

Digital Hermeneutics and Religious Authority in the ChatGPT Era: Murtadha Muthahhari's Perspective

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence has changed how people access, interpret, and evaluate religious information. This article examines the transformation of religious authority in the ChatGPT era through digital hermeneutics and Murtadha Muthahhari's epistemological perspective. The study uses qualitative library research with an interpretive-philosophical approach. Primary sources are selected works by Muthahhari, while secondary sources address digital religion, algorithmic mediation, large language models, AI ethics, and contemporary debates on religious authority. ChatGPT outputs are treated as secondary interpretive material, not as authoritative religious sources. The analysis finds that AI produces three interconnected shifts: wider access to religious information, more dialogical and personalized interpretation, and a growing risk that fluency and accessibility will be mistaken for authority. From Muthahhari's perspective, information processing cannot be equated with religious knowledge because reason, revelation, experience, moral responsibility, and spiritual formation are interconnected. ChatGPT can therefore serve as an epistemic and interpretive aid, but not as an autonomous religious authority. The article proposes a human-in-the-loop model of digital religious literacy in which AI supports exploration and learning, while qualified scholars and users remain responsible for verification, contextual interpretation, normative judgment, and ethical consequences.

Keywords

digital hermeneutics; religious authority; ChatGPT; artificial intelligence; Murtadha Muthahhari; Islamic epistemology; digital religion

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1. INTRODUCTION

Generative artificial intelligence has moved religious information seeking beyond the familiar logic of the internet. Search engines made religious materials widely accessible, but conversational AI adds another layer: information can now be requested, reformulated, summarized, translated, and discussed through ordinary language. A user may ask about a Qur'anic verse, a legal question, an ethical dilemma, or a theological concept and receive an immediate answer that appears coherent, personal, and



confident. This experience can feel remarkably similar to consulting a knowledgeable conversation partner.

The change matters because religious knowledge has historically been embedded in institutions, teachers, texts, scholarly methods, and communities of interpretation. In Islamic traditions, authority is not simply a matter of possessing information. It is connected to competence, interpretive methodology, transmission, accountability, and the moral responsibility attached to giving guidance. When an AI system produces an answer in the style of an expert, a fundamental epistemological question emerges: does the capacity to generate an answer also constitute authority?

Recent resource suggests that artificial intelligence is already entering this field. Niam (2024) argues that AI can broaden access to religious education while creating concerns about accuracy, credibility, and the boundaries of religious authority. Tarwiyyah (2025) shows that the emergence of “Kiai-AI” can renegotiate established forms of religious authority rather than simply replacing them. Research on AI and Indonesian ulama similarly indicates that digital technologies can reshape religious communication and the hierarchy through which knowledge is recognized (Abror et al., 2024). These studies are important, but a philosophical question remains underdeveloped: why can an AI system appear authoritative even when its epistemic status is fundamentally different from that of a religious scholar?

Digital religion provides an important starting point. (H. Campbell, 2007) demonstrated that the internet can redistribute and renegotiate religious authority by changing how users interact with institutions, leaders, texts, and communities. Later work emphasized that digital religion should be understood not merely as religion taking place online, but as a transformation in the relationship among religious actors, media, practices, and technologies (H. Campbell, 2013; H. A. Campbell & Cheong, 2024). Generative AI intensifies this process because the system does not simply display a source. It generates a new linguistic response that mediates the user’s encounter with religious knowledge.

This situation makes digital hermeneutics especially relevant. Hermeneutics asks not only what a text means, but also how meaning is produced through language, history, context, and the horizon of the interpreter. In a digital environment, the medium itself becomes part of the interpretive condition. A prompt, interface, model, training data, and conversational context can all influence the form in which religious information is presented. The question therefore expands from “What does this text mean?” to “How does an algorithmically mediated interaction shape what the user is able to understand and trust?”

Murtadha Muthahhari offers a productive epistemological lens for addressing this problem. His philosophical writings place knowledge within a broader account of reason, revelation, human nature, worldview, and the purposes of life. Studies of his epistemology emphasize the importance of rational

inquiry while resisting the reduction of knowledge to a narrow materialist or purely empirical framework (Komarudin, 2019; Saragih, 2005). In this perspective, reason is not an enemy of religion. Yet reason also does not exhaust the sources and dimensions of religious knowing. Revelation, experience, ethical orientation, and the formation of the human subject remain significant.

This perspective helps avoid two opposing assumptions. The first is techno-solutionism, the belief that more sophisticated technology necessarily produces more reliable knowledge. The second is techno-pessimism, the belief that AI is inherently incompatible with religion and therefore must simply be rejected. This article adopts a critical middle position. AI is understood as a powerful human-made epistemic technology that can support learning and interpretation, while its epistemic status must remain distinct from religious authority.

The central argument is that ChatGPT does not simply replace or eliminate religious authority; it changes how authority is experienced, accessed, and negotiated. The article therefore introduces the idea of distributed interpretive authority to describe a digital environment in which texts, traditions, scholars, communities, users, and AI systems occupy different but interacting positions. The main contribution is to connect this model with Muthahhari's epistemology and to propose human-in-the-loop as an epistemic principle for digital religious literacy.

The research uses qualitative library research with an interpretive-philosophical orientation. Primary materials are selected works by Murtadha Muthahhari, while secondary materials cover digital religion, hermeneutics, algorithmic authority, large language models, AI ethics, and recent studies of AI in Islamic education and religious authority. ChatGPT outputs are considered secondary interpretive material rather than primary religious evidence. The analysis proceeds through thematic reduction, categorization of knowledge sources and authority, hermeneutic interpretation of human-AI interaction, philosophical analysis using Muthahhari's concepts of reason and revelation, and synthesis. Claims about AI are cross-checked against scholarly literature because language models may generate fluent but inaccurate statements (Huang et al., 2025; Shmitchell et al., 2024).

2. METHOD

This study is a qualitative library-based study. It is designed as an interpretive-philosophical inquiry rather than a statistical measurement of AI use. The object of analysis is the transformation of religious knowledge authority produced by conversational AI, particularly ChatGPT, and the epistemological assumptions that make such authority appear plausible.

The primary theoretical source is Murtadha Muthahhari's philosophical work, especially his discussions of knowledge, reason, religion, human beings, and worldview. Secondary sources include recent journal articles and scholarly books on digital religion, religious authority, AI ethics, large

language models, and Islamic applications of generative AI. Classical hermeneutic perspectives, particularly Gadamer's account of understanding as a historically and linguistically situated event, are used to clarify the interpretive dimension of digital interaction (Gadamer, 2004).

The study also considers representative ChatGPT responses to religiously oriented prompts as secondary interpretive material. The purpose is not to test ChatGPT as a religious oracle, but to examine the characteristics of its responses: fluency, personalization, apparent certainty, use of references, treatment of disagreement, and the distinction between descriptive information and normative advice. Because hallucination remains a recognized problem in large language models, AI-generated statements are not accepted as evidence without verification (Huang et al., 2025; Shmitchell et al., 2024).

The analysis follows four stages. First, relevant literature and AI outputs are reduced according to the themes of knowledge, authority, interpretation, validity, and responsibility. Second, the material is interpreted through digital hermeneutics, focusing on the interaction among user, text, medium, and algorithm. Third, the findings are examined through Muthahhari's epistemological framework. Fourth, the results are synthesized into a model of complementary authority and human-in-the-loop religious literacy. This procedure allows technological claims and normative religious claims to remain analytically distinct.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. From Authority-Based Knowledge to Accessibility-Based Authority

The first finding is a change in the user's experience of authority. In conventional settings, religious knowledge is often acquired through teachers, books, study circles, educational institutions, and recognized religious organizations. Such pathways can be slow and demanding, but they also provide mechanisms of correction, contextualization, and accountability. ChatGPT lowers the cost of access. Users can ask the same question repeatedly, request simpler explanations, compare positions, or ask for examples without having to master specialist terminology first.

The educational value of this accessibility should not be underestimated. Research on ChatGPT in Islamic religious education suggests that generative AI can support learning, lesson design, explanation, and exploration when used responsibly (Suhendi et al., 2024). Yet accessibility can also become a source of perceived authority. A response that is immediate, fluent, and easy to understand may be experienced as better than a carefully qualified answer that requires the user to consult several sources. In this sense, authority can become accessibility-based: the easier a source is to access and converse with, the more authoritative it may feel.

This shift does not necessarily mean that users abandon scholars. Rather, the criteria through which trust is formed become more complex. The user may move from asking AI for a definition to asking for

interpretation, then to asking for advice on a normative issue. The transition can happen gradually and without an explicit decision to transfer authority. Niam (2024) therefore rightly emphasizes human oversight, while Tarwiyyah (2025) shows that AI can renegotiate rather than simply erase traditional authority.

3.2. ChatGPT as a Secondary Interpreter

ChatGPT is best understood here as a secondary interpreter. It does not occupy the same position as a scholar trained within a living tradition of textual study, jurisprudence, theology, and ethical responsibility. Instead, it operates at the level of linguistic mediation: it reorganizes patterns of information into a conversational response. This can be useful for orientation, comparison, translation, and conceptual mapping, but usefulness should not be confused with normative legitimacy.

The dialogical character of the interaction is one of its strongest features. A user can ask for a technical explanation, then a simpler version, then a comparison between interpretations. This personalization can make difficult religious concepts more approachable. However, it may also create an illusion of substantive understanding. The system responds to the prompt and available context; it does not possess the user's lived religious experience, moral commitments, or spiritual situation in the way a human adviser does.

Research on Arabic-Islamic concepts illustrates this tension. Arifianto et al (2023) found that ChatGPT can provide useful explanations of debatable Islamic terms, but its responses should not be treated as final theological judgments. Similarly, Shormani (2024) demonstrates that culturally and religiously nuanced Arabic expressions can lose important meanings in translation. These findings support the view that AI can mediate interpretation while remaining dependent on human contextual judgment.

3.3. Fluency Is Not Legitimacy

A central analytical distinction emerging from this study is between fluency, reliability, and authority. Fluency refers to the ability to produce coherent and persuasive language. Reliability concerns whether the content can be independently verified. Authority concerns whether the source has legitimate standing to make a claim that others ought to accept or follow. ChatGPT may display high fluency and may help users locate reliable information, but neither quality automatically creates religious authority.

This distinction becomes critical when questions are normative rather than descriptive. "What does this term mean?" and "What should I do according to Islamic law?" are epistemically different questions. The second involves methodology, interpretation, disagreement, and consequences. It may require knowledge of legal principles, textual evidence, contextual conditions, and the responsibility to

guide a person. An AI system can summarize these dimensions, but it should not be treated as possessing the same normative competence as a qualified human scholar.

This is also why equating AI with a mujtahid is a category error. AI may support activities that precede scholarly judgment, such as locating concepts, organizing literature, comparing positions, or generating questions for further inquiry. But the responsibility for normative judgment remains human. The distinction is not based on whether machines are “intelligent enough”; it is based on the different kinds of epistemic and moral standing involved.

3.4. Reason, Revelation, and the Epistemic Limits of AI

Muthahhari’s epistemology makes it possible to identify a deeper problem: the reduction of knowledge to information processing. If religious knowledge is treated as a large database of texts and propositions, then a system with access to vast amounts of language data can appear epistemically superior to an individual human. But Muthahhari’s philosophical orientation points toward a richer conception of knowing, in which rational reflection is connected with revelation, human experience, worldview, and ethical formation (Komarudin, 2019; Saragih, 2005).

Reason remains essential because religious understanding requires argument, comparison, criticism, and interpretation. Revelation, however, has a normative status that is not generated by an algorithm. Human experience gives concepts concrete meaning, while moral responsibility connects knowledge with action. A language model can simulate explanations of these dimensions, but simulation should not be confused with possessing them. The distinction is epistemological rather than merely technological.

This perspective changes the most important question. Instead of asking whether AI is intelligent, the more useful question is what kind of knowing AI is being used to support. For definitions, preliminary literature mapping, translation, or conceptual comparison, AI can be highly useful. For legal decisions, theological disputes, or personal religious guidance with serious consequences, the need for human verification and expert judgment increases proportionally.

3.5. Hallucination, Context Loss, and Algorithmic Mediation

Religious texts are embedded in linguistic history, interpretive traditions, legal schools, and cultural contexts. A short AI answer can make these layers less visible. The risk is not simply that the answer will be “wrong.” A response can be broadly correct while still being misleading because it omits disagreement, presents one interpretation as universal, or uses a citation that does not support the claim. Hallucination adds another layer of risk because fluent language can conceal factual error (Huang et al., 2025).

Large language models are probabilistic language systems rather than truth-verification engines. Shmittchell et al (2024) warned that linguistic fluency can be mistaken for understanding. Vaswani et al (2017) established the transformer architecture that helped enable modern language models, but technical capability does not solve the epistemic problem of grounding. The lesson for religious use is straightforward: a confident sentence must be treated as a claim to be checked, not as evidence of truth.

Recent work on Islamic language models reinforces the importance of curated sources, retrieval, traceable citations, representation of legal disagreement, and expert evaluation. RAG-based approaches such as MufassirQAS illustrate a practical direction in which generated answers can be connected to retrievable sources. Such designs can improve transparency, but they do not remove the need for human interpretation. Technology can make verification easier; it cannot make responsibility disappear.

Table 1. Distinguishing informational usefulness from religious authority.

Dimension	Traditional scholarly authority	ChatGPT	Epistemic implication
Source	Texts, tradition, scholarship, transmission	Patterns in training data and prompts	Source provenance must be checked
Process	Interpretation through recognized methods	Probabilistic language generation	Fluency does not guarantee validity
Accountability	Human and institutional responsibility	No moral responsibility of its own	Normative decisions require humans
Context	Historical, legal, theological, lived context	Context supplied through interaction	Important context may be omitted
Use	Teaching, interpretation, guidance	Exploration, explanation, comparison	Best treated as an assistive tool

As shown in Table 1, the crucial difference is not simply the amount of information available. It is the relationship among source, method, context, and responsibility. This distinction explains why an AI response can be useful without becoming authoritative.

3.6. Distributed Interpretive Authority

The study proposes the concept of distributed interpretive authority. In a digital religious environment, authority is no longer experienced through a single channel. Texts provide normative sources; scholarly traditions provide interpretive methods; scholars provide expertise and accountability; communities provide social verification; users formulate questions and make decisions; and AI provides technological mediation. These actors do not possess equal authority, but they interact in the production of religious understanding.

The concept is useful because it avoids the false choice between “AI replaces scholars” and “AI has no effect at all.” AI clearly affects how people reach sources and how answers are framed. Its influence therefore exists even without formal religious authority. The problem begins when one layer assumes the function of another. When AI supports exploration, the relationship is complementary. When it becomes an automatic mufti, the boundary is crossed. Conversely, when scholars ignore digital mediation entirely, they risk losing contact with the ways in which people now encounter religious knowledge.

3.7. Human-in-the-Loop as an Epistemic Principle

Human-in-the-loop is usually discussed as a technical safeguard. This study extends it into an epistemic principle: humans should remain responsible for deciding whether an AI-generated religious claim is fit for use. The human role is not merely to approve a machine output after the fact. It is to frame the question, examine sources, compare interpretations, identify uncertainty, and take responsibility for the resulting judgment.

A practical four-step model can be proposed. First, use AI for initial exploration. Second, trace and verify the sources cited or implied by the response. Third, preserve relevant disagreement and context rather than forcing a single answer. Fourth, return normative decisions to appropriately qualified human authorities. This model does not weaken the usefulness of AI; it defines the conditions under which that usefulness becomes responsible.

The model is also consistent with broader AI ethics principles concerning human oversight, transparency, and accountability (Floridi et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2021). In religious contexts, these principles need additional sensitivity to the sacred status of texts, differences among interpretive traditions, and the possibility of harm when users rely on inaccurate religious advice.

3.8. Implications for Islamic Higher Education

Islamic higher education has a strategic role in responding to this transformation. A simple prohibition on AI is unlikely to be sufficient because students already encounter AI as part of their information environment. What is needed is digital religious literacy: the ability to formulate good questions, request and inspect sources, distinguish summary from interpretation, recognize uncertainty, compare scholarly positions, and disclose the use of AI when appropriate.

Assessment practices can also be redesigned. Tasks that merely ask students to reproduce information are increasingly vulnerable to automation. Assignments that require source criticism, argument reconstruction, comparison of interpretations, reflective reasoning, and oral defense place greater emphasis on human intellectual agency. In this sense, AI can become an opportunity to move religious education away from information reproduction and toward deeper reasoning.

3.9. Implications for Scholars and Religious Institutions

The digital transformation does not require religious scholars to become software engineers. It does require sufficient digital literacy to understand how AI generates answers and why users may trust them. Religious institutions can respond by publishing reliable digital resources, making primary sources easier to access, providing contextual explanations, and establishing channels for correction when inaccurate religious information circulates online.

At the same time, scholarly authority can be strengthened by emphasizing qualities that cannot be reduced to automated language production: intellectual formation, ethical responsibility, lived experience, pastoral sensitivity, and accountability to a community of learning. If AI is strong at speed and information retrieval, human scholarship can focus more explicitly on depth, judgment, and moral responsibility.

3.10. Ethical Implications

The use of AI in religious contexts requires stronger ethical safeguards than many routine administrative applications. Transparency matters because users should know when a text or answer has been AI-assisted. Verification matters because a citation attached to an AI response is not proof that the source actually supports the claim. Non-substitution matters because AI should not replace human mentoring in situations that require spiritual, ethical, or legal guidance. Accountability matters because consequential errors require a responsible human or institution.

These principles are consistent with broader AI governance frameworks, but religious contexts add specific concerns: respect for sacred texts, sensitivity to differences among schools of interpretation, protection against fabricated quotations, and prevention of manipulation through apparently authoritative religious language. The central ethical principle is therefore not to eliminate AI from religious life, but to keep its role proportionate to its epistemic capabilities and limitations.

4. CONCLUSION

ChatGPT is changing the religious knowledge landscape not simply because it makes information faster to obtain, but because it changes how authority is experienced. Speed, fluency, personalization, and accessibility can generate a strong impression of credibility. Yet these characteristics are not equivalent to religious legitimacy.

Digital hermeneutics shows that religious understanding is increasingly mediated by algorithms, prompts, interfaces, and generated language. ChatGPT can make interpretation more dialogical and accessible, but it can also compress context, obscure disagreement, and produce fluent inaccuracies. It is therefore more appropriate to understand ChatGPT as an epistemic and interpretive aid than as an autonomous religious authority.

Murtadha Muthahhari's epistemological perspective provides a philosophical basis for this distinction. Religious knowing cannot be reduced to information processing because reason, revelation, experience, ethical orientation, and human formation are interconnected. AI can strengthen the informational and exploratory dimensions of learning, but it does not thereby acquire the moral and normative standing of a human scholar.

The study therefore proposes a complementary model of authority. AI can expand access and support exploration; scholars and communities can provide verification, contextual interpretation, and normative guidance; and users remain responsible for how knowledge is accepted and acted upon. The most productive response to AI in religion is neither uncritical trust nor blanket rejection, but disciplined use grounded in human responsibility.

Future research should test this conceptual model empirically through interviews, surveys, prompt experiments, and comparisons between AI-generated answers and human-issued fatwas or scholarly explanations. Comparative studies across AI models, languages, and Islamic interpretive traditions would also help determine how far algorithmic mediation changes religious authority in different social contexts.

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