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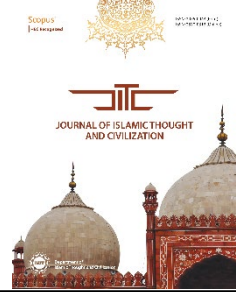
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Author (s): Muh. Tasrif


Affiliation (s): The State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Ponorogo, Indonesia

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Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities
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Upholding Faith and Religious Freedom: An Interpretation of the Qur'anic Story of Young Cave Dwellers as a Religious Minority

Muh. Tasrif*

Sciences of Qur'ān and Tafsīr,
Faculty of Ushūl al-Dīn, Adab, and Da'wah,
The State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN),
Ponorogo, Indonesia

Abstract

The study of religious freedom for minorities has various aspects, such as legal, human rights, sociological, cultural, and religious aspects. Unfortunately, efforts to find solutions to protect religious freedom for minority groups have not made adequate use of the religious perspective, particularly Islamic. This research paper aims to fill the gap by analyzing and interpreting the active efforts of young cave dwellers described in the Qur'ān as a minority group. For this purpose, it used the qualitative descriptive approach based on the thematic interpretation of the Qur'ān. The study covered the story of young cave dwellers as narrated in the Qur'ān in al-Kahf 18:9-26. The story was analyzed in terms of its narrative context, storyline, similarities with other similar stories, and other crucial aspects. It was found that young cave dwellers actively fought for religious freedom by combining firmness in faith and positive adaptation in interacting with the society. The story teaches us that religious freedom depends not only on the willingness of the majority group and the state but also on the proactive efforts of the minority group in behaving and acting on the diversity of religious views that surround them. For this reason, this paper contributes to provide conceptual solutions to the struggle of minority groups to fight for religious freedom amid religious diversity and views of life.

Keywords: beliefs, faith, freedom of expression, human rights, Qur'ān, religious freedom, religious minority, young cave dwellers

Introduction

Religious freedom is one of the most fundamental human rights. It is the freedom to express ones religion or belief system to protect other fundamental human rights.¹ The implementation of religious freedom can promote social integrity in a pluralistic society. It is a tool for peace, friendship, equality, and justice, and also works against hostility and discrimination. Therefore, the campaign for religious freedom has a significant meaning.²

In modern democracies, implementing religious freedom is the basis of any political policy. It is a fundamental legal right under the laws of many countries. The European Convention on Human Rights, for example, stipulates that everyone has the right to freedom of religion.³ In Western Europe and Australia, the notion of religious freedom encompasses two types of freedoms, namely freedom

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Muh. Tasrif, Associate Professor, Faculty of Ushūl al-Dīn, Adab, and Da'wah; The State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Ponorogo, Indonesia, at tasrif@iainponorogo.ac.id

¹Avdykader Mucaj, and Florent Muqaj, "Human Rights and Religious Freedoms During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kosovo," *Baltic Journal of Law and Politics* 14, no. 2 (December 1, 2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2478/bjlp-2021-0010>.

²Ali Akbar, "Freedom of Religion: The Contribution of Contemporary Iranian Reformist Scholars," *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): 7, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060384>.

³Frane Staničić, "Does Religious Freedom Warrant Protection as a Fundamental Human Right?," *Drustvena Istrazivanja* 28, no. 2 (2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5559/di.28.2.01>.

of conscience and freedom of practice. Despite the limited scope of the concept of religious freedom in India and Indonesia, it has become a part of their respective constitution.⁴

Religious freedom is an essential ingredient in the teachings of different religions including Islam.⁵ In Islam, this concept is expressed in al-Baqarah 2:256, "There is no compulsion in religion." Moreover, the prohibition against religious intolerance is also affirmed in al-Kāfirūn 109:6.⁶ In Islam, freedom of religion means that every human being has the right to choose their faith and beliefs.

Religious freedom is an important notion promoted by human rights activists at national and international levels. Human rights organizations play a significant role in protecting human rights. Many human rights organizations advocate and monitor the activities of states and social institutions in support and implementation of specific human rights.⁷ In favorable circumstances, these organizations are positioned as supporters of state policies in upholding human rights. However, in unfavorable circumstances, they act as opposition against oppressive state policies. Luckily, international human rights organizations are able to effectively mobilize the international community to pressure countries that commit human rights abuses, especially against religious freedom, to change their policies.

Despite receiving global attention, religious freedom of minority groups remains impaired both by weak law-enforcement and the majority group's dominance of public space. Several US human rights watchdogs report that there has been religious persecution in much of the world, perpetrated individually and in groups by secular, religious, terrorist, and state actors.⁸ In Sri Lanka, for example, violence against religion has been promoted by many groups to perpetuate the ethno-religious hegemony of the majority.⁹ Even in developed countries such as the UK, religious minorities face discriminatory treatment by politicians.¹⁰ Various violations and discrimination against religious minorities are intertwined with differences in culture, ethnic origin, gender, and language.

⁴Neha Tripathi, and Anubhav Kumar, "The Constitutional Struggle for Religious Freedom: A Comparative Study of India and Indonesia," *Constitutional Review* 8, no. 1 (2022): 10, <https://doi.org/10.31078/consrev811>; Vikas K. Choudhary, "The Idea of Religious Minorities and Social Cohesion in India's Constitution: Reflections on the Indian Experience," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (November 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110910>.

⁵M. Mehfooz, "Religious Freedom in Pakistan: A Case Study of Religious Minorities," *Religions* 12, no. 1 (2021): 12, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010051>.

⁶Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497568>; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521831601>; Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195139914.001.0001>.

⁷J. Fox and R. Finke, "Ensuring Individual Rights through Institutional Freedoms: The Role of Religious Institutions in Securing Religious Rights," *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021): 9, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040273>.

⁸Lee Marsden, "International Religious Freedom Promotion and US Foreign Policy," *Religions* 11, no. 5 (2020): 10, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11050260>.

⁹Matthias Basedau, and Johanna Schaefer-Kehnert, "Religious Discrimination and Religious Armed Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Obvious Relationship?," *Religion, State and Society* 47, no. 1 (2019): 30-47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2018.1531617>.

¹⁰Lee Crawford, and Ukasha Ramli, "Discrimination by Politicians against Religious Minorities: Experimental Evidence from the UK," *Party Politics* 28, no. 5 (2022): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211021053>.

In case of weak laws and the domination of the majority in the public sphere, minority groups succumb to the repression of authoritarian powers and thus are forced to follow the religion of the rulers. To give an example, religious minorities in Japan are considered another group and cannot be a wholesale part of Japanese nationalism due to the country's official affiliation to the majority religion.¹¹

In many societies, religious minorities do not actively and openly convey their beliefs and religion to the majority group through the available communication media. In fact, poor communication generates misunderstandings about differences in beliefs, worship procedures, morality, and sociocultural views. These misunderstandings have the potential to create mutual suspicion in each side.¹² Mutual mistrust, in turn, breeds social conflicts. Within this atmosphere, it is difficult to expect the groups to cooperate for improving economic welfare, health, environment, and education.

Social conflicts within the society result from limitations and restrictions on people in following their beliefs and expressing their religious symbols. For instance, ethnic minorities in Vietnam were treated as sub-citizens whose religion was not officially recognized by the state. Consequently, religious activities performed by minority groups were considered in opposition to Vietnamese culture.¹³ In Sri Lanka, there was an anti-halāl and anti-slaughter campaign backed by nationalist Buddhist forces. This campaign aimed at disrupting the Muslim economy.¹⁴ In Norway, Muslim men were reported to experience discrimination in the labor market because of their religious identity.¹⁵

Although plenty of research has been conducted to investigate religious freedom among minority groups, no study has used the Qur'ān as a framework to analyze this issue. In fact, some stories in the Qur'ān discuss religious minorities and such stories can be used as examples of actively fighting for religious freedom. Indeed, the Qur'ān has long been known to tell stories about people of the past. For instance, one study explored stories directed at uncovering the principles of moral education for children.¹⁶ Another study discussed sibling violence portrayed in two stories, namely

¹¹Ernils Larsson, "Covenantal Pluralism in 'Homogenous' Japan: Finding a Space for Religious Pluralism," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2022): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2022.2031056>.

¹²see Zoua M. Vang, Feng Hou, and Katharine Elder, "Perceived Religious Discrimination, Religiosity, and Life Satisfaction," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20, no. 6 (2019): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-018-0032-x>; Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert, "Religious Discrimination and Religious Armed Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa: an Obvious Relationship?"; Ramy Bassioni and Kimberly Langrehr, "Effects of Religious Discrimination and Fear for Safety on Life Satisfaction for Muslim Americans," *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 15, no. 1 (2021): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.3998/jmmh.133>.

¹³Edyta Roszko, "Controlled Religious Plurality: Possibilities for Covenantal Pluralism in Vietnam," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2021): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1954421>.

¹⁴Mohammad Agus Yusoff, and Athambawa Sarjoon, "Anti-Halal and Anti-Animal Slaughtering Campaigns and Their Impact in Post-War Sri Lanka," *Religions* 8, no. 4 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8040046>.

¹⁵Valentina Di Stasio et al., "Muslim by Default or Religious Discrimination? Results from a Cross-National Field Experiment on Hiring Discrimination," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 6 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1622826>.

¹⁶Mohammad Jaber Thalgi, "Principles in the Moral Education of Children in the Light of Qur'ānic Stories," *Darulfunun Ilahiyat* 30, no. 1 (2019): 205-30, <https://doi.org/10.26650/di.2019.30.1.0049>.

Hâbil-Qabîl and Prophet Yûsuf.¹⁷ In addition, there was a study of the stories of the 25 prophets mentioned in the Qur'ân viewed from the perspective of existential theory. A comparative study was also conducted to identify the process of transgression, including temptation, transgression, and tragedy, in the story of Eve in the Jewish and Islamic traditions.¹⁸ However, up to the present, no study has used the story of young cave dwellers in the Qur'ân, although it might be of practical use for solving the problem of religious freedom for minorities.

This paper is significant since it encourages religious minorities to uphold their faith and religious freedom actively. It also provides lessons for Muslim countries that struggle with protecting religious minorities. Therefore, it aims to reveal the meaning of the story of young cave dwellers in the Qur'ân which is relevant to the efforts to maintain religious freedom for minority groups. Further, it argues that protecting religious minorities is not only an obligation of the state and society but religious minorities should also obtain active security and protection.

2. Method

This research paper employed descriptive qualitative research method with a thematic interpretation approach (*mawdû'î*). Thematic interpretation was used to reveal the Qur'anic view of the story of young cave dwellers (Aşhab al-Kahf).¹⁹ The data were collected in the form of verses about the story of Aşhab al-Kahf mentioned in al-Kahf 18: 9-26. These verses were reinforced by other verses that explained other prophets' stories that have a similar plot. Verses about the stories of the prophets were collected through manual and digital indexes of the Qur'ân. The manual index used was *al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li Alfâz al-Qur'ân al-Karîm* by Muḥammad Fuâd 'Abd al-Bâqî.²⁰ Meanwhile, verses were translated from *Saheeh International* using the Ayat app.²¹ The Qur'anic commentaries used as sources of analysis were the works of M. Quraish Shihab, a modern Indonesian interpreter, namely *Tafsir al-Mishbah*²² and *Tafsir Al-Lubab*.²³ The verses were analyzed descriptively, comparatively, and critically. The verses about young cave dwellers were descriptively analyzed to identify their narrative context and storyline. Furthermore, the story of young cave

¹⁷Ibrahim Yildiz, "Kur'ân'da Kardeş Şiddeti: Hâbil-Kâbil ve Hz. Yûsuf Kıssalarına Psikolojik Bir Bakış (Fraternal Violence in the Qur'ân: A Psychological Perspective on the Parables of Hâbil-Kâbil and Hazrat Yûsuf)," *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi* 24, no. 1 (June 15, 2020): 4, <https://doi.org/10.18505/cuid.690585>.

¹⁸Khaoula Trad, "Eva y La Triple T En Las Tradiciones Judía e Islámica (Eve and The Triple T in Jewish and Islamic Traditions)," *Ilu* 22 (2017): 8, <https://doi.org/10.5209/ILUR.57425>.

¹⁹see Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo41314165.html>; Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ân: Towards a Contemporary Approach*, I (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), <https://www.routledge.com/Interpreting-the-Quran-Towards-a-Contemporary-Approach/Saeed/p/book/9780415365383>.

²⁰Muḥammad Fuâd 'Abd Al-Bâqî, *Al-Mu'jam Al-Mufahras Li Alfâz Al-Qur'ân Al-Karîm* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ḥadîth, 2007), <https://ia902702.us.archive.org/27/items/WAQ140507/140507.pdf>.

²¹ETC King Saud University, "Ayat KSU - Electronic Moshaf Project" (Arab Saudi: King Saud University, 2015), <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/ayat/?l=en>.

²²M. Quraish Shihab, "Tafsir Al-Mishbah Volume 7," in *Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan, Dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an [Tafsir Al-Mishbah: Message, Effect, and Compatibility of the Qur'ân]* (Tangerang: PT Lentera Hati, 2016).

²³M. Quraish Shihab, *Al-Lubab: Makna, Tujuan, Dan Pelajaran Dari Surah-Surah Al-Qur'an Volume 2 [Al-Lubab: Meaning, Purpose, and Lessons from the Surahs of the Qur'ân]* (Tangerang: Lentera Hati, 2012), https://mizanstore.com/TAFSIR_AL-LUBAB_MAKNA_TUJUAN_DAN_PELAJARAN_DARI_SURAH_SURAH_AL_56306.

dwellers was compared with the stories of the prophets with similar storylines. In the next stage, the story of young cave dwellers was critically analyzed as a religious minority group actively fighting for their religious freedom.

3. Story of Young Cave Dwellers in the Qur'ān

3.1 Historical Context of the Revelation

The story of Aṣḥāb al-Kahf appeared in the context of the theological interaction between Prophet Muhammad, the Meccan pagans, and the People of the Book living in Medina. Meccan pagans doubted Prophet Muhammad's prophetic claims. For this reason, they looked for ways to prove the fallacy of these prophetic claims. One of them was to test the conformity of his prophetic claims with the content of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. They believed that these prophetic claims would collapse if he could not explain the essential issues discussed in the old books. One of the controversial issues among the People of the Book was the story of the cave dwellers. In this context, the Qur'ān put forward the story of young cave dwellers as an answer to Meccan pagans who challenged the Prophet to prove the truth of his prophetic claims.

Surah al-Kahf is connected with the Quraysh tribe which sent al-Najjār bin Hārith and Uqbah bin Abi Mu'ait to the Jewish priests living in Medina. The two men asked the priests about Prophet Muhammad, his qualities, and the content of his *da'wah*. Upon arrival in Medina, the two asked the Jewish leaders about how to know the truth of his prophethood. The Jewish leaders suggested that the two should ask him about three things, namely the young cave dwellers, the wandering men in the east and west, and the soul. If he could answer these three questions, he would be right in his claim. On the other hand, if he could not answer, he was a liar.

Al-Najjār and 'Uqbah then returned to Mecca and went to Prophet Muhammad to ask him these three questions. Subsequently, Prophet Muhammad promised to answer them the next day. He delivered the promise without accompanying it with the saying "If God wills." Hence, he could not answer them the next day because he did not receive a revelation from Allah Almighty. He waited for fifteen days for the revelation. During this waiting period, he was saddened by the ridicule of the people around him. Then came the revelation explaining the story of the young cavemen and admonishing him that when he makes a promise to do something, he should accompany his promise with the words "If God wills."²⁴

3.2 Narration of the Story

The story is narrated in al-Kahf 18: 9-26. The *surah* comprises 110 verses and belongs to the *Makkiyya* (surahs revealed before Hijra) group of *surahs*. Al-Kahf means cave, while Aṣḥāb al-Kahf means cave dwellers. These names are applied to the story of young men hiding in a cave and sleeping in it for 309 years.²⁵ The Qur'ān narrates this story globally and does not elaborate on it in chronological and detailed storylines. The Qur'ān only explains a few important things about the setting of the story, the story itself, the setting of the story within the story, the narration of the main events, the duration of the time when they occurred, and the story's purpose. The setting related to the context of the story's revelation to Prophet Muhammad appears at the end, while the story's narration seems at the beginning (see Figure 1).

²⁴Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia, *Al-Qur'ān Dan Tafsirnya [Al-Qur'ān and Its Commentary] (Revised Edition) Volume 5* (Jakarta: Widya Cahaya, 2011), 576-77, <https://pustakalajinah.kemenag.go.id/koleksi?kategori=tafsir-tahlil>.

²⁵Ibid., 575.

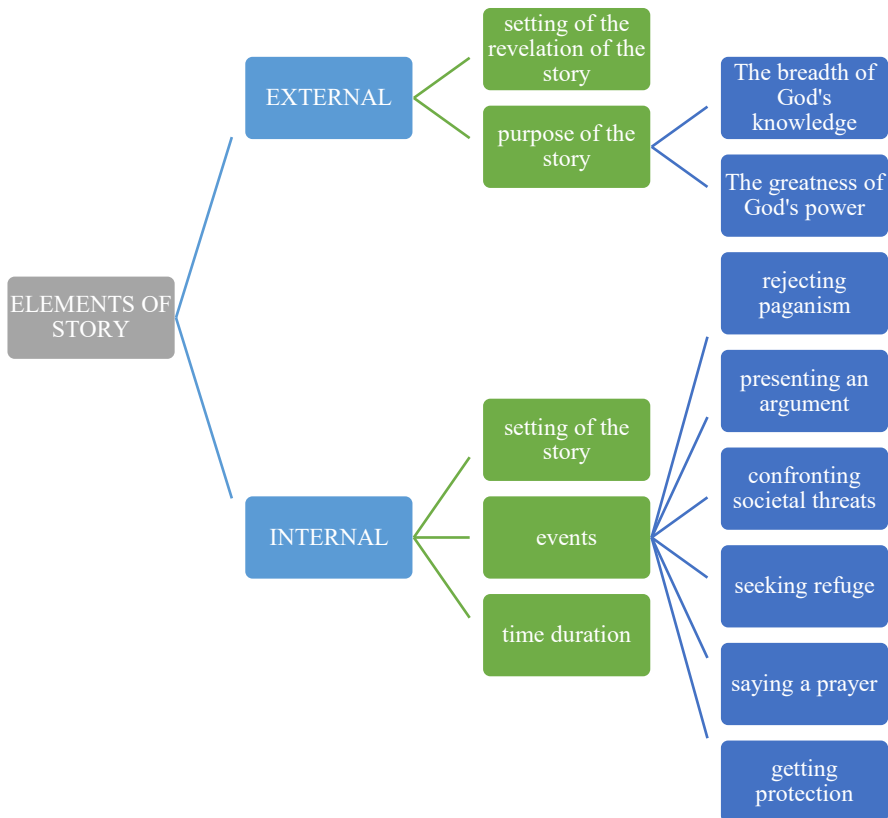


Figure 1. Elements of the Story

The story of Young cave dwellers appears in the Qur’ān in the context of Prophet Muhammad’s dialogue with the pagans of Mecca and the People of the Book living in Medina. As mentioned earlier, Prophet Muhammad received questions about cave dwellers and spontaneously agreed to give their answers the very next day. For his spontaneity, the Qur’ān rebuked him, “And never say of anything, ‘Indeed, I will do that tomorrow,’ except [when adding], ‘If Allah wills.’”²⁶ Only after 15 days the verses of the Qur’ān were revealed to him, so he may respond to the questions posed to him. In these verses, major questions regarding cave dwellers were answered.

The people of Mecca and Medina debated the number of cave dwellers and the length of their stay. These two issues were not considered essential by the Qur’ān, so Prophet Muhammad was asked to affirm that Allah knew better their numbers and the length of their stay. Indeed, he was forbidden to argue with and ask the People of the Book for views on both matters.²⁷ In addition to the revelation of the story of young cave dwellers, the Qur’ān also presents its real-life location.

What is interesting about the story of young cave dwellers is the fact that they lived at a time when political authorities curbed religious freedom. Rather, the ruler imposed certain religious

²⁶al-Kahf 18: 23.

²⁷Ibid., 18:22, 26.

beliefs on all subjects.²⁸ Verse 15 confirms the views of the people of the time, “These, our people, have taken besides Him deities. Why do they not bring a clear authority for [worship of] them?” Furthermore, the Qur’ān also explains the cave’s position that allowed its inhabitants to survive. The cave’s situation was such that at sunrise, the rays leaned to the right from the mouth of the cave. Moreover, at sunset, the rays moved away to the left. Its inhabitants were also in a prominent place within it.²⁹ However, for people who approached the cave, the state of the cave and its inhabitants was so scary that they moved away out of fear. Qur’ān al-Kahf 18:18 describes the horror of the cave, “If you had looked at them, you would have turned from them in flight and been filled by them with terror.”

Chronologically, the story of the young cave dwellers begins with their refusal to follow the pagan religion adopted by the king and the society. They emphatically called for “Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never will we invoke besides Him any deity. We would have certainly spoken, then, an excessive transgression.”³⁰ In making their appeal, they also argued about the religious error of their people, that is, they neglected the logical evidence against belief in many gods.³¹

Their calls resulted in death threats to their souls from the king and a forced return to the pagan religion.³² To avoid the danger, they decided to exile themselves to a cave in the belief that their Lord would provide help and guide them to the straight path.³³ To strengthen their hearts, they prayed, “Our Lord, grant us from Yourself mercy and prepare for us from our affair right guidance.”³⁴

The Qur’ān further describes how Allah Almighty fulfilled their prayers. “God closed their ears for years.”³⁵ They had faith in their Lord and God gave them instructions.³⁶ They slept and Allah turned them right and left, while their dog spread its front legs in front of the cave door.³⁷ Then, Allah Almighty woke them up. After waking up, they discussed and agreed to send one of them to buy food. When buying food, he was advised to be gentle with outsiders and to hide his true identity.³⁸ If their identity was exposed, they would be re-arrested and forced to return to the pagan religion. If so, they would never be lucky forever.³⁹ It was when their messenger came out that Allah revealed their identity to the people. Nevertheless, the people remained at odds (doubtful) about the actual state of the cave dwellers. The rulers then built a mosque over the cave.⁴⁰

Although other aspects are not mentioned in detail, the Qur’ān provides information about the duration of their stay in the cave, “And they remained in their cave for three hundred years and exceeded by nine.”⁴¹ This verse explains that they were in the cave asleep for over 300 years according to the calculation of the solar calendar used by the Jews, plus nine years according to the

²⁸Ibid., 18:20.

²⁹Ibid., 18:17.

³⁰al-Kahf 18:14.

³¹Ibid., 18:15.

³²Ibid., 18:20.

³³ibid., 18:16.

³⁴Ibid., 18:10.

³⁵Ibid., 18:11.

³⁶Ibid., 18:13.

³⁷Ibid., 18:18.

³⁸Ibid., 18:19.

³⁹Ibid., 18:20.

⁴⁰Ibid., 18:21.

⁴¹Ibid., 18:25.

estimate of the lunar calendar used by the Meccans.⁴² However, when others gave different information, Prophet Muhammad was asked to assert that Allah knew best about the duration of their stay in the cave because of His visual and hearing acuity.⁴³

Furthermore, the primary purpose of the story of young cave dwellers is to show the breadth of God's knowledge and power over His creatures. Qur'an al-Kahf 18:12 explains that Allah awakened them from their long sleep to show themselves the correct count of their sleep length. In Qur'an al-Kahf 18:19, it is explained that people in Mecca and Medina had a dispute about the length of time. The affirmation that God knows the duration of time is stated again in al-Kahf 18:26, "Allah is most knowing of how long they remained."

In Qur'an al-Kahf 18:21, this story is presented to show God's power regarding the truth of His promises and the occurrence of the Day of Judgment. God's promise was filled with their prayers answered to find a way out of the threat of religious coercion.⁴⁴ Similarly, His promise was fulfilled by giving them additional instructions because of their sincere prayers and efforts.⁴⁵

3.3 Young Cave Dwellers' Participation in Upholding of Religious Freedom

The story of young cave dwellers shows the active participation of religious minorities in demonstrating their existence and defending themselves from the sociopolitical threats emanating from outside their group. Their active participation is manifested in at least four forms, namely open declaration of their beliefs, affirmation of arguments over their beliefs, seeking protection from threats, and gentleness to the society. These forms are presented in Figure 2.

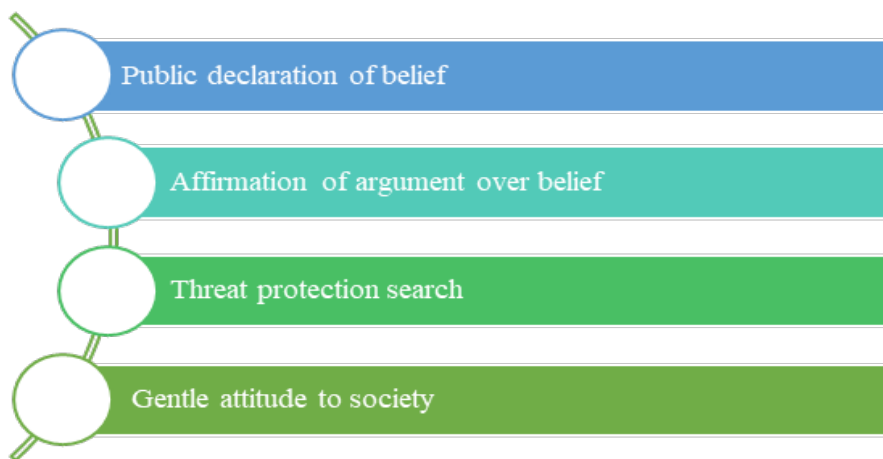


Figure 2. Active Participation of Young Cave Dwellers

The declaration of faith by young cave dwellers based on their freedom of conscience amid an oppressive regime is affirmed in al-Kahf 18:14. This verse confirms that they appeared bravely and openly before the ruler and the public to declare their beliefs. They also practiced these beliefs

⁴²Shihab, *Al-Lubab: Makna, Tujuan, Dan Pelajaran Dari Surah-Surah Al-Qur'an Volume 2 [Al-Lubab: Meaning, Purpose, and Lessons from the Surahs of the Qur'an]*, 291.

⁴³al-Kahf 18:26.

⁴⁴Ibid., 18:10.

⁴⁵al-Kahf 18:13.

perfectly, attentively, and sincerely.⁴⁶ Their sincerity received God's acceptance in terms of steadying their hearts on their faith, "*wa rabaṭnā 'alā qulūbihim.*"⁴⁷ To bind (*rabaṭa*) means to confirm their faith because faith has its place in the heart. So, if the heart is attached, it becomes steady and does not waver.⁴⁸ Not only does God bind hearts but He also instructs them.⁴⁹

The young cave dwellers affirmed their belief arguments by questioning the ideas of another faith they considered false, that is, belief in multiple gods.⁵⁰ Their questioning the pagan faith was a consequence of their declaration that their God is the Lord of heaven and earth.⁵¹ In another passage, al-Kahf 18:26 affirms the characteristics of one true God, that is, He Who knows all that is invisible in heaven and earth, Who does not need a protector, and Who determines the decisions over all things. For this reason, human beings, animals, or any other objects are not worthy of godhood. Consequently, those who worship them have gone completely astray.

Young cave dwellers were threatened by their people because they declared their faith and arguments. Faced with the threat, they agreed to exile themselves to a cave. When they went to the cave, they offered hope to God, "Our Lord, grant us from Yourself mercy and prepare for us from our affair right guidance."⁵² Their hope was accompanied by confidence that God would show them the best way.⁵³ In addition, they hid so that their people could not trace their whereabouts and erase their identity. For this reason, when they woke up from sleep and felt hungry, they sent one of them to find food in secret. They told the messenger sent to find food that "...and let him be cautious. And let no one be aware of you."⁵⁴ They did this because they feared that if the people recognized the messenger, they would threaten their safety. They might be allegedly killed or forced to return to their pagan religion.⁵⁵

The condition of young cave dwellers as a minority vis-à-vis a tyrannical ruler is likened to the state of Prophet Muhammad and his followers as a minority vis-à-vis the majority of Meccan pagans. For this reason, this story, in addition to providing answers to pagan challenges, also offered lessons to him and his followers on the attitudes they should take as a minority group. The story provides an example of militancy and, at the same time, a strategy for avoiding majority pressure. Militancy is reflected in resilience and steadfastness in upholding personal beliefs, even if they contradict the views of the majority. Meanwhile, avoiding majority pressure takes the form of actions aimed to isolate oneself and to hide in a safe place.

The actions of young cave dwellers conform to a pattern of activity that the Apostles of the Lord also carried out in delivering the mission of His treatise. Such patterns can be found in their stories set forth by the Qur'ān. One example are the actions Prophet Muhammad took when he began his apostolic *da'wah* in Mecca. At first, he received orders to preach but without the obligation to do so openly. He said, "O you who covers himself [with a garment], arise and warn!"⁵⁶ Then came the

⁴⁶Shihab, "Tafsir Al-Mishbah Volume 7," 253.

⁴⁷al-Kahf 18:14.

⁴⁸Shihab, "Tafsir Al-Mishbah Volume 7," 254.

⁴⁹al-Kahf 18:13.

⁵⁰Ibid., 18:15.

⁵¹Ibid., 18:14.

⁵²Ibid., 18:10.

⁵³al-Kahf 18:16.

⁵⁴al-Kahf 18: 19.

⁵⁵al-Kahf 18: 20.

⁵⁶al-Muddaththir 74:1-2.

blatant proselytizing command, “Then declare what you are commanded and turn away from the polytheists”.⁵⁷

A small part of Mecca’s population accepted his proselytizing, although most refused. Qur’ān Yāsīn 36:7-10 describes their rejection. They rejected his proselytizing so vehemently that the existence or absence of an invitation to *da’wah* made no difference. Furthermore, they not only resisted but harassed and tortured those who followed him.⁵⁸ Qur’ān al-Burūj 85:8 states that the torture of his followers was solely because of their faith in God, “And they resented them not except because they believed in Allah, the Exalted in Might, the Praiseworthy.” In turn, the rejection and torture saddened the prophet and even caused his body to ache. For this reason, to strengthen his heart, Allah explained that he was only tasked with delivering *da’wah*, while human beings had the freedom to accept or reject it.⁵⁹

To defend his preaching, he sought a way out of the rejection and torture of his followers through migration (or *hijra*) out of Mecca. Before eventually emigrating to Medina in 622 CE, he allowed his followers to perform *hijrah* to Habashah in 615 and to Thaif in 619 CE. This migration was intended to gain freedom to practice their religion and remains a virtue. Such actions receive great rewards from Allah Almighty in the Hereafter.⁶⁰ On the other hand, those who allow themselves to be oppressed so that they cannot practice their religion freely, while having the ability to migrate to safer places, are considered as persecuting themselves.⁶¹ Thus, migrating for religious freedom is a religious obligation that minority groups cannot abandon.

3.4 Active Participation of Religious Minorities

As shown in Figure 2, one form of active participation by religious minorities is declaring their beliefs openly. This open declaration is also a manifestation of implementing the principle of freedom of expression which is a fundamental right guaranteed by the constitutions of democratic countries for every individual.⁶² It is protected through regulations at national and international levels. Nevertheless, in reality, the implementation of this concept is greatly influenced by particular societal values. In some Asian countries, for instance, freedom of expression adapts to the community’s interests.⁶³ For this reason, this concept goes hand in hand with the respective community’s interests. Also, in modern political culture, freedom of expression needs to be regulated through the rule of law, so as not to be threatened by the manipulative techniques of politicians in democratic regimes.

The next form of active participation is presenting logical arguments for their beliefs, as depicted in Figure 2. Belief arguments are put forward openly to become part of public reasoning. Public reasoning serves to explore and attain the agreement of a community about public good. In obtaining consensus regarding public interest, the public reasoning process is based on the principles of

⁵⁷al-Hijr 15:94.

⁵⁸M. Quraish Shihab, *Al-Lubab: Makna, Tujuan, Dan Pelajaran Dari Surah-Surah Al-Qur’an Volume 4 [Al-Lubab: Meaning, Purpose, and Lessons from the Surahs of the Qur’ān]*.

⁵⁹al-Kahf 18:29.

⁶⁰see Āle ‘Imrān 3:195; al-Anfāl 8:72, 74.

⁶¹see al-Nisā’ 4:97.

⁶²Justyna Miklaszewska, “Freedom of Speech in Modern Political Culture,” *AVANT. The Journal of the Philosophical-Interdisciplinary Vanguard* 10, no. 1 (April 30, 2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.26913/avant.2019.01.06>; Olha S. Bondarenko, Maryna S. Utkina, and Mariia V. Kolesnikova, “Role of Mass Media in Preventing Corruption,” *Law, State and Telecommunications Review* 13, no. 1 (May 26, 2021): 70–93, <https://doi.org/10.26512/lstr.v13i1.35433>.

⁶³Ivan Ng Yan Chao, “‘Asian Values’ in Different Forms: A Comparative Examination of How Singapore, Indonesia and Myanmar Address Insults to Religion,” *Religion and Human Rights* 15, no. 3 (January 12, 2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18710328-BJA10013>.

inclusive and non-coercive discourse.⁶⁴ Public reasoning is the reasoning of equal citizens in imposing rules on each other under the protection of state power. In a pluralistic society, public reasoning allows the realization of the desire for equitable social cooperation among community members and citizens.⁶⁵

As shown in Figure 2, religious minorities can also actively seek allies to protect religious freedom, socially and politically. Security cooperation agreements with other parties need to be pursued by religious minorities. This cooperation includes the protection of life, property, and in particular, faith and worship based on their beliefs. However, it is still crucial for religious minorities to safeguard the existence of others and not disturb their peace and security. They also play an active role in realizing the common good in the host country's economic, social, political, and cultural aspects.

Finally, as immigrants, members of religious minorities must behave politely and avoid being arrogant, so that others may accept and associate peacefully with them (see Figure 2). Peaceful social association requires a high level of social tolerance. Social tolerance is the acceptance of various social groups.⁶⁶ High social tolerance allows learning interactions between social groups that create close relationships. Formed by an intimate social environment due to intensive associations, it can foster creativity, innovation, and productivity.⁶⁷ Moreover, it enables active social participation.

Religious minorities need active social participation to be accepted as part of the society. It is vital to enhance behavioral adaptation and social norms.⁶⁸ Furthermore, it creates social collaboration that begins with intensive interaction with nearby community members. When collaboration has been achieved, it serves as a reinforcing factor that enhances social cohesion. In this case, social collaboration carried out by individuals can occur quickly in societies that have strong identity ties.⁶⁹

4. Conclusion

The story of Aşhāb al-Kahf illustrates that religious freedom for minority groups does not only depend on external parties which ensure religious liberty but also on the active efforts of religious minorities themselves in fighting for it. Their diligent efforts may include open declaration of beliefs, affirmation of arguments for their views, seeking protection from threats, and adaptive attitudes toward the society. Their active effort effectively allows them to maintain their existence and

⁶⁴Wardani, *Islam Ramah Lingkungan (Islam Eco-Friendly)* (Banjarmasin: IAIN Antasari Press, 2015), <http://idr.uin-antasari.ac.id/5183/>.

⁶⁵Blain Neufeld, "Shared Intentions, Public Reason, and Political Autonomy," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 6 (2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2018.1448046>.

⁶⁶Olga Aimaganbetova et al., "Youth's Disposition of Radicalism in a Poly-Ethnic and Poly-Confessional Society from the Perspective of Tolerance/Intolerance," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 1 (2023): 7, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1155>.

⁶⁷Osama Alhendi et al., "Tolerance, Cultural Diversity and Economic Growth: Evidence from Dynamic Panel Data Analysis," *Economies* 9, no. 1 (2021): 9, <https://doi.org/10.3390/economies9010020>.

⁶⁸Julianna M. Nemeth et al., "A Social-Contextual Investigation of Smoking among Rural Women: Multi-Level Factors Associated with Smoking Status and Considerations for Cessation," *Rural and Remote Health* 18, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 11, <https://doi.org/10.22605/RRH4338>.

⁶⁹Mitchell Goist, and Florian G. Kern, "Traditional Institutions and Social Cooperation: Experimental Evidence from the Buganda Kingdom," *Research and Politics* 5, no. 1 (2018): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017753925>.

contribute to the common good, together with other groups. Finally, with such diligent efforts, peaceful and productive social cooperation can be achieved.⁷⁰

The story of young cave dwellers also provides lessons about the role of majority groups in building multicultural competence, especially for the benefit of religious minorities. Multicultural competence is essential in today's era of globalization.⁷¹ In its presence, the majority group does not perceive a sense of threat from the minority group and provides strong support for their rights. For this reason, the majority group is expected to develop multicultural competence to create a harmonious and peaceful social life. Multicultural competence can grow if religious minorities open up and do not remain exclusive and closed. The openness of religious minorities contributes to the disclosure of sufficient information resulting in the loss of suspicion of other groups.

4.1. Future Directions

This study contributes to developing new interpretive approaches to uncover the purpose of the Qur'anic stories relevant to the current problems of Muslims,⁷² such as social relations between majority groups and religious minorities. For this reason, the story in the Qur'an can be elaborated operationally to solve the tensions that occur in the social life of Muslims.

This study also allows for the further study of Qur'anic stories that can offer solutions to contemporary humanitarian problems. Among them are conflict problems that occur due to the differences in political, religious, and economic views. In this regard, the stories of Dhū al-Qarnayn, Dāwūd, Sulaymān, and ʿĀlūt can be critically examined using the thematic interpretation approach.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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⁷⁰Wardani, *Islam Ramah Lingkungan (Islam Eco-Friendly)*.

⁷¹Sojung Park et al., "Traditional Korean Art Materials as Therapeutic Media: Multicultural Expansion Through Materials in Art Therapy," *Art Therapy* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2020.1729077>.

⁷²see M. Ainur Rifqi and A. Halil Thahir, "Maqasidi Interpretation; Building Interpretation Paradigm Based on Mashlahah," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol18.iss2.art7>.

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