

The Changing Da'wah Preference From Salafi to Moderate: Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far in Millennial Muslim Urban

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To cite this article with APA style:

Taufiq, F. & Tsauro, A. (2025). The Changing Da'wah Preference From Salafi to Moderate: Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far in Millennial Muslim Urban. *Journal of Asian Wisdom and Islamic Behavior*, 3(1), 54-62.

ARTICLE INFO

Submitted:
1 July 2024

Received:
7 July 2024

Revised:
11 March 2025

Accepted:
19 March 2025

Available online:
27 March 2025

ABSTRACT

Da'wah preferences among urban Muslim millennials are likely changing recently due to the emergence of figures, namely Bahauddin Nur Salim (Gus Baha) and Habib Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar (Habib Ja'far). *Da'wah* materials offered by mainstream preachers in urban areas tend to be Salafi. Meanwhile, the two figures' appearance gave a new color with a traditional Islamic pattern based on the nuances of *pesantren*. This study aims to examine the changes in *da'wah* preferences among millennial urban and the reason behind it. Through Stuart Hall's circuit of culture theory, this study attempts to compare the two figures who became religious authority alternatives through *da'wah* methods in the stages of content production. The theory suggests that the social dynamic process shaped by elements; representation, identity and consumption. This qualitative study is based on previous studies, preachers speeches through YouTube channels. The study shows that urban millennial generations have likely experienced changing preferences in *da'wah* which was originally consumptive listening to *da'wah* from several Salafi groups to the alternative moderate groups. Meanwhile, Habib Ja'far might be preferable among youngsters as he has a wider segmentation than Gus Baha. The preference for Gus Baha's *da'wah* style has received public attention due to special recognition and legitimacy from great scholars such as KH. Maimun Zubair and Prof. Quraish Shihab and his approach seems comfortable and suitable with urban muslims. Meanwhile, the *da'wah* preference for Habib Ja'far has increased along with his creativity in creating *da'wah* content through his channel. Besides his productivity in writing books, Habib Ja'far's collaboration with numerous content creators and urban artists has attracted more viewers, especially among young people.

Keywords: *Da'wah Preferences, Gus Baha, Habib Husein, Millennial Muslim*

Introduction

The dynamics of *da'wah* in Indonesia are experiencing a significant and dynamic situation. The emigration trend has also emerged as a recent phenomenon that cannot be avoided (Akmaliah, 2020). Currently, this trend is mostly targeting the urban Muslim millennial generation. This condition shows that they have a preference for *da'wah* over *da'i* or knowledge obtained by the Islamic scholars (*ustadz*) they follow as role models and the religious material they convey. Apart from that, the hijrah trend is not only a religious phenomenon but also the

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behavior and lifestyle of urban Muslim communities (Farchan & Rosharlianti, 2021). The trend grows in public until it gets a normal reception from society.

Another interesting thing is that amid the massive migration trend, more and more preachers or preachers are emerging, whether they have qualified religious authority or not. However, the emergence of this phenomenon also indicates that there are many preferences for da'wah among Muslims in Indonesia. In this case, Kyai Bahauddin Nur Salim known as Gus Baha is one of the preachers who has many followers and *muhibbin* (lovers). This is because he has charisma and recites the classical books (*turots*) in each of his sermons. The delivery of Islamic da'wah and knowledge that touches the hearts of the congregation is even accompanied by humor and stories that are appropriate to the anxieties and problems that occur in society. Gus Baha has its segment of listeners and congregation. Apart from that, his scientific authority is also an attraction for anyone to listen to his Koran and lectures. Typical Islamic boarding school-style preaching and *sorogan* or *bandhongan* recitation of the Koran have made Gus Baha's recitation style attractive to his congregation, especially those who previously studied the Koran at an Islamic boarding school (Sofia 2022; Rohmatulloh, As'ad, & Malayati, 2022).

However, Gus Baha approaches towards urban Muslim received lower attention in comparison to Salafi urban preachers. The figures such as Ustadz Hanan Ataki, Ustadz Wijayanto, Ustaz Solmed and many more has influence urban landscape of *da'wah* (Akmaliah, 2020). The rise of Habib Husein Ja'far, a graduate from UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta trying to challenge the urban preferences. He is one of the current millennial preachers which has his uniqueness and characteristics, as well as admired by young people, especially those belonging to the millennial generation. Through releasing videos on his simple Youtube Channel, Habib Ja'far has gradually become a new rising preacher for young Muslims, especially those who live in urban areas. Ja'far finds his momentum to preach consistently and got invited to strategic *da'wah* places in Indonesia. The listener and congregation segment is dominated by young people (Ginting & Ritonga, 2023). The friendly-relaxed-inclusive style of preaching that is typical of young people is the main attraction of his preaching and lectures that his listeners look forward to.

Habib Husein Ja'far himself has created a YouTube account, namely "Jeda Nulis" (means pause of writing), where this account becomes his medium for preaching (Jeda Nulis, 2023). Based on his explanation, it was meant only to take a break after completing his MA thesis at UIN Syarif Jakarta. Through his channel, he has been posting and producing videos related to lectures, interviews with several figures, and discussions related to Islam, as well as current issues in day-to-day's life. Because of his active and unique style of preaching, he is then widely known as an "industrial Habib" due to his involvement in anti-mainstream preaching, entertainment, and conducted in places that are rarely targeted by preachers, such as cafes, coffee shops, places where young people hang out, and various discussion places (Jeda Nulis, 2024).

The da'wah approaches by Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far gained a remarkable attention in respective listeners or viewers. Because of that, this study attempts to elaborate on how various preaching preferences exist, shift and change. Many preachers have colored the landscape of Islamic da'wah in Indonesia such as Ustaz Zainuddin MZ, Ustaz Jefri Al-Bukhori, and many more, but in this article, we try to focus and explore more deeply the style and pattern of the preaching of contemporary Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far, as well as urban Muslim discourse in gaining knowledge and absorbing da'wah from lectures and discussions. Islam, as well as religious authority, is an indicator related to the scientific capabilities possessed by preachers so that their scientific knowledge and preaching preferences depend on what they like and are close to themselves, especially shaping their thoughts, perspectives, and ways of seeing in practicing their religion (Alatas, 2021).

Methods

This research uses a media approach to analyze and observe the preaching preferences of urban millennial Muslims. In this case, two preacher figures were studied and researched, namely Bahauddin Nur Salim (Gus Baha) and Habib Husein Ja'far. Both have their characteristics and styles of preaching and have their target audience. From the methods, patterns, and styles of both, it can be seen how they transmit their preaching material. From the two YouTube contents of Santri Gayeng and Jeda Nulis, as well as several YouTube accounts that discuss Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far, it can be seen how their preaching material is heard and consumed by the wider community. The data is analyzed from these YouTube accounts, then sorted out which ones are by certain themes and topics, and then the analyzed data is narrated in the form of descriptions and arguments.

Millennial Muslim Urban and Da'wah Preferences

The landscape of Indonesian public space is filled with the increase in new media which ultimately opens up opportunities and threats in matters of Islamic teaching or da'wah. In this case, many da'wah preferences emerge amid socio-religious life. Cyberspace has become one of the media used by preachers to spread lectures and religious material. Meanwhile, the old authority that has been held by several Islamic organizations in Indonesia, such as NU and Muhammadiyah, is gradually being filled with new authority with the emergence of *ustadz* and *ustadzah*, or preachers who use social media to transmit their lectures (Akmaliah, 2020).

For this condition, millennial Muslims have Islamic literature and preferences, especially about transmission, appropriation, and contestation. Noorhaidi Hasan explores this discourse and discusses a problem that millennial Muslims consume in Indonesia (Hasan, 2018). Besides that, millennial Muslim also have idols, getting fatwa, and political constellation spreads this situation. Furthermore, in discussing millennial Muslims, have their preaching preferences. This condition is influenced by their closeness to the use of gadgets and social media (Fakhruroji, 2019). This situation allows them to consume and gain religious knowledge from what they often see and hear from preachers whose lecture style and material they like. In this context, millennial Muslims tend to look for religious literature from preachers that they like and are close to the reality of their lives. Social media has had a big impact on the millennial Muslim generation, which makes their religious literature from content and materials from social media, whether conveyed by *ustadz*, *ustadzah*, or certain preachers as their religious understanding and guidance (Rusli & Nurdin, 2022).

In this context, advances in technology and information provide new opportunities for preachers to participate in spreading Islamic teachings through their social media platforms (Zaman & Assarwani, 2021). For example, religious lectures and sermons delivered by Gus Baha are distributed via social media, such as YouTube, Instagram, Spotify, and other social media. Among the various platforms, the mainstream accounts are Santri Gayeng (Youtube Santri Gayeng) and Official LP3IA. This also attracted many congregants and listeners, as well as Gus Baha's followers in various regions. Apart from that, Gus Baha's recitation also attracts various groups, including those who live in urban areas. Through social media, his religious lectures can be enjoyed, watched, and listened to by the congregation wherever they are. Indeed, if you look at it, Gus Baha's lectures targeted congregants who had previously studied at Islamic boarding schools, female students, elderly people, and those who were used to listening to and seeing typical Islamic boarding school recitations.

Meanwhile, Habib Ja'far's style of reciting and lecturing tends to target the younger generation, where he often recites the Koran via Podcast, YouTube, and Instagram, and lectures in cafes, hangout places, and spaces where he can deliver his lectures. These conditions meant that Habib Ja'far's lectures were also accepted by a wide audience, especially young people. If you

trace the YouTube account “Jeda Nulis” you can see that this account was joined on YouTube on May 4, 2018. In fact, to date, its followers have reached 1.33 million and its views have reached 99,298,844. From this account, Habib Ja’far transmits religious scientific material and lectures.

In the context of urban Muslims, Habib Ja’far has considerable influence and receives strong attention. Moreover, his da’wah material and lectures are considered very close to young people. This further increases Habib Ja’far’s existence and influence in the context of religion in urban circles. Using social media and YouTube, Habib Ja’far can attract millions of people to watch and enjoy his lectures and materials.

Gus Baha Popularity: Dakwah From Pesantren to Youtube

Every Wednesday fortnightly, there is a course on reading the Islamic classical book “*Tafsir Jalalain*” conducted at an Islamic institution called *Lembaga Pendidikan dan Pengembangan Al-Quran* (LP3IA) or Institution for Quranic Education and Development in Narukan, Rembang, Central Java. More than thousands of attendees normally come to that place, mostly wearing white shirts, sarongs, and *kopyah*, a typical Gus Baha style. They are coming from various places, mostly from East and Central Java. Surprisingly, there are also those coming from West Java and Jakarta. Normally, it starts at 11 am until 3 pm with an hour break for dzuhur prayer. For years, this routine has also been followed with similar sessions conducted in Jogjakarta and Bantul with similar books and with an extra book on “*Tafsir Ibn Athaillah’s Al Hikam*”. Such traditional teaching and reading attract more attendees thanks to social media broadcasting and livestreaming through YouTube. The edited-short videos of dakwah also widely spread on various platforms which made Gus Baha very popular to many Indonesian Muslims.

It cannot be denied that the popularity of Gus Baha started from *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). The preacher who was born on 29 September 1970 has been teaching for years in Pesantren Al-Anwar Sarang Central Java. Charismatic ulama like KH Maemoen Zubair acknowledged his intelligence and ability which surpassed many students at his age. Gus Baha had been offered to study in Yemen, but he preferred to stay in Sarang instead to master certain disciplines such as *Quranic Studies*, *Fiqh*, *Hadith*, and *Tafsir*. Gus Baha is familiar with the *pesantren* environment as he was born there and studied under charismatic ulama such as Kyai Nursalim (his father), Kyai Arwani Kudus, and Kyai Abdullah Salam Kajen (Yahya, 2021). It is interesting to note that Gus Baha collaborated with the famous ulama, Gus Miek to conduct a dakwah platform, namely *Dzikrul Ghafilin*.

Although Gus Baha did not pursue higher education, many giant scholars on Quranic Studies have praised him and acknowledged his deep comprehensive knowledge. Among those experts is Prof Muhammad Quraish Shihab, the author of *Tafsir Al-Misbah* (Mahrita, 2021). Gus Baha was offered a doctorate title from Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII) for his expertise, but he refused. His expertise can be seen from his publications, for instance, the tafsir book in Arabic titled “*Hifdzuna Lihadal Mushaf*” published in 2013 by UII Press (Nursalaim, nd). Because of his quality in Quranic Studies and also Islamic Jurisprudence, Gus Baha is appointed as one of the National Tafsir Board.

Amidst the development of technology, Gus Baha Dakwah has benefitted a lot from broadcasting through social media to continue transferring Islamic knowledge, especially from YouTube. Since the fast internet of 4G and 5G were applied by the Indonesian government, it has had a huge impact on Dakwah. Kompas’s study shows that people are keen to listen to dakwah thanks to social media. Some assume that online dakwah might ruin the essence of face-to-face *dakwah* as *santri* needs to study directly with ulama. In urban society, ulama from Salafi groups dominates the content which is widely spread easily whereas in rural society are more familiar with the traditional way of preaching, just like Gus Baha. However, this situation gradually changed. During COVID-19, many *pesantren* managed to disseminate and broadcast the

Islamic teaching from respective pesantren. It grew and multiplied to counter mainstream Salafi groups such as the platform Yufid. Through YouTube accounts namely “Official LP3IA” and “Santri gayeng”, the content on Gus Baha become more mainstream to the urban population. In addition, the hashtag #gusbaha was popularized by netizens who shared a shortcut video of him to spread positive advice through Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, and Instagram. In short, technology has brought traditional da’wah to the mainstream (Qudsy & Muzakky, 2021).

Many believe that the listener of Gus Baha dakwah is dominated by the Nahdlatul Ulama community, known as nahdliyyin. However, the Muslim urban middle class tends to watch his video which finds easier to understand as he is mastering Islamic knowledge comprehensively. Gus Baha’s consistency in preaching which supported by his social media team who always do decent work. This consistency attracts more listeners not only from nahdliyyin but also Salafi group. The shifting of Salafi followers from listening to their preacher to Gus Baha depends on his character which never undermines other groups or comments negatively towards the different group. In addition, Gus Baha’s appearance is so simple, often wearing white shirts, sarong, and kopyah makes him different from urban *ustaz* who tend to like glamorous outfits and accessories.

The dakwah of Gus Baha gained a lot of attention on social media after the talk shows Shihab and Shihab, broadcasted via YouTube. On that platform which was hosted by Najwa Shihab, Gus Baha exclusively had a conversation with Prof Quraish Shihab on Quranic studies, personal stories, and everyday life. The popularity of Gus Baha indicates that *pesantren* still has an enormous impact on Indonesian Muslim society since it contributes to character development and portrays traditional Islam decently. Gus Baha simply brings Islamic teaching in a more subtle, easy, and acceptable amidst the popular dakwah of exclusive religious groups.

Habib Ja’far as an “Industry of Habib”

Habib Ja’far claims to be an “industry Habib”. This is known from a conversation between him and Boris Bokir, a well-known comedian in Indonesia on the Plus26 YouTube channel on June 12, 2022. He stated that he felt happy on TV and pursuing this world, especially so that he could be successful in preaching Islam (Hasan, 2018). Indeed, Habib Ja’far often appears on TV and various entertainment shows, including on YouTube Podcasts. The themes and topics discussed in several events are varied, ranging from Islam, daily life, inter-religious relations, and various things that are discussed related to current issues.

Meanwhile, the term industrial Habib or artistic habib was written by Yaser Arafat in his article entitled “Artistic Habib in the Vortex of the Indonesian Entertainment Industry”.(Arafat, 2023) In his writing, Yaser stated that *habaib* is also involved in the world of the popular culture industry. This also confirms that before Habib Ja’far, *habaib* was involved in the television industry. This means that the *habaib* also contributes greatly to entertainment in Indonesia. The world of television is used as a massive propaganda medium to spread Islamic material through songs, films, and TV shows.

The image of industrial habib has been shown by himself publicly. In the latest Putcast talk show in Jogjakarta, Habib Ja’far asked about the non-Muslim participants who were attending the “Religious Moderation” seminar. He was very enthusiastic to hear the comments and ideas from a Christian student to ensure the way he preaches is positive. Before this, he used to be attended a podcast called Pemuda Tersesat (Lost Boy) hosted by Coki Pardede and Tretan Muslim for many series. Taboo and unpredictable questions are responded to by Habib Ja’far clearly and easily. The founder Coki Pardede later jailed by authorities for undermining Islamic values (Noice, 2024).

The article about the figure of Habib Ja’far was also written by Ahmad Muhajir and Norshahril during “Trendy Indonesian Habib Rides the Waves Online”. (“Trendy Indonesian Habib Rides the Waves Online”, 2023) This article presents the figure of Habib Ja’far as a young preacher who uses podcasts and online videos in religious discussions in Indonesia. Habib Ja’far is considered

to be one of the young preachers who is intelligent and tries to go beyond the boundaries of the *habaib* tradition. He also uses online media as a tool for preaching. Apart from that, he also inserts humor on various occasions. This also became his attraction in preaching. For instance, in explaining the availability of direction on religious occasions. He said that “[Google Maps] shows you one possible direction to your destination, but if you do not follow it, it will show you alternative routes”.

As an industrial leader, Habib Ja’far is a preacher who has an audience of young people. For this reason, he is very familiar with and liked by young people because of his style and approach which related to up-to-date trends among the young generation. In terms of da’wah style, Habib Ja’far’s approach getting attention from non-Muslims, some say that he managed to portray *habibs* who always smile and are kind to anybody. This is what differentiates Habib Ja’far from other *habaibs*. The study on *habaibs* has triggered since there are *habaibs* who preach in public using harsh words, incite hostility towards non-Muslims, and are exclusive. To Habib Ja’far, the privilege of prophet Muhammad’s descendants does guarantee to become a good person. Some Arab descendants are taking advantage of being part of the prophet’s household. Also, he shows the other side of the prophet who shows kindness even towards those who dislike and oppose him.

Habib Ja’far can be regarded as the face of moderate *habibs*. He does not care about the prophet’s descendants, yet he only focuses on his way of da’wah using a moderate outlook and inclusive. He believes that forcing to do what one wants is inappropriate. He disagrees with attacking other religions. It cannot be denied that the bargaining position of *habibs* in public is getting a lot of attention. The latest 2016 and 2017 rallies are among the significant factors elevating such status. *Habaibs* especially those in Jakarta are varied characteristically.

Differences and Similarities in *Da’wah* Approaches

Gus Baha and Habib Ja’far have points of similarity in their respective da’wah activities. Having been influenced by the educational background and environment, both have applied humanistic, inclusive, and humorous approaches which attract more followers. Both try to provide an alternative to *da’wah* among the urban Muslim middle class, which was previously dominated by the Wahhabi Salafi group, especially in terms of social media content and national television.

However, Gus Baha and Habib Ja’far have differences in da’wah approaches. First, Gus Baha brings a traditional Islamic boarding school-style approach which is in demand by several groups, especially Islamic boarding school students. Meanwhile, Habib Ja’far tries to break away from the mainstream tradition of Arab descendants or *habaibs* to preach to various groups with an appearance that is more accepted by all groups in society. This means that Habib Ja’far is different from young *habaibs* in general who emphasize more on appearance and accessories, such as wearing a turban, *imamah*, and others which tend to be exclusive.

Second, both function as a counter-narrative to mainstream Islamic content on social media. The popularity phenomenon of Habib Ja’far and Gus Baha is also driven by the production of content in each of their preaching. Through the YouTube account “Jeda Nulis”, Habib Ja’far tried to start expanding his preaching on social media which then spread to other platforms and received great attention (Sugiarti, et. al, 2021). Habib Ja’far’s presence on other platforms such as “Plus26”, “Login”, “Putcast” and “Pemuda Tersesat”, for example, has increased Habib Ja’far’s engagement and popularity massively, surpassing some mainstream preachers. On the other hand, in his digital preaching, Gus Baha looks different from Habib Ja’far, the content of his preaching and lectures is managed by his students and *muhibbin*. Pesantren even forbade guests from recording Gus Baha’s teachings.

Third, the listeners of these two preachers are very diverse. However, if we compare the two figures Gus Baha and Habib Ja’far, Gus Baha’s listeners are not only from *Nahdliyyin* circles

but also urban Muslims. Meanwhile, Habib Ja'far is very open to all groups, even non-Muslims. This can be seen from his interactions on various occasions with public figures from Catholic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist groups. Fourth, as a preacher involved in digital da'wah, Habib Ja'far's popularity is of course wider in scope because it targets various groups. In addition, the approach taken is very targeted at young people as Habib's appearance is easily stylish and accepted by various groups. Meanwhile, Gus Baha, with a simple appearance such as wearing a white shirt, black sarong, and *kopyah*, wanted to show that the essence of preaching is not merely in appearance, but in the extent to which one understands religion easily.

From some of the similarities and differences between Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far, it can be seen that the segments, speaking styles, lectures, and target audiences both have their own characteristics. This shows that both preachers basically also use jokes as a tool to get attention and make the da'wah material they convey interesting. Beside that, this study shows that urban millennial generations have likely experienced changing preferences in *da'wah* which was originally consumptive listening to *da'wah* from several Salafi groups to the alternative moderate groups. Meanwhile, Habib Ja'far might be preferable among youngsters as he has a wider segmentation than Gus Baha. The preference for Gus Baha's da'wah style has received public attention due to special recognition and legitimacy from great scholars such as KH. Maimun Zubair and Prof. Quraish Shihab and his approach seems comfortable and suitable with urban Muslims. Meanwhile, the *da'wah* preference for Habib Ja'far has increased along with his creativity in creating *da'wah* content through his channel. Besides his productivity in writing books, Habib Ja'far's collaboration with numerous content creators and urban artists has attracted more viewers, especially among young people.

Conclusion

In the last decade, the da'wah preference among Muslim urban millennials experienced shifting. The shift is influenced by the development of technology, especially the internet which affects the way of preaching and studying Islam. The digital domain has become a new means of contestation, the more one shares, the more one gets public attention. The da'wah content on the internet has been dominated by one dominant group, Salafi-Wahabi was very good at producing content. The trends of digital da'wah were then followed by young ulama, Gus Baha, and young habibs, Habib Ja'far who later tried to contain and counter the mainstream da'wah approaches. In this study, the two figures have shifted millennial urban preferences by joining the digital da'wah and giving a new alternative. Both Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far have a similar objective to bring da'wah content from hard and taboo topics through easy ways of understanding. The former makes the teaching of *tafsir* and *fiqh* much easier to grasp as the preacher articulates the argument decently, while the latter applies a more millennial yet friendly approach and inclusive one. Muslim millennial urbanites are more likely to adore da'wah contents of Habib Ja'far since the writings are close to the day-to-day life of the young generations. Embarking on unusual and out-of-the-box questions leads more people to watch the video of him. The personality of Habib Ja'far has changed the view of Arab descendants from more stubborn and exclusive to more creative and inspirational. Also, the millennials' preference towards him has indicated that the segmentation is much wider than Gus Baha's. Lastly, this study only explores the dakwah preferences in urban Muslim, especially how the Muslim society's preference on Gus Baha and Habib Ja'far. So, for the other scholars that exploring this study must be focus and more details, not only in urban Muslim.

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