisites. This view can be applied considering the factor of time, as it would otherwise not be relevant for analogy. Therefore, according to Quraish, the understanding of *asbāb al-Nuzūl* can be expanded to include the social conditions at the time of the Quran's revelation, and its understanding can be developed through what was previously formulated by earlier scholars, expanding the understanding of analogy with the principle of *al-Maṣlaḥah al-Mursalah* that leads to facilitating the understanding of religion, akin to the time of the Prophet and his companions.<sup>29</sup>

In his writings, Quraish Shihab employs five main approaches, namely the linguistic and literary approach, the jurisprudential and legal approach, the scientific interpretation approach, the Sufi approach, and the socio-cultural approach.<sup>30</sup> In his approach to interpreting the Quran, Quraish Shihab uses two main methods. Firstly, he employs the

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<sup>26</sup> Aiyub and Mutia, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Nashruddin Baidan, *Tafsir Maudhu'i: Solusi Qur'ani Atas Masalah Sosial Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2011), p. 199.

<sup>28</sup> Atik Wartini, 'CORAK PENAFSIRAN M. QURAIISH SHIHAB DALAM TAFSIR AL-MISBAH', *HUNAFa: Jurnal Studia Islamika*, 11.1 (2014), p. 124 <<https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v11i1.343.109-126>>.

<sup>29</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan Dan Keserasian Al-Quran*, pp. 89–90.

<sup>30</sup> Yusuf Budiana and Sayiid Nurlie Gandara, 'Kekhasan Manhaj Tafsir Al-Mishbah Karya M. Quraish Shihab', *Jurnal Iman Dan Spiritualitas*, 1.1 (2021), p. 88.

analytical method (*tahlili*), where he endeavors to elucidate the contents of Quranic verses from various perspectives while observing the sequence of verses as presented in the Uthmani script. This method allows him to delve into the profound meanings of each Quranic verse. Secondly, Quraish Shihab also utilizes the thematic method (*maudu'i*), where he discusses specific topics addressed in the Quran, whether within a single surah or across multiple surahs.<sup>31</sup> Through this method, he aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of particular themes presented in the Quran and explain their relevance to the context of modern life.<sup>32</sup> By employing these two methods, Quraish Shihab is able to present a deep, diverse, and contextual interpretation of the Quran that is not only relevant to past times but also meaningful and pertinent in the continuously evolving context of today's world.<sup>33</sup>

Quraish Shihab's tendency in his exegesis leans more towards *ra'y*-based interpretation, as his interpretations are consistently accompanied by reasoned interpretation, or *ijtihad*. However, this does not mean he does not utilize the approach of *bi al-ma'thur* interpretation. Explanations from other verses and the sayings of the Prophet are used to strengthen his *ijtihad*. One prominent aspect of his exegesis is its societal orientation (*adab al-ijtima'i*).<sup>34</sup> Quraish Shihab employs a dual approach of textual and contextual interpretations, meaning the context of the verses is linked to the conditions and situations when the text was revealed. However, the textual approach seems to be more prominent than the contextual one.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, Quraish Shihab utilizes *ta'wil* to return the meaning of content to something other than its literal meaning or to reveal hidden meanings. It serves as a tool or method to understand the words, sentences, and messages of Allah. The requirement is that when interpreting, there must be linguistic indicators and logical reasoning in the interpretation. Applying *ta'wil* will facilitate understanding the content of the Quran both in the present and the future. However, caution is necessary in interpreting the Quran so as not to misinterpret verses solely based on personal thoughts. *Ta'wil* must adhere to linguistic principles derived from the verses, ensuring it does not contradict these principles and overlook the verses themselves.<sup>36</sup>

### **3. M. Quraish Shihab's Interpretation of Christmas Greetings**

Examining M. Quraish Shihab's interpretation of the Muslim greeting of Merry Christmas to non-Muslims reveals the complexity of views from a prominent scholar on this sensitive issue. With a strong scholarly background in exegesis, Quraish Shihab offers a

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<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, 'Metode Penafsiran Al-Qur'an M. Quraish Shihab', *TSAQAFAH*, 6.2 (2010) <<https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v6i2.120>>.

<sup>32</sup> Rizki Subagja and Heri Khoiruddin, 'TELAAH METODOLOGI PENAFSIRAN AL-QUR'AN OLEH QURAISH SHIHAB MELALUI PRISMA TAFSIR AL-MISBAH: ANALISIS TERHADAP AYAT 63 SURAH AL-FURQAN', *Tahdzib Al-Akhlaq: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 6.2 (2023), pp. 168–69 <<https://doi.org/10.34005/tahdzib.v6i2.3226>>.

<sup>33</sup> Abdul Majid, 'The Symbolic Interpretation of Quraish Shihab on The Hadith of Women's Creation', *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Mu Ashirah*, 20.1 (2023), 182 <<https://doi.org/10.22373/jim.v20i1.17100>>.

<sup>34</sup> Andi Rosadisastra, *Metode Tafsir Ayat-Ayat Sains Dan Sosial* (Jakarta: Amzah, 2012), p. 145.

<sup>35</sup> Muhammad Ulinuha, *Rekonstruksi Metodologi Kritik Tafsir* (Jakarta: Azza Media, 2015), p. 215.

<sup>36</sup> Dedi Junaedi, 'Konsep Dan Penerapan Takwil Muhammad Quraish Shihab Dalam Tafsir Al-Mishbah', *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya*, 2.2 (2017), p. 234 <<https://doi.org/10.15575/jw.v2i2.1645>>.

unique and profound perspective on how Islam views practices that may conflict with religious teachings. Essentially, his analysis of his approach to the legality of saying Merry Christmas not only provides an understanding of Islam's stance towards non-Islamic traditions but also underscores the importance of tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and cultural context in a multicultural society.

Quraish Shihab's interpretation in his exegesis book *al-Misbah* of Surah Maryam, verse 33, illustrates the differences in understanding.

وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَيَّ يَوْمَ وُلِدْتُ وَيَوْمَ أَمُوتُ وَيَوْمَ أُبْعَثُ حَيًّا

*And peace is on me the day I was born and the day I will die and the day I am raised alive.*

In his exegesis book *Tafsir Al-Mishbah*, M. Quraish Shihab interprets that the "peace" (*salam*) mentioned in this verse encompasses all forms of goodness, safety, and peace that enveloped Prophet Isa (Jesus) in three pivotal moments.<sup>37</sup> At his birth, he was granted peace as a form of protection from various harms and dangers that could have befallen him as an infant. On the day of his death, this peace shielded him from the torment of the grave and all the fears accompanying death. And on the day of resurrection, this peace assures him safety and happiness on the day of recompense.<sup>38</sup>

M. Quraish Shihab also emphasizes that the use of the definite article "السلام" (*as-salam*) in this verse indicates that it refers to all forms of peace and tranquility. This differs from the greeting of peace extended to Prophet Yahya (John) in Surah Maryam, verse 15, which is indefinite (*nakirah*), suggesting that the greeting of peace to Isa encompasses broader and deeper meanings. In a broader context, this interpretation underscores the importance of peace and tranquility in every phase of human life, especially that of a prophet. It also highlights Islam's universal message regarding the significance of prayers and hopes for peace for all humanity in every phase of their lives. For Quraish Shihab, this verse also serves as a basis for honoring the births of prophets, including Isa, in a manner consistent with Islamic belief, maintaining the conviction that Isa is a prophet and servant of Allah, not God or the son of God.<sup>39</sup>

M. Quraish Shihab connects this verse with the practice of greeting Christians Merry Christmas. He argues that since Prophet Isa (Jesus) himself was greeted with peace on the day of his birth, Muslims are not mistaken in following this example by extending Christmas greetings. He emphasizes that wishing Merry Christmas can be a form of good etiquette and fosters harmonious relations between religious communities, as long as Muslim faith remains steadfast in the belief that Isa is a prophet and servant of Allah, not God or the son of God. According to Quraish Shihab, offering Merry Christmas greetings does not compromise a Muslim's faith as long as it is done with sincere intentions and a clear understanding of Islamic beliefs. He views this gesture as a form of tolerance and respect that aligns with Islamic teachings of peace and well-being, as exemplified by Prophet Isa in the mentioned verse. Thus, wishing a Merry Christmas is seen as a gesture of mutual respect

<sup>37</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan Dan Keserasian Al-Quran*, pp. 180–82.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Prima, 'Penafsiran Ucapan Selamat Natal Dan Prinsip-Prinsip Toleransi Beragama Dalam Tafsir Al-Misbah', *Analytica Islamica*, 4.1 (2015), pp. 6–7.

<sup>39</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan Dan Keserasian Al-Quran*, pp. 180–82.

that does not contradict Islamic values but rather demonstrates that Islam is a religion rooted in tolerance and peace.<sup>40</sup>

Besides writing interpretations in his books, M. Quraish Shihab is also active in participating in mass media programs, such as "*Pelita Hati*," "*Tafsir al-Misbah*," and others on the private television channel Metro TV. In the program "*Tafsir al-Misbah*," Quraish Shihab once answered a question from one of the participants regarding whether saying Merry Christmas is permissible or not. Based on the quote, M. Quraish Shihab's response was:

"I strongly suspect this issue is only in Indonesia. I spent a long time in Egypt. I am very familiar with it. I read in the newspapers that the scholars of Al Azhar visit Christian leaders and wish them a Merry Christmas. I know for sure that there is a great scholar in Syria who issued a fatwa that it is permissible. His fatwa is in a book that was introduced by another great scholar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, whose name in Syria is Mustafa Al Zarqa'. He said that saying Merry Christmas is part of courtesy, fostering good relations."<sup>41</sup>

Then M. Quraish Shihab also stated:

"So, if you greet Merry Christmas, but your belief is that Prophet Isa (Jesus) is not God or the son of God, then there is no harm. Express a Merry Christmas with this belief and as a Muslim. When you say it to Christians who understand, they are confident that you do not believe (in their faith)."<sup>42</sup>

The author's analysis concludes that the statement reflects a perspective that leans towards inclusivity regarding the greeting of Merry Christmas from an Islamic standpoint. This can be seen from various aspects. First, from a personal experience perspective, referencing personal experiences in Egypt and understanding that the practice of greeting Merry Christmas by scholars at Al Azhar there is widely accepted. Second, from the perspective of religious rulings, the speaker refers to a fatwa from a prominent scholar in Syria stating that saying Merry Christmas is permissible, supported by other scholars. This indicates legitimacy from a specific religious viewpoint. Third, regarding interfaith tolerance,<sup>43</sup> Quraish Shihab's statement emphasizes that wishing Merry Christmas does not contradict Islamic beliefs as long as the belief that Prophet Isa is not God or the son of God is maintained. This demonstrates a stance of tolerance and respect for differences in religious beliefs.<sup>44</sup> Fourth, in the context of social relationships, the speaker highlights that wishing a Merry Christmas can be seen as a form of courtesy and can foster good relations between individuals or between faiths. This underscores the importance of harmonious social relationships amidst a diversity of beliefs. Therefore, the statement reflects an open attitude

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<sup>40</sup> Khan, Lindridge, and Pusaksrikrit.

<sup>41</sup> Abdul Rohim, 'Ini Paparan Quraish Shihab Tentang Ucapan "Selamat Natal"', *Dakwatuna.Com*, 2014 <<http://www.dakwatuna.com/2014/12/18/61676/ini-paparan-quraish-shihab-tentang-ucapan-selamat-natal/#ixzz4ghLfxKxU>>.

<sup>42</sup> Rohim.

<sup>43</sup> Rahkman Ardi and Diah Budiarti, 'The Role of Religious Beliefs and Collective Narcissism in Interreligious Contact on University Students', *Heliyon*, 6.9 (2020), e04939 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04939>>.

<sup>44</sup> Ardi and others.



towards religious diversity and underscores the importance of dialogue, respect, and tolerance in interfaith relations.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, it can be affirmed that according to M. Quraish Shihab, saying Merry Christmas is permissible (*mubah*), provided that one believes Prophet Isa is not God or the son of God. This permissibility (*mubah*) in Islamic jurisprudence allows for discretion for accountable individuals (Muslims who are mature, sane, and capable) to choose whether to perform an action or abstain from it, without it resulting in reward or sin.

#### **4. Scholars' Understanding of Christmas Greetings**

The views of scholars regarding the greeting of Merry Christmas are an interesting issue in the context of interfaith dialogue and understanding of sacred texts. In this discussion, we will examine the opinions of several scholars from both the early (*mutaqaddimin*) and contemporary (*mutaakhirin*) periods to understand various perspectives on the legality of extending Christmas greetings to non-Muslims. Among them:

##### **a. Ibn Taymiyyah (661–728 H)**

Ibn Taymiyyah is one of the scholars who adamantly prohibits saying Merry Christmas. In his book *Iqtidha' al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*, Ibn Taymiyyah states that greeting non-Muslims for their religious celebrations is forbidden (*haram*). He argues that this act resembles (*tasyabbuh*) with them in matters specific to their religion, which could undermine the faith (*aqidah*) of a Muslim.<sup>46</sup>

##### **b. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (691-751 H)**

Ibn Qayyim, a student of Ibn Taymiyyah, in his book *Ahkam Ahl al-Dhimmah*, also supports his teacher's opinion. He explains that congratulating non-Muslims on their religious celebrations carries a greater sin than merely congratulating someone on a regular sinful act because it constitutes recognition of the symbols of their disbelief.<sup>47</sup>

##### **c. Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926-2022 CE)**

Yusuf al-Qaradawi was a contemporary scholar known for his moderate views. In his book *Fiqh al-Aqalliyat al-Muslimah*, al-Qaradawi argues that greeting Merry Christmas is permissible (*mubah*)<sup>48</sup> if done in the context of strengthening social ties and preventing hostility, provided it is not accompanied by recognition or support for the theological aspects of the celebration.<sup>49</sup>

##### **d. Muhammad bin Shalih al-Utsaimin (1929-2001 CE)**

Al-Utsaimin was a Saudi scholar known for his strict views on greeting Merry Christmas. He stated that it is forbidden (*haram*) for a Muslim to greet Merry Christmas because it involves acknowledging a celebration that involves shirk (associating partners

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<sup>45</sup> Ardi and others.

<sup>46</sup> Syamsul Bahri, 'Mengucapkan Selamat Natal Dan Selamat Hari Raya Agama Lain', *Kalam: Jurnal Agama Dan Sosial Humaniora*, 4.2 (2020), p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Moh Afiful Khair and others, 'MENGUCAPKAN SELAMAT NATAL DAN SELAMAT HARI RAYA PADA AGAMA LAIN: Studi Al-Quran Dan Al-Hadits Multikultural', *AHSANA MEDIA*, 9.2 (2023), pp. 104–5 <<https://doi.org/10.31102/ahsanamedia.9.2.2023.102-116>>.

<sup>48</sup> Sulaeman, p. 133.

<sup>49</sup> Sulaeman, p. 133.

with Allah).<sup>50</sup> According to him, this constitutes approval of religions other than Islam, which clearly contradicts the principles of monotheism (*tauhid*).<sup>51</sup>

**e. Ahmed Kutty**

Ahmed Kutty, a contemporary scholar and writer from Canada, offers a more lenient perspective. In various fatwas, he mentions that greeting Merry Christmas to neighbors or non-Muslim friends can be acceptable within the context of harmonious coexistence and mutual respect, as long as the intention is to show kindness and is not accompanied by participation in their religious rituals.<sup>52</sup>

Based on the views of the scholars above, it can be seen that greeting Merry Christmas to non-Muslims varies greatly. Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah take a strict textual approach, prohibiting the greeting of Merry Christmas due to concerns of resemblance (*tasyabbuh*) and approval of other religions. In contrast, Quraish Shihab adopts a contextual approach that considers social situations and intentions.

Al-Utsaimin also rejects it for similar reasons, emphasizing the importance of upholding the principle of monotheism (*tauhid*). On the other hand, M. Quraish Shihab stresses the significance of social and cultural context in understanding Islamic teachings, suggesting that greeting Merry Christmas can serve as a means to demonstrate tolerance and respect for differences without compromising Islamic beliefs.<sup>53</sup>

Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Ahmed Kutty, however, provide more lenient perspectives. They permit greeting Merry Christmas within a positive social context, where such actions aim to strengthen interfaith relations and prevent social conflict. They emphasize the importance of having clear intentions and avoiding any acknowledgment of non-Muslim religious beliefs.

In Islam, religious reference is indeed singular, namely the Qur'an and Hadith, yet the phenomenon shows that the face of Islam is diverse. There are various Islamic groups that sometimes have their own distinct characteristics in their practices and religious rituals. It seems that these differences have become commonplace, part of the divine plan, and even a mercy. Quraish Shihab notes that diversity in life is a necessity desired by Allah. This includes differences and diversity of opinions in scholarly fields, as well as diverse human responses regarding the truth of the holy books, interpretations of their content, and forms of their implementation.<sup>54</sup>

Quraish Shihab's opinion above aligns closely with the concept of religious moderation advocated by Yusuf Qaradawi, with principles that do not espouse fanaticism towards a particular opinion, do not mandate upon humans what Allah has not mandated, do

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<sup>50</sup> Sulaeman, p. 138.

<sup>51</sup> Sulaeman, p. 133.

<sup>52</sup> Ahmed Kutty, fatwa available at Islamicity website (<https://www.islamicity.org>).

<sup>53</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al Quran: Fungsi Dan Peran Wahyu Dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat*.

<sup>54</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Secercah Cahaya Ilahi: Hidup Bersama Al-Qur'an* (Bandung: Mizan, 2007), p. 117.

not burden unnecessarily, avoid rudeness and harshness, refrain from harboring ill thoughts towards others, and steer clear of falling into the abyss of extremism.<sup>55</sup>

In Arabic, moderation is known by the term "*wasath*" or "*wasathiyah*," which carries meanings similar to "middle ground," fairness (*adil*), and balance (*tawazun*). A person who adheres to the principle of *wasathiyah* can be called a "*wasith*." In Arabic, the term *wasathiyah* is also interpreted as "the best choice." Regardless of the word used, they all imply the same meaning of fairness, which in this context means choosing a middle path amidst various extreme options.<sup>56</sup>

Religious moderation is indeed the key to fostering tolerance and harmony, both at local, national, and global levels.<sup>57</sup> Choosing moderation by rejecting extremism and liberalism in religious practices is crucial for maintaining balance and fostering peace, thereby preserving civilization.<sup>58</sup> This approach allows each religious community to treat others with respect, embrace differences, and coexist peacefully and harmoniously. In multicultural societies like Indonesia, religious moderation may not just be an option but a necessity.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, it can be concluded that M. Quraish Shihab introduces a new dimension with an approach that emphasizes tolerance and social harmony without compromising faith. He demonstrates that within the context of social dynamics and pluralism, greeting Merry Christmas can serve to strengthen interfaith relations and uphold harmony, as long as it does not entail recognition of theological aspects conflicting with Islam. This inclusive approach reflects Quraish Shihab's contextual interpretation style, which adapts to Indonesia's socio-cultural realities.

### C. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that according to M. Quraish Shihab, it is permissible (*mubah*) for Muslims to greet non-Muslims with Merry Christmas, as long as the greeter does not intend to believe that Prophet Isa (Jesus) is God or the Son of God. His inclusive view on this issue is grounded in Islamic principles of tolerance, peace, and respect for religious differences. He views greeting Merry Christmas to Christians as not being contrary to Islamic teachings, as long as it is done with the clear intention that Prophet Isa is a prophet and servant of Allah, not God or the Son of God.

Quraish Shihab's interpretation refers to Quranic verses indicating that Prophet Isa himself is mentioned to have greeted others on the day of his birth, which he believes legitimizes honoring the birth celebrations of prophets without compromising the Islamic principle of monotheism (*tauhid*). However, Quraish Shihab also emphasizes the importance of context and intention in greeting Merry Christmas to ensure that such actions are not

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<sup>55</sup> Yusuf Qardhawi, *Islam Dalam Tengah: Menjauhi Sikap Berlebihan Dalam Agama* (Bandung: Mizan, 2017), p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Fauziah Nurdin, 'Moderasi Beragama Menurut Al-Qur'an Dan Hadist', *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Mu'ashirah*, 18.1 (2021), p. 61 <<https://doi.org/10.22373/jim.v18i1.10525>>.

<sup>57</sup> Nurma Yunita Yuni Arisah, Hardivizon, 'Nilai-Nilai Pendidikan Moderasi Beragama Dalam Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah Ayat 143 Dan 256 (Studi Komparatif Penafsiran M. Quraish Shihab Dan Hamka Yuni)', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 1 (2022).

<sup>58</sup> Glasford and Calcagno.

<sup>59</sup> Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, *Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

misunderstood as recognition of theological aspects conflicting with Islamic beliefs. For him, greeting Merry Christmas can be a means to build harmonious social relationships among people of different faiths.

In the broader debate among scholars, Quraish Shihab's approach stands out for its tendency to consider social and cultural contexts in interpreting Islamic teachings. This reflects an adaptive approach to the diversity within societies, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and maintaining religious tolerance without sacrificing religious principles. Thus, Quraish Shihab's perspective has significantly contributed to expanding insights into how Islam views social interactions with people of other religions, emphasizing the importance of balancing religious identity with the demands of a diverse social life.

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