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Reimagining *Kalimatun Sawa:* Islamic Mysticism, A Common Word, and the Ethics of Interreligious Harmony

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji kembali konsep Kalimatun Sawa (QS. Ali 'Imran [3]: 64) sebagai sumber teologis dan etis dalam membangun kerukunan antarumat beragama melalui perspektif tasawuf Islam. Berangkat dari perhatian utama naskah terhadap dimensi spiritual dalam perjumpaan antariman, penelitian ini melampaui pembacaan ayat yang semata-mata bersifat normatif dengan mengkaji bagaimana konsep-konsep tasawuf, meliputi tauhid, mahabbah, ma'rifah, fana', fitrah, dan waḥdat al-wujūd, dapat memberikan landasan bagi model dialog yang berorientasi pada kerendahan hati spiritual, hubungan timbal balik yang berlandaskan etika, serta pengakuan terhadap keberagaman. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan hermeneutika filosofis dan analisis teks kualitatif terhadap wacana Al-Qur'an, penafsiran Islam klasik dan kontemporer, inisiatif *A Common Word* tahun 2007, sejumlah teks dialogis Kristen, serta kajian mengenai pluralisme keagamaan di Indonesia. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa Kalimatun Sawa dapat berfungsi sebagai kerangka dialog antaragama, bukan sebagai klaim bahwa seluruh agama memiliki kesamaan doktrinal. Signifikansinya terletak pada kemampuannya mengidentifikasi titik temu teologis dan etis tanpa menghilangkan perbedaan keyakinan yang mendasar, khususnya terkait wahyu, kristologi, dan otoritas keagamaan. Tasawuf Islam memperkuat kerangka tersebut dengan menggeser orientasi dialog dari persaingan klaim kebenaran menuju transformasi diri, kecintaan kepada Tuhan, dan tanggung jawab terhadap sesama. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa dialog berbasis spiritualitas akan lebih produktif apabila tidak terjebak dalam relativisme maupun sikap triumfalisme keagamaan. Dialog tersebut tidak menghapus identitas keagamaan, tetapi menumbuhkan sikap moral yang diperlukan untuk mewujudkan kehidupan bersama secara damai. Dalam konteks Indonesia, pendekatan ini menawarkan kerangka konstruktif untuk mengembangkan praktik kehidupan antaragama dari sekadar toleransi formal menuju keterlibatan antariman yang lebih relasional dan transformatif.

Kata Kunci: Kalimatun Sawa; tasawuf Islam; dialog antaragama; kerukunan umat beragama..

ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders Kalimatun Sawa (Qur'an 3:64) as a theological and ethical resource for interreligious harmony through the lens of Islamic mysticism. Building on the manuscript's central concern with the spiritual dimensions of interfaith encounter, the study moves beyond a purely normative reading of the verse and examines how Sufi concepts—including tawhid, mahabbah, ma'rifah, fana', fitrah, and waḥdat al-wujūd—can illuminate a mode of dialogue grounded in spiritual humility, ethical reciprocity, and recognition of difference. The study employs philosophical hermeneutics and qualitative textual analysis of Qur'anic discourse, classical and contemporary Islamic interpretations, the 2007 A Common Word initiative, selected Christian

dialogical texts, and scholarship on Indonesian religious pluralism. The analysis finds that Kalimatun Sawa can function as a dialogical grammar rather than a claim that all religions are doctrinally identical. Its significance lies in identifying a shared ethical and theological horizon while preserving genuine disagreement concerning revelation, Christology, and religious authority. Islamic mysticism strengthens this framework by shifting dialogue from competitive truth-claims toward self-transformation, love of God, and responsibility toward others. The article argues that mystical dialogue is most productive when it is neither relativist nor triumphalist: it does not erase religious identities, but cultivates the moral dispositions required for peaceful coexistence. In the Indonesian context, this approach provides a constructive framework for moving from formal tolerance toward relational and transformative interreligious engagement.

Keywords: *Kalimatun Sawa; Islamic mysticism; interreligious dialogue; religious harmony*.

Introduction

Religious plurality creates a paradox for contemporary societies. Diversity can enrich public life through encounters among different moral and spiritual traditions, yet religious difference can also become a source of suspicion when identity is organized around exclusivist boundaries. Indonesia illustrates both dimensions of plurality. Its constitutional and social commitment to religious coexistence has generated extensive traditions of interfaith cooperation, while local disputes over symbols, worship, public space, and religious authority demonstrate that coexistence cannot be reduced to the absence of open conflict. The question is therefore not simply how different religious communities can live beside one another, but how they can cultivate forms of encounter that transform difference into an ethical resource.

Within Islamic thought, Qur'an 3:64 provides an especially important point of departure. The verse addresses the People of the Book and invites them to a "common word" (kalimatin sawā'in baynanā wa baynakum), identified in the verse with worship of the one God and refusal to elevate human beings to the status of divine lords. Historically, the verse has been interpreted in multiple ways. Classical exegetes generally situated it within the Qur'anic affirmation of tawhid and the correction of theological claims that Islam regards as incompatible with divine unity. Contemporary interreligious initiatives, by contrast, have increasingly read the verse as a basis for constructive Muslim–Christian engagement. The 2007 A Common Word initiative is the most visible example of this development.

The original manuscript that grounds this article already identifies an important but underdeveloped dimension of *Kalimatun Sawa:* mysticism. It proposes that religious harmony cannot be sustained by formal theological agreements alone because interreligious relations also involve affect, spiritual experience, humility, love, and the transformation of the self. That intuition is consistent with scholarship that has explored Islamic mysticism as a possible resource for interreligious dialogue. Saeedimehr (2020), for example, identifies *waḥdat al-wujūd*, fitrah, and a mystical hermeneutic of the Qur'an as resources for dialogue, while studies of Sufi movements in Indonesia have shown how

mystical traditions can cultivate inclusive social dispositions without necessarily abandoning Islamic identity.

Yet a significant conceptual problem remains. To interpret *Kalimatun Sawa* as evidence that "all religions are the same" risks collapsing genuine theological differences into a generalized spirituality. Recent scholarship on Qur'an 3:64 has shown why this simplification is problematic. Wrogemann (2021), for instance, emphasizes that Muslim and Christian interpretations of divine unity are not interchangeable, particularly concerning Christian claims about Jesus Christ. The challenge, therefore, is to formulate a mystical reading that enables encounter without requiring doctrinal equivalence.

This article addresses that problem by proposing that *Kalimatun Sawa* should be understood as a dialogical grammar rather than a doctrine of religious sameness. Its function is not to establish that Muslims, Christians, Jews, or other communities possess identical theological systems. Rather, it provides a principled invitation to identify a sufficiently meaningful ethical and theological horizon from which dialogue can begin. Islamic mysticism contributes to this project by emphasizing the transformation of the dialogical subject: the ego must be disciplined before the other can genuinely be heard. In this sense, mystical dialogue is not primarily an exercise in proving that another religion is correct or incorrect; it is an ethical practice of self-restraint, attentiveness, compassion, and responsibility.

The article makes three contributions. First, it rereads *Kalimatun Sawa* through the relationship between tawhid and mystical ethics, rather than treating the verse only as a proof-text for interfaith tolerance. Second, it places the mystical reading in conversation with A Common Word and contemporary theories of interreligious dialogue, while retaining the importance of theological difference. Third, it contextualizes the argument within Indonesian religious plurality and the historical development of Sufism in the archipelago. The central thesis is that mystical interpretation can deepen interreligious harmony when it is framed as an ethic of encounter rather than as a claim of metaphysical equivalence.

The contemporary reception of *Kalimatun Sawa* is closely associated with A Common Word between Us and You. Initiated in 2007 by Muslim scholars and addressed to Christian leaders, the document identified love of God and love of the neighbor as a shared foundation for Muslim–Christian cooperation. Malik (2013) interprets the initiative as a form of norm entrepreneurship that sought to establish a durable framework for collective action between communities whose theological differences had often been interpreted through conflict. The initiative subsequently generated a substantial body of scholarship, including the edited volume by El-Ansary and Linnan and later work collected in The Future of Interfaith Dialogue.

The importance of A Common Word lies partly in its refusal to make dialogue dependent on doctrinal homogenization. The initiative emerged from explicitly Islamic theological premises while addressing Christian interlocutors as Christians. This makes it

different from a secular model in which religion is bracketed out of public reasoning. At the same time, the initiative raises a difficult question: what exactly counts as a "common" theological or ethical ground when the traditions interpret God, revelation, salvation, and religious authority differently? Wrogemann (2021) shows that this problem cannot simply be bypassed. A shared vocabulary of divine unity does not eliminate disagreement over the meaning of lordship and the identity of Jesus.

Accordingly, the literature suggests a distinction between common ground and common doctrine. Common ground refers to values, practices, or theological orientations that can support cooperation; common doctrine would imply substantial agreement on the truth-conditions of religious claims. Kalimatun Sawa is more defensible as common ground. This distinction is crucial for a mystical approach because mystical traditions often speak in the language of unity, but unity can mean several different things: unity of ultimate dependence on God, unity of moral vocation, unity of human dignity, unity of spiritual aspiration, or metaphysical unity of being. These meanings should not be treated as interchangeable.

Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, provides a distinctive vocabulary for thinking about the transformation of the religious self. Tawhid is not only a proposition concerning divine oneness but also a discipline of consciousness: the self is called to resist forms of absolutization that compete with God. Mahabbah (divine love) turns this consciousness into an ethical orientation toward creation, while ma'rifah denotes experiential knowledge of God cultivated through spiritual discipline. Fana' describes the dissolution of ego-centered attachments, although classical Sufi traditions differ considerably in how they interpret the concept and its relation to theological orthodoxy.

Saeedimehr (2020) argues that Islamic mysticism can contribute to interreligious dialogue through three interconnected principles: *waḥdat al-wujūd*, fitrah, and mystical Qur'anic hermeneutics. These principles do not automatically produce pluralism; rather, they offer conceptual resources from which dialogical possibilities can be developed. This qualification is important. Sufism is not a single, uniform ideology of religious pluralism. Historical Sufi communities have included both inclusive and exclusivist tendencies, and contemporary Sufi movements may respond differently to religious difference (Nugroho, 2021). Mysticism therefore should be treated as a field of interpretive possibilities rather than as an automatic solution to interreligious conflict.

The relevance of mystical consciousness to dialogue is also supported by comparative studies of interreligious experience. Research in interreligious studies has explored how contemplative encounter can shift dialogue from abstract comparison toward practices of listening and self-transformation. The implication is not that mystical experiences are identical across religions, but that they can create conditions in which participants become more capable of encountering difference without immediately reducing it to threat or error. This provides a useful bridge between Islamic mystical ethics and contemporary dialogical approaches.

The Indonesian context is particularly significant because religious plurality is embedded in social, cultural, and historical processes. Sufism participated in the Islamization of the archipelago through networks of scholars, teachers, merchants, and Sufi orders. Azyumardi Azra's reconstruction of scholarly networks demonstrates that Islamic intellectual life in the Malay-Indonesian world developed through transregional connections rather than through an isolated local trajectory. Within this history, mystical traditions interacted with existing cultural formations and generated diverse forms of Islamic expression.

The Indonesian experience also demonstrates that mystical traditions should not be romanticized. Debates between different currents of Sufism, including the historical controversies surrounding Hamzah Fansuri and Nur al-Din al-Raniri, reveal that mystical thought has long been contested within Muslim communities. This history strengthens rather than weakens the present argument: if mystical resources are to contribute to interreligious harmony, they must be articulated through responsible hermeneutics, theological awareness, and social ethics rather than through the assumption that mystics naturally transcend all boundaries.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive design based on philosophical hermeneutics and interreligious discourse analysis. It is a library-based conceptual study rather than an empirical study of a specific interfaith community. The primary textual corpus consists of Qur'an 3:64, selected classical and modern discussions of tawhid and mystical thought, the A Common Word initiative and its scholarly reception, and selected Christian dialogical documents, particularly Nostra Aetate. Secondary materials include peer-reviewed scholarship on Islamic mysticism, interreligious dialogue, religious pluralism, and Indonesian religious coexistence.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, the semantic and theological structure of *kalimatin sawā* is examined in relation to the Qur'anic context of tawhid and the People of the Book. Second, the concept is placed in dialogue with mystical categories such as *mahabbah, ma'rifah, fitrah, fana'*, and *waḥdat al-wujūd.* Third, these concepts are compared with the dialogical logic of A Common Word and contemporary scholarship that identifies both its potential and its theological limits. Fourth, the argument is contextualized within Indonesia, where interreligious relations are shaped by both formal institutions and everyday social interaction. The interpretive procedure is therefore not intended to demonstrate that religions are metaphysically identical, but to identify the ethical and spiritual conditions under which religious difference can become dialogically productive.

Results and Discussion

Kalimatun Sawa as Common Ground, Not Religious Sameness

The first finding is that Kalimatun Sawa is most analytically productive when interpreted as common ground rather than religious sameness. The Qur'anic expression itself contains an invitation to encounter: "between us and you." The grammatical structure is relational. It does not eliminate the distinction between interlocutors; it creates a space in which they can address one another. The verse therefore contains both proximity and difference. It seeks a basis of encounter without pretending that no theological disagreement exists.

This point is especially important in relation to A Common Word. The initiative's emphasis on love of God and love of neighbor does not require Muslims and Christians to agree on every doctrine. Indeed, the initiative derives its argument from Islamic sources while inviting Christians to recognize parallel ethical imperatives within their own tradition. Malik (2013) shows that the project was framed as a basis for collective action rather than as a new syncretic religion. Fitzgerald (2018) likewise situates A Common Word within a broader history of interfaith dialogue in which the search for commonality can produce new forms of encounter without dissolving confessional identity.

A mystical interpretation can deepen this distinction. In Sufi thought, the unity of God is precisely what prevents any created form—including the self, institution, nation, or religious group—from becoming an absolute. If this principle is translated into dialogical ethics, it means that Muslims should be capable of defending their theological convictions without turning the religious self into an object of worship. The same principle can be applied analogically to interreligious encounter: fidelity to one's tradition does not require hostility toward the other.

This interpretation also avoids a common conceptual mistake in discussions of religious pluralism. If "unity" is defined as agreement, difference becomes a problem to be overcome. If unity is understood as a shared ethical orientation toward the dignity of human beings and responsibility before God, difference can remain meaningful. *Kalimatun Sawa* can therefore be read as an invitation to principled coexistence: shared moral action grounded in religiously meaningful reasons, accompanied by honesty about doctrinal disagreement.

Tawhid, Mahabbah, and the Transformation of the Religious Self

The second finding concerns the ethical significance of mystical anthropology. A central contribution of Sufism to interreligious dialogue is not a new theory of comparative theology but a theory of the self. Dialogue fails when participants approach one another primarily as representatives of collective ego. Mystical disciplines challenge this tendency through practices of self-examination, remembrance, repentance, humility, and love. Fana', understood cautiously as the weakening of egoic attachment rather than the literal annihilation of personal existence, offers a particularly useful metaphor for interreligious ethics.

The connection between fana' and dialogue is indirect but important. The dialogical ego often seeks recognition, superiority, or victory. It interprets disagreement as humiliation and concession as defeat. A mystical ethic reverses this logic. The value of the encounter lies partly in the capacity to discover one's own limitations. Listening becomes a spiritual discipline. The other is not simply an object to be refuted but a person whose presence can expose dimensions of one's own tradition and self-understanding that require reflection.

Mahabbah provides the complementary positive orientation. Love of God becomes meaningful through ethical conduct toward creation. The principle is not sentimentalism; it is a demand for concrete responsibility. In an interreligious context, this means that theological conviction should be visible in the quality of one's treatment of religious others. A discourse about divine love that produces contempt for neighbors is internally inconsistent with the ethical trajectory emphasized by the mystical tradition.

This argument resonates with the logic of A Common Word, which places love of God and love of neighbor at the center of Muslim–Christian reconciliation. It also resonates with Christian approaches to interreligious dialogue that emphasize love, reconciliation, and human dignity. The convergence, however, should be described as an ethical convergence rather than as proof that Islamic and Christian doctrines are identical.

Waḥdat al-Wujūd and the Limits of Metaphysical Universalism

The most intellectually ambitious mystical resource in the original manuscript is *waḥdat al-wujūd,* associated especially with Ibn 'Arabi. In simplified form, the doctrine emphasizes the dependence of all contingent existence upon the Absolute. In later reception, it has sometimes been interpreted as implying that religious differences are merely external forms of a deeper unity. Such interpretations have generated both powerful accounts of religious pluralism and significant theological controversy.

For the purposes of interreligious dialogue, however, *waḥdat al-wujūd* should not be used as a shortcut to the proposition that every religion teaches the same thing. Such a conclusion exceeds what can responsibly be inferred from the doctrine. A more defensible use of the concept is ethical and phenomenological: human beings are radically dependent on a reality greater than themselves, and therefore no community possesses grounds for treating its own social identity as an absolute object of domination. The doctrine can thus cultivate humility without requiring doctrinal relativism.

This restrained interpretation is particularly important when dialogue involves Christianity. The Christian confession concerning Jesus as Christ and Lord cannot simply be translated into an Islamic concept of tawhid without remainder. Wrogemann (2021) demonstrates that the difference is not superficial. A responsible dialogue therefore requires a polyphonic model in which each tradition speaks from its own center while

seeking intelligible points of encounter. Mysticism contributes by making the encounter existential and ethical, not by eliminating the content of the traditions.

A Common Word and the Practical Architecture of Dialogue

The third major finding is that spiritual commonality becomes socially meaningful only when translated into practices of dialogue. The literature on A Common Word identifies an important movement from theological affirmation toward collective action. Malik (2013) conceptualizes this as norm entrepreneurship: religious actors seek to establish expectations for cooperation that can become socially reproducible. This suggests that Kalimatun Sawa should not remain a symbolic slogan. Its significance depends on institutional and interpersonal practices that embody its ethical claims.

The classic typology of interreligious dialogue is useful here. Dialogue can occur through everyday life, common social action, theological exchange, and the sharing of religious experience. These dimensions should be treated as complementary. Everyday interaction creates trust; social cooperation converts shared values into public goods; theological dialogue clarifies rather than suppresses disagreement; and spiritual exchange can disclose dimensions of faith that are inaccessible to purely propositional debate. A mystical approach is particularly compatible with the fourth dimension but should not be isolated from the other three.

The practical implication is that religious harmony should be understood as a process of relationship-building. Formal declarations are valuable because they articulate norms, but declarations cannot substitute for sustained interaction. Schools, universities, religious organizations, civil society groups, and local communities can translate the ethics of Kalimatun Sawa into joint projects addressing poverty, environmental responsibility, disaster response, education, and social justice. In this sense, interreligious harmony becomes a form of public ethics rather than merely a theology of tolerance.

The Indonesian context makes this practical orientation especially relevant. Research on Sufi communities in Indonesia shows that mystical traditions can encourage social engagement and religious plurality, while also demonstrating that such orientations are not uniform. Nugroho (2021), for example, notes both the inclusive potential of the Naqshbandi Haqqani tradition and the tensions that can emerge when Sufi communities encounter more exclusivist currents. The implication is that mystical resources need institutional reinforcement if they are to contribute consistently to public coexistence.

From Formal Tolerance to Transformative Encounter

The article's final analytical finding concerns the limits of tolerance. Tolerance is necessary, but it can remain thin when it means merely permitting the existence of others. A mystical approach points toward a thicker form of coexistence in which encounter changes the participants themselves. The aim is not conversion, nor the

abandonment of religious identity, but moral transformation. A Muslim participant should ideally emerge from dialogue with greater humility, stronger commitment to justice, and a more disciplined understanding of his or her own tradition; the same should be possible for participants from other traditions.

This model can be described as transformative dialogue. Its first principle is fidelity: participants speak honestly from within their traditions. Its second is reciprocity: no community monopolizes the right to define the other. Its third is humility: theological conviction is not converted into social domination. Its fourth is ethical action: common values become visible through cooperation. Its fifth is reflexivity: participants remain willing to examine how religious language may be distorted by political, economic, or identity interests.

Understood in this way, *Kalimatun Sawa* is neither a formula for doctrinal compromise nor a claim that religious differences are illusory. It is a discipline of finding a just point of encounter. The mystical dimension gives the concept depth because it relocates the work of harmony from the level of institutions alone to the formation of persons. The dialogical subject must learn to listen, to restrain ego, to love without possessing, and to cooperate without demanding sameness.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *Kalimatun Sawa* can be productively reread as a spiritual and ethical framework for interreligious harmony when its meaning is distinguished from the stronger claim of religious sameness. Qur'an 3:64 establishes a dialogical invitation to the People of the Book around a theological center defined by divine unity. In contemporary interreligious discourse, particularly through A Common Word, this invitation has been developed into a language of shared love of God, love of neighbor, and cooperation for the common good.

Islamic mysticism adds an important dimension to this framework by emphasizing transformation of the religious self. Tawhid disciplines the tendency to absolutize created identities; *mahabbah* translates love of God into ethical responsibility; *ma'rifah* links knowledge with spiritual transformation; *fana'* offers a language for the reduction of ego-centered attachment; and *waḥdat al-wujūd,* when interpreted cautiously, can cultivate ontological humility without erasing doctrinal difference. These resources make dialogue not simply a diplomatic technique but an ethical and spiritual practice.

The study also establishes an important limitation. Mysticism should not be romanticized as an automatic solution to religious conflict, nor should mystical language be used to declare all religions metaphysically identical. Muslim–Christian dialogue, for example, contains substantive disagreements about revelation, Christology, and the meaning of divine lordship. A productive dialogue does not conceal these disagreements; it develops the ethical capacity to engage them without hostility.

For Indonesian religious life, the implication is that harmony should move beyond formal tolerance toward transformative encounter. *Kalimatun Sawa* can serve as a conceptual bridge linking Qur'anic theology, Sufi ethics, and practical interreligious cooperation. Its most durable contribution lies not in eliminating difference, but in creating a moral space in which difference can be encountered through humility, love, justice, and shared responsibility. Future research should test this conceptual framework empirically through ethnographic studies of Sufi communities, interfaith educational institutions, and local Muslim–Christian initiatives in Indonesia.

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