

Religious Dialectics: The Debate Between Persis and The Ahmadiyya Qadiani During The Dutch Colonial Period, 1925–1939

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

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Ahmadiyya, a transnational movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in late 19th-century India, entered Indonesia during the national movement era and, despite gaining limited sympathy, faced strong rejection from mainstream Islamic organizations for its controversial teachings, especially his prophetic claims. This research aims to examine the religious dialectics between the Ahmadiyya Qadian and the Islamic Union (PERSIS) in 1925–1939, with a focus on attitudes and responses. This research uses historical methods combined with the social approach and analysis of the theory of charismatic authority from Max Weber to understand the appeal of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's leadership and the forms of delegitimization carried out by his opponents. The results of the study show that the polemic between Ahmadiyya and PERSIS is not only a theological conflict, but also part of the discourse contestation to determine Islamic orthodoxy in Indonesia. Da'wah media such as magazines and books are important tools in shaping public opinion and spreading ideological arguments. This polemic of the debate reflects the process of constructing religious identity in the midst of colonialism, as well as the efforts of local Islamic organizations in building valid religious authority in the midst of Islamic renewal and transnational ideological challenges such as Ahmadiyah.

INTRODUCTION

The religious debate in the early 20th century in the Dutch East Indies was an integral part of the dynamics of the formation of modern Islamic identity in Indonesia (de Jonge, 2022; Faizi, 2023; Sebastian & Alkaff, 2024). One of the most prominent polemics was the dialectic between the Islamic Union (Persis) and the Ahmadiyya Qadians. Persis, which was founded in 1923 in Bandung, is known as a modernist Islamic organization with a spirit of purification that emphasizes the purification of Islamic teachings from the practices of heresy, superstition, and superstition (Federspiel, 1970). In contrast, the Qadian Ahmadiyya based in India began to expand its influence to the Dutch East Indies in the 1920s through literature, da'wah missions, and international publications (Lavan, 1974). The presence of these two movements during the colonial period not only gave birth to theological rivalry, but also gave rise to intense public debates, especially throughout 1925–1939 (Kaptein, 2004).

Persis positioned himself as a representative of rational and puritanical Islam, by re-emphasizing the authority of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Through the magazine *Defenders of Islam* (1929–1935), Persis not only voiced his theological agenda, but also built intellectual authority to assert legitimacy in the face of Muslims who were divided into various sects (Islamic Defenders Magazine, 1929). On the other hand, the Ahmadiyya Qadians, through *the Review of Religions* (published since 1902 in India) and publications in Dutch and English,

introduced modern ideas such as rationality, tolerance, and reinterpretation of the concepts of prophethood and jihad (The Review of Religions, 1925). The ideological clash occurred because Persis strongly rejected Ahmadiyya doctrine, especially regarding Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claim to be a mujaddid and the promised Messiah (Azra, 2000).

Historically, the Persian–Ahmadiyya debate could not be separated from the colonial context. The Dutch East Indies government provided limited space for religious organizations to move, but at the same time recorded and supervised their activities through intelligence reports and official archives (National Archives The Hague, 1930). The colonial archives show how the colonial authorities viewed this polemic as part of the political dynamics of Muslims that had the potential to affect colonial stability (van Bruinessen, 1995). Meanwhile, contemporary Islamic magazines, both published by Persis and those that contained the responses of the wider community, became an important medium in disseminating ideas, as well as an arena of intellectual contestation that shaped Muslim public opinion in the Dutch East Indies (Al-Lisan Magazine, 1932).

Previous academic studies have touched on Ahmadiyya polemics with various Islamic organizations, both at the global and local levels. Dissertations and theses from various universities in Indonesia as well as research published in indexed journals Scopus and SINTA emphasize that the Ahmadiyya conflict with the modernist Islamic movement is more than just a theological controversy (Ichwan, 2012). It reflects on the tension between traditional religious authorities and the emergence of Islamic reform movements oriented towards modern rationality (Burhani, 2018). However, research that specifically reviews the dialectic between Persis and Ahmadiyya Qadian in the colonial period is still relatively limited (Muharrom, 2024). In fact, the period 1925–1939 was an important period that marked the intensity of polemics, as evidenced by the occurrence of public debates, the publication of polemics, and the strong response of Persis which then influenced the direction of the Islamic movement in Indonesia (International Crisis Group, 2014).

This study is important because the dialectic of Persis and Ahmadiyya Qadian not only shows theological differences, but also shows how religious authority was negotiated, maintained, and reconstructed in the public space of colonial Islam. This study seeks to show that theological debates in the colonial period served as an arena for knowledge production, where modern Islamic organizations built their legitimacy bases, as well as showing the dynamics of local Islamic interaction with global currents (Saefullah, 2017). Thus, this study is not only relevant to the study of Indonesian Islamic history, but also contributes to the broader academic discourse on the relationship between religion, colonialism, and modernity (Burhanudin, 2012).

Existing scholarship has examined Ahmadiyya's conflicts with various Islamic groups, emphasizing theological disputes and reformist tensions. However, studies specifically focusing on the Persis–Ahmadiyya dialectic in the colonial period remain limited, particularly those that integrate theological, intellectual, and sociological dimensions within a single analytical framework.

The main objective of this research is to analyze in depth the dynamics of the debate between Persis and the Ahmadiyya Qadian during the Dutch colonial period, especially between 1925–1939, with a focus on the theological, intellectual, and social aspects that emerged from the polemic. The main questions to be answered are how Persis and Ahmadiyah

positioned themselves in the debate, how religious discourse was shaped and disseminated through the colonial media, and how the intervention of the colonial government influenced the direction of the polemic (Wildan, 2010).

To answer this question, this research uses a historical approach by relying on primary sources in the form of Dutch archives, colonial intelligence reports, contemporary Islamic magazines, and official publications of the organization. Secondary sources come from previous research that discusses PERSIS and Ahmadiyah Qadian in the form of books, dissertations, and other scientific publications.

An analysis of a number of primary documents—including the magazine *Pembela Islam* published in 1929–1935, colonial archives stored in The Hague, and Ahmadiyya publications that have been translated into Dutch and English—shows that the debate between the Islamic Union (Persis) and the Ahmadiyya Qadian is not solely local, but also influenced by transnational ideological currents. Persis came up with an agenda of purification of Islamic teachings that reemphasized the literal authority of the Qur'an and sunnah, while rejecting all forms of bid'ah that were considered to weaken the purity of the faith. Meanwhile, the Ahmadiyya Qadian brought a discourse that emphasized rationality, universality, and the spirit of cosmopolitanism that were closely linked to their global network in India, Europe, and the Middle East.

Both organizations pay great attention to the use of print media as an instrument of da'wah, polemics, as well as intellectual legitimacy. *Defenders of Islam* became an important channel for Persis in articulating criticism of Ahmadiyya, framing purification discourses in a language that was easily accessible to urban Muslims. In contrast, Ahmadiyya publications circulating in Dutch and English showed their efforts to present Islam as a modern and competitive religion in the global arena. Thus, the ideological contestation between Persis and Ahmadiyya Qadian in the Dutch East Indies is a reflection of the dynamic interaction between local and transnational currents of thought, as well as showing how colonial print media functioned as an important arena in the formation of religious opinion and religious authority.

Drawing on Max Weber's perspective on charismatic authority, the debate between the Islamic Union (Persis) and the Ahmadiyya Qadian can be interpreted as an arena in which religious figures and organizations seek to build, maintain, and reproduce their claims to charisma. Weber defines charismatic authority as a form of legitimacy rooted in the belief of followers in extraordinary qualities, both inherent in individual figures and in a movement that is perceived to have a sacred mission and is distinct from the established socio-religious order (Weber, 1978). In this framework, charisma is not only born from the leader's personality, but is also constructed through social interaction, public recognition, and communication mechanisms that underpin the sustainability of these claims.

In the context of the Dutch East Indies, Persis and Ahmadiyya appear with a distinctive but confrontational model of charismatic authority. Persis, through the figure of Ahmad Hassan, articulates a charisma based on intellectual capacity and textual rationality. Hassan is respected not because of the lineage of traditional scholars, but because of his expertise in debate, scriptural argumentation, and effective use of print media (Federspiel, 1970). In contrast, Ahmadiyya Qadian bases his charismatic claims on the figure of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whom his followers see as the promised mujaddid and al-Messiah. Mirza's charisma, which is prophetic-transcendent, is then projected transnationally through international da'wah

networks, literature publishing, and cosmopolitan strategies in presenting Islam as a modern religion (Friedmann, 1989).

The confluence of these two charisma models shows how religious authority was produced, negotiated, and maintained in colonial public spaces. Open debates, polemic writings in magazines, and the distribution of leaflets became important means of extending charismatic recognition from the local base to wider networks (National Archives The Hague, 1935). At the same time, the process of rutinizing charism—the transformation of individual charisma into a form of institutional authority—was evident. Persis institutionalized Hassan's legacy through organizational structures, educational curricula, and regular publications, while Ahmadiyya standardized Mirza's charisma through the caliphate's leadership system and international mission infrastructure (Burhani, 2020).

Thus, the Persian-Ahmadiyya debate in the colonial period is not just a theological polemic, but a historical laboratory to understand the dynamics of charismatic authority in modern Indonesian Islam. He shows that charisma is not a fixed entity, but a social construct that is always tested, challenged, and routineized through the interaction between leaders, followers, and the historical context that surrounds it.

METHOD

This research is written as a historical study that uses the *Historical Method* to explain the Religious Dialectics between the Islamic Union (PERSIS) and the Ahmadiyya Qadian during the Dutch colonial period (1925–1939). The historical method emphasizes empirical analysis of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct past events in a scientific, critical, and systematic manner (Zuhdi, 2025). In the context of contemporary Indonesian history studies, this method is seen as the main approach to produce a credible and meaningful historical narrative for the socio-cultural study of today's society (Ardhana & Puspitasari, 2024).

The methodological framework of this research is built based on the stages of historical research: Heuristics, Source Criticism, Interpretation, and Historiography, which systematically connects historical sources with research questions and historiographical conceptual frameworks (Ardhana & Puspitasari, 2024). The heuristic stage is the first step in historical research that focuses on the discovery and collection of historical sources relevant to the research question. Sources explored include Primary Sources such as contemporary newspapers (1929–1939), magazines, organizational debate documents, and *Official Report*. The 1933 debate contained an argumentative dialogue between representatives of the Ahmadiyya Qadian and PERSIS that provided a direct recording of the theological discourse of the period. In addition, the researcher also identified secondary sources in the form of academic books, theses, and articles from national scientific journals that discussed the Islamic religious movement in Indonesia and the dynamics of religious discourse during the colonial period to build a broad historical context. After the heuristic stage, this research was continued with source criticism, which is a systematic evaluation process to assess the credibility, authenticity, and relevance of the historical sources that have been collected. This stage serves to ensure that the data used has an empirical basis that can be accounted for before entering the advanced analysis stage.

The final stage is historiography, which is the process of writing history in a narrative-analytical manner based on the results of the interpretation of sources (Gottschalk, 1986).

Historiography in this study not only aims to present the chronology of theological debate events, but also to analyze the historical meaning, dynamics of discourse, and ideological positions of the actors involved. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the enrichment of Indonesian Islamic historiography, especially in understanding the relationship between reformist, puritan, and transnational Islamic movements during the Dutch colonial period (Noer, 1996).

This study offers a new contribution by situating the Persis–Ahmadiyya polemic as a multidimensional contest over religious authority, employing Max Weber’s concept of charismatic authority to analyze how legitimacy was constructed, negotiated, and institutionalized through media, debate, and organizational structures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The period 1925–1939 marked the most intense phase in the religious dialectic between the Islamic Union (Persis) and the Ahmadiyya Qadian in the Dutch East Indies. This dynamic not only took place in the internal theological debate spaces of Muslims, but also emerged in the wider public sphere through the print media, open debate forums, and colonial government records. Precisely led by Ahmad Hassan, with the basis of charismatic authority as a rationalist scholar, faced the Ahmadiyya Qadian who carried the prophetic charismatic authority of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. The confrontation of these two charismatic authorities gave birth to a long dialectic that formed the face of colonial Islamic intellectualism.

Print Media as an Arena for Charisma Contestation

Magazines became the main instrument in framing debates. *The Defenders of Islam*, the official organ of Persis, has consistently published rebuttals to Ahmadiyya doctrine since the late 1920s. These articles are not only theological, but also rhetorical, with the aim of establishing Persis as a valid religious authority (Islamic Defenders Magazine, 1931). On the other hand, Ahmadiyya through *The Review of Religions* and Malay-language publications such as *Sinar Islam* tried to present itself as a cosmopolitan representation of Islam capable of answering the challenges of modernity (The Review of Religions, 1928).

Weber explained that charisma needs a "stage" to be displayed and acknowledged. In the context of the Dutch East Indies, the print media became the stage. Ahmad Hassan's charisma was manifested through rational argumentation, textual interpretation, and logical answers to the questions of the people. Meanwhile, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's charisma (represented by his students and literature) was articulated through prophetic narratives and eschatological promises. The meeting of these two forms of charisma in the public sphere gave birth to a sharp dialectic that influenced the perception of colonial Muslims (Weber, 1978).

The Dutch archives show that the media debate between Persis and Ahmadiyah received the attention of the colonial government. In the 1932 *Politiek Verslag* report, it was stated that ideological conflicts between Islamic organizations were considered safer than anti-colonial political movements because they diverted the energy of the people to internal religious discourse (National Archives The Hague, 1932). Thus, the debate was not only theological, but also political, because it was also monitored and "managed" by the colonial authorities.

Open Debate and Charisma Theater

In addition to the print media, polemics also took place in open debate forums. Public debate became a kind of "charisma theater" where religious authority was tested in front of an

audience. One of the most famous debates was held in Bandung in 1933, where Persis faced a representative of Ahmadiyya. In the forum, Ahmad Hassan appeared as the main speaker with a logical rhetorical style, sharp argumentation, and extensive knowledge of Islamic texts (Federspiel, 1970).

For Weber, this kind of moment shows how charisma is confirmed by followers through public recognition (Weber, 1978). When audiences appreciate Hassan's arguments, his rationalist charisma is further consolidated. On the contrary, Ahmadiyya's defensive position in the forum shows the limitations of his transnational charisma when confronted with powerful local authorities.

The *Islamic Defenders* magazine reported Hassan's victory in various debates as proof of the validity of Persis' theology (Islamic Defenders Magazine, 1933). The report also expanded Hassan's authority in the eyes of the people, asserting that charisma comes not only from individual qualities, but also from social construction through the media and public witnesses.

PERSIS, through the figure of Ahmad Hassan, appears increasingly solid with its puritanical identity. Hassan emphasized the importance of returning Islam to the authoritative sources of the Qur'an and Hadith, while rejecting religious practices that are considered heretical or deviant. This strategy proved effective in attracting the sympathy of the masses who were worried about the infiltration of Ahmadiyya teachings. Straightforward rhetoric, supported by print media such as brochures and magazines, strengthened the image of PERSIS as the guardian of the purity of the faith. On the contrary, Ahmadiyah was increasingly cornered by stigmatization as a heretical group that was intensively disseminated in the public sphere. In this context, the theological debate shows how the discourse of purification has succeeded in dominating the Islamic narrative in Bandung and its surroundings.

Despite being marginalized, Ahmadiyya still showed resilience by emphasizing the argument of rationality and Islamic universality. Federspiel notes that Ahmadiyya's strategy does not merely emphasize dogma, but also attempts to build an intellectual discourse that is in line with the times. However, the appeal of this approach is limited to intellectuals and is unable to penetrate the wider mass base. This situation shows the limitations of the rationalist movement in the face of more emotional populist rhetoric. In other words, although Ahmadiyya are able to articulate modern and cosmopolitan ideas, socially they are still marginalized due to the dominance of the purification narrative intensified by PERSIS.

Theological Dialectics: Rationalism vs. Prophetism

The Persis–Ahmadiyya polemic is substantially centered on the issue of prophetic finality. For Persis, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's prophetic claim is a great heresy that threatens the foundations of Islam. Hassan writes a systematic rebuttal in his work *Al-Furqan* that is widely circulated among urban Muslims (Hassan, 1933). Hassan's argument emphasizes the logic of the Qur'an and hadith that precludes the possibility of a new prophet after Muhammad.

On the other hand, Ahmadiyya defends itself by proposing an alternative interpretation of the prophetic concept, namely that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's prophethood is *zilli* (shadow) and does not violate Islamic doctrine (Friedmann, 1989). However, for Persis, this semantic difference does not reduce the fallacy of the claim. This dialectic shows how charismatic authority is built on claims of theological truth that are mutually affirming.

In Weber's framework, Persis uses rationalization as a means to challenge Ahmadiyya's prophetic charisma. Hassan's rationalism has instead become a new form of charisma—an

intellectual charisma that is recognized by the urban Muslim public. In contrast, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's charisma faces limitations when his prophetic narrative does not gain legitimacy outside his circle of loyal followers.

Polemic Socio-Political Dimension

The Persian–Ahmadiyya polemic also had implications for the socio-political dynamics of Muslims in the Dutch East Indies. On the one hand, this conflict showed internal fragmentation that benefited the colonial government. The colonial report emphasized that "the more diverse interpretations of Islam in the Dutch East Indies, the less likely it is to emerge a united pan-Islamic movement" (National Archives The Hague, 1934).

However, on the other hand, this polemic also strengthens the intellectual tradition of modernist Islam. With open theological debates, the ummah is forced to be more critical and rational in understanding doctrine. This is one of Persis's major contributions to the development of Indonesian Islamic thought: making debate a means of public education. As Burhani notes, the polemic with Ahmadiyya actually helped to affirm Persis' theological identity as a rationalist puritan group (Burhani, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the religious polemic between Persis (Islamic Union) and the Ahmadiyya Qadian during the Dutch colonial period (1925–1939). It situates the conflict within broader transformations among Muslims in the Dutch East Indies, including Islamic reform, the expansion of print media, and colonial surveillance. Thus, the polemic is not merely doctrinal, but reflects struggles over religious authority, rationalization of discourse, and colonial power relations.

Ahmadiyya's arrival in the mid-1920s, through transnational networks, introduced the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, emphasizing prophetic claims and spiritual renewal. This provoked strong opposition from Persis, which prioritized purification of faith and rational interpretation. The debate unfolded mainly through print media magazines, pamphlets, and books—serving as arenas where authority was publicly contested.

Using Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, this study interprets the polemic as a contest between two forms of legitimacy. Ahmad Hassan of Persis derived authority from textual mastery and rational debate, while Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's authority was prophetic and institutionalized within a global network. Theologically, Persis reinforced the doctrine of finality of prophethood to define orthodoxy and consolidate its identity.

Intellectually, the polemic fostered religious literacy and debate traditions among urban Muslims, shifting authority toward discursive and argumentative forms. Sociologically, it reveals how authority was negotiated and institutionalized, with Ahmadiyya remaining marginal despite global support. Colonial власти tacitly allowed such conflicts, seeing them as limiting Muslim political unity. Ultimately, the polemic shaped modern Indonesian Islam by strengthening rational discourse while reproducing exclusionary views toward Ahmadiyya, effects that persisted into the post-colonial era.

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