

Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics on Religious Language and COVID-19

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Philosophical hermeneutics is a style of hermeneutics that focuses on the ontology of understanding and interpretation. One of the leading exponents of philosophical hermeneutics is Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer explained that the prejudice and historical aspects that accept the dialectics of the past, the present and the future are crucial in understanding religious language related to COVID-19. This concept then underlies Gadamer's thoughts on the idea of the fusion of horizon. This idea indicates that understanding religious texts must be done by bringing together the text's horizon, author and reader to reach a meaningful knowledge in interpreting a text. Suppose this view applies in understanding religious language related to the COVID-19 pandemic protocol. In that case, interpreter must consider all dimensions associated with the social situation to find a substantive meaning and a complete understanding of all dimensions related to the interpreter's current position to apply the substantive meaning contextually in actual cases.

Keywords: philosophical hermeneutics, prejudice, time, fusion of horizon, religious language, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

In every religious tradition, language and text occupy a significant position. Both are considered aspects that determine the blueprint for the growth and development of a religious tradition. Meanwhile, religious traditions cannot be separated from the dynamics of the people's understanding of revelation in the form of texts. The study of the philosophy of religion states that the text does not exist in a vacuum. The presence of text is related to the dynamics of the context of social, political, economic, and the author's motives in writing the text. Therefore, a relevant set of approaches is needed to understand the text, namely hermeneutics. Based on the hermeneutic point of view, understanding the text's historicity, the writer and the reader will significantly help understand the text accurately (Hidayat 1996: 2).

One of humanity's global problems is the outbreak of COVID-19 (Palacios Cruz et al. 2020). Several studies have stated that COVID-19 has given rise to health problems (Hart, Koenig 2020; Palacios Cruz et al. 2020), economics (Ataguba 2020; Susilawati et al. 2020), education (Onyema et al. 2020), and psychological trauma (Abdullah 2020; Lades et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020). Overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian Government issued a COVID-19 health protocol policy including social distancing, staying at home, wearing

masks, washing hands with running water, spraying disinfectants, and vaccines. This policy has an impact on the implementation of Muslim worship. They cannot pray in the mosque in the congregation. They cannot perform Hajj and Umrah, and religious traditions involve many people. As a result, implementing this pandemic health protocol has given rise to resistance in some religious community in Indonesia (Maliki 2020; Subandi, Anshor 2020).

To overcome resistance, contextual understanding of religious texts is crucial. Several studies have stated that religious leaders play an important role in socialising the implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic protocol (DeFranza et al. 2020; Dein et al. 2020; Wildman et al. 2020). Several studies mention the role of religion in overcoming covid (Kumar, Indira 2020), and other research on the role of religious leaders in promoting the COVID-19 vaccine (Barmania, Reiss 2021; Galang 2021; Tan et al. 2021). However, not many studies explain that this pandemic health protocol has a strong basis under religious texts. Due to the need to understand religious texts, a solid methodological framework is needed to understand religious texts relevant to pandemic health protocols.

This study wants to show that the application of pandemic health protocols has theological arguments in religious texts, such as the Koran and the sunnah (behaviour of the prophet) in the context of Islam. Contextual understanding through productive interpretation finds a religious message in anticipating the pandemic. This contextual understanding is also a counter-narrative against the religious community resisting the COVID-19 pandemic protocol. Then, this study uses a Hans-George Gadamer hermeneutical approach to describe the relationship between the guiding text and the reader in understanding religious texts concerning pandemic health protocols.

Gadamer's thoughts have attracted the attention of many researchers. Katie M. Webber, for example, tries to introduce the application of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to nursing practice by considering the importance of the relationship between subjects to disclose themselves. In other words, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics project requires the transformation of hermeneutics beyond the methodological framework in favour of a broader experience of understanding and interpretation that is facilitated through language (Webber 2020). Therefore, Gadamer's hermeneutics is involved in ontological hermeneutics study and ethics. The research conducted by Sam McAuliffe shows that Gadamer's hermeneutical thought is also involved in deep application of ethics and its implementation significantly depends on behaviour improvisation, in particular. The ethical action means involving self by spontaneous attending and responds what was found in somebody in the factual existence, as shown in improvisational music (McAuliffe 2021).

Other research on the Gadamer thought was done by Ilya Inishev. Inishev focuses on Gadamer's hermeneutics project in the ontology context that becomes the point differentiator between traditional-romantic hermeneutics and philosophical hermeneutics. In the context of ontological hermeneutics, the understanding is viewed as transformative and participatory experience, following the claim of universality of philosophical hermeneutics. This transformative experience will influence the awareness of self interpreters and the material environment of interpretive experience (Inishev 2021). Correlating with the Inishev's study, Arnas Mickevičius sees the current controversy in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics between dogmatism and relativism, or between objective and subjective interpretation. In the middle of a controversy, Mickevičius considered the way offered by Husserl's phenomenology (Mickevičius 2017). Thus, the dialectic between dogmatism and relativism, or between objectivism and subjectivism in Gadamer's hermeneutics thought, will be used as a point of view

in understanding religious texts in the context of the pandemic protocol. Thus, changes in religious behaviour due to the COVID-19 pandemic have a solid epistemological foundation through Gadamer's hermeneutic thought.

HANS-GEORGE GADAMER'S HERMENEUTIC IDEAS

Hans-George Gadamer is one of the exponents of philosophical hermeneutics closely related to phenomenology and existentialism (Suddick et al. 2020). Gadamer is also the founder of communication hermeneutics (Vlăduțescu et al. 2017). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in several ways is to continue, complete and perfect the ontological-existential concept of understanding in Heidegger's view within the framework of ontological hermeneutics. Heidegger has transformed hermeneutics as an epistemological and methodological approach towards ontological and philosophical hermeneutics (Aşkın 2015). Heidegger's emphasis on the concept of time (time) in his book *Being and Time*, then continued by Gadamer in his book *Truth and Method* to explain the historical aspect of understanding while emphasising the importance of language in describing the historicity of understanding. Gadamer then uses this critical reflection on historical elements to analyse the development of the hermeneutical circle initiated by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, which aims to increase the ontological awareness of Geisteswissenschaften (Bravo 2018; Lengyel, Isela Peña Peláez 2020; Ricoeur 2015).

In addition to the concept of time, Gadamer also continues Heidegger's analysis of the fore-structure of understanding. For Heidegger, knowledge emerges through the fore-structure of learning. The fore-structure includes *Vorhabe* (fore-having), *Vorsicht* (foresight) and *Vorgriff* (fore-grasping) (Bleicher 1980: 103). These three fore-structures determine the style of the interpreter's text understanding. Heidegger later said that with the structure of the pre-understanding it is possible to give birth to a plurality of interpretations of a text or event, which is the same as every person has a fore-structure of different understanding. Heidegger's concept of the fore-structure of understanding is what Gadamer will further develop in the concept he calls prejudice. Prejudice helps to understand the text's horizon and the context as a whole.

Thus, there are three essential concepts in understanding Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The first is a prejudice. According to Gadamer, the whole of human understanding is a product of prejudice instilled by tradition and culture, so that nobody can understand the historical texts is neutral. As a result, an interpreter will always project the initial meaning before the overall purpose appears. Understanding is a dialectical process between the subjectivity of the interpreter and the text (Howard 2001: 206).

With this view, Gadamer intends to rehabilitate the concept of prejudice that has gained a negative connotation since the Enlightenment (Enlightenment). Based on its claim to the autonomy of reason (reason), the Enlightenment era only considered prejudice as part of an unenlightened mentality (Cubukcu 2012). This view is the idea of Cartesian epistemology, which some romanticist hermeneutic thinkers accepted. They carry an objectivist orientation of thought and ultimately influence the formulation of their doctrine of historicism. The rejection of the Enlightenment against the concept of prejudice influenced the natural sciences and social sciences in the 19th century, which caused them to be more interested in seeking objective knowledge, which, they hoped, could follow methodological principles or system rules so that they could defeat myths with the power of logos (Bleicher 1980: 108–109). Thus, since the Enlightenment, prejudice has only been a pejorative status. Even defenders and protectors of religious tradition – though they feel fortunate to have correct prejudices – are influenced by the Enlightenment ethos, which bases their belief on the objective evidence

(Warnke 1987: 73). This phenomenon eventually gave birth to orthodoxy in religion, which only recognises a single truth in interpreting the scriptures of a religion produced by its group and opposes truth for other groups.

In fact, according to Gadamer, the idea of the final form of reason – like the idea of rational autonomy proposed by Betti – will be confronted with the fact that reason can only actualise itself under historical conditions. As a result, the formulation of the natural sciences that use the laws of an object by ignoring the elements of tradition that influence it is not sufficient to understand the systematic influence of historical factors in the socio-cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) always experience change.

The second is the concept of time. In addition to the concept of prejudice, another concept that is the key to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is the concept of time. According to Gadamer, time consists of three parts. First is the past, namely when the text was born or published. Second, the present is when an interpreter is currently full of prejudice so that subjective interpretations will appear. Third, the future, namely the time that contains the wishes of the interpreter in the future, so that the character of understanding is productive (Durdovic 2018).

Gadamer says that understanding involves a dialectical relationship between the past, the present and the future. Consequently, the interpretation of the text or social history depends on the past workings. The current atmosphere is seen and understood only through traditions' intentions, perspectives and pre-conceptions. 'Tradition' is understood by Gadamer as something where the interpreter lives, abides and exists in it. The interpreter flows in the course of tradition without realising it (Palmer 1967: 177).

According to Gadamer, history is an event of the past to look to the future based on the current situation so that historical objectivity becomes blurred. At the same time, in the process of interpretation, the interpreter also has desires and hopes for the future. Therefore, the meaning of history in Gadamer's view always refers to the future era, though the meaning process itself begins today. In turn, the past and the future mediate through the present interpreter. Consequently, history is a series of events that connect traditions in the past, the present and the future. Dialectic of the past, present and future gives birth to the relationship between practices or the continuity of traditions. As a result, the process of meaning always takes place continuously.

For Gadamer, a historian should distance himself between himself and the text to determine its authenticity, accuracy, and the relationship between the text and context, as determined by the objective method. Thus, the interpreter cannot touch the manifestation of objective truth for life. Therefore, Gadamer said that understanding the text could emerge a productive meaning.

Gadamer then formulated history as 'effective history', meaning that when an interpreter tries to understand historical data or texts written by someone in the past, the interpreter attempts to understand the text or event while maintaining the contemporary historicity of the interpreter itself (Hidayat 1996: 22). In other words, the modern nature of the interpreter still works as a starting point for interpretation. The consciousness of 'effective historical' work productively in the act of understanding (Howard 2001: 175). This effective historical awareness is radically limiting. Therefore, Gadamer said that history does not belong to humans (subjects), but humans who belong to that history (Gadamer 1975: Xxii).

The third is the fusion of horizon. The other crucial concept of Gadamer hermeneutics is the fusion of horizon. Nietzsche and Husserl used this term to denote a way of thinking bound by various determinations and natural laws that limit one's point of view. Concerning historical understanding, the horizon refers to historical awareness to see the past not based

on the interpreter's current criteria or prejudices but in the perspective of the past historical horizon itself so that the interpreter can understand it in the correct dimensions. The interpreter's failure to place himself amid the historical horizon of a tradition will cause the interpreter to fail to understand the historical significance (Gadamer 1986: 270).

In other words, in understanding a tradition, one must understand all dimensions of historical texts or events, contained in the historical process, and connections between past and present cultures according to the social context (McCaffrey et al. 2012). The act of understanding itself is a communication towards a truth. Interpretation always takes place in a dialogue so that the formula 'subject-object', 'I-you' has been lost and replaced with 'we' (fusion of horizons).

GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS ON RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND COVID-19

Gadamer's hermeneutics is very helpful in revealing the continuity and discontinuity of tradition. Concerning religious traditions, Gadamer's hermeneutics can help indicate the continuity and discontinuity of religious tradition, which describes the relationship between the revealed truth and history. Gadamer's thoughts greatly influenced the Islamic hermeneutical thinking initiated by Fazlu Rahman, Hassan Hanafi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid (Esack 1993; Zainol et al. 2018), and others. Gadamer's main idea is to understand the text. Understanding the text's historicity, the writer and the reader are necessary (Fischbach 2017; Hanif 2017).

In line with Gadamer's thoughts, Rahman argues that the text of the Koran and hadith from the past must be interpreted reconstructively and actualised now and here (the world) but remains committed and directed forward (teleologically) (Rahman 1980: 106–120). Departing from the past, present and future dialectic, Rahman tries to invite Muslims to recognise the Koran and its social setting as if they lived in the time of the Prophet. After that, return to the present and understand the current social environment to create a fusion of the horizon. This implies that in understanding a tradition, one must understand the whole dimension of the historical process as a conversation or communication open to the truth, including the social setting (*asbab al-nuzul*). According to Rahman, the verses of the Koran were not revealed in an empty space but are closely related to the social atmosphere that surrounded the Arab society at the time of the revelation of the Koran. According to Rahman, someone who wants to understand the Koran must understand all the historical dimensions related to the interaction of the Koran and Muhammad and their interactions with the Arab society at that time. There is a similarity between Gadamer and Rahman that the meaning of the text always goes beyond the author, so understanding is always productive, not reproductive.

One of the roles of philosophical hermeneutics is understanding religious language (Harrison 2010; Muthmainnah, Khaidir 2020), including religious language regarding the COVID-19 pandemic protocol (DuBose 2020). In Islam, as a case example, religious texts have a strong message in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. These texts come from the words of the Prophet Muhammad, which are commonly called hadith. In the structure of Islamic scholarship, hadith occupies the second position after the Koran. First, the hadith of Sahih (valid) was narrated by Bukhari and Muslim from Usama bin Zaid: Muhammad said: 'tha'un (infectious diseases) is warning of Allah to test His servants from among humans. So when you hear that a disease is spreading in a land, do not enter that land. And when the plague strikes in the land where you are, do not flee from it either'. Second, Ibn Majah and Ahmad ibn Hanbal narrated the hadith from Abdullah ibn' Abbas. Muhammad said: 'It is not permissible to do damage and harmful things'. Third, the authentic hadith was narrated by Bukhari and Muslim from Abu Hurairah.

Muhammad said: 'Do not mix the sick with the healthy'. Fourth, Sahih Hadith was narrated by Bukhari and Muslim Abdullah ibn Abbas on the recommendation to pray at home when it rains on Friday.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics read the messages in these religious texts. First, the interpreter can place these religious texts as a dialectic between the past, present and future. In other words, these sacred texts are a form of a dialectic between texts and contexts that took place in the past, but the meanings and moral messages are still valid today and even in the future. Second, although there is a dialectic of the past, present and future, the reader's situation is still used as a starting point for interpretation. These religious texts contain a solid message for quarantine and limit human interaction (lockdown) in modern scientific language.

Third, because the starting point of interpretation is contemporary, the meaning or message obtained is also very subjective. In other words, the solution to dealing with this pandemic is very contextual. Today, the interpreter can preventively interpret these religious text messages, giving birth to the COVID-19 health protocol. Equipped with a second hadith encourages humans to create benefit (general good) and avoid harm (damage), namely social distancing, masks, quarantine, lockdown, vaccines, and various other alternatives following the development of science and technology. These contemporary characteristics and subjectivity open up the possibility of different interpretations in different eras with different situations. In other words, the current solution for handling COVID-19 is not a final solution. It means that new ways of handling COVID-19 are still open following the development of science and technology.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on Gadamer's hermeneutical framework, understanding religious language related to COVID-19 emerges with two implications. First, it is ideological. The concept of prejudice shows that everyone shackled by prejudice instilled tradition and that interpretation is always subjective. Thus, in interpreting religious language related to COVID-19, the interpreter's subjectivity dramatically affects the process of making meaning. Consequently, there is no single and textual meaning contained in the language of religion. The textual meaning becomes blurred, and what remains are variations and various purposes of religious language according to that who interprets it. An essential substantive meaning becomes the principle of values and morals. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic health protocols vary according to each region's situation and conditions.

Second, in methodology, Gadamer says that understanding the language of religion should be done in a way that brings horizon text and horizon writers in the past with the modern horizon reader, so the birth of fusion of horizons will be a source of useful knowledge in the interpretation of a text. In other words, in understanding religious language, the interpreter must take all social situations to find the substantive meaning of the text and a complete understanding of all dimensions related to the interpreter's present situation so that the reader can apply a substantive meaning in actual cases.

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H. G. Gadamerio filosofinė hermeneutika religinės kalbos ir COVID-19 atžvilgiu

Santrauka

Filosofinė hermeneutika – tai hermeneutikos rūšis, orientuota į supratimo ir interpretavimo ontologiją. Vienas žymiausių filosofinės hermeneutikos atstovų yra Hansas Georgas Gadameris. Pasak H. G. Gadamerio, prietariai ir istoriniai aspektai, atitinkantys praeities, dabarties ir ateities dialektiką, yra labai svarbūs siekiant suprasti religinę kalbą, susijusią su COVID-19. Taigi ši koncepcija paremta H. G. Gadamerio mintimis apie horizonto susilieimo idėją. Ši idėja rodo, kad religinius tekstus reikia suprasti susiejant teksto horizontą, autorių ir skaitytoją, kad būtų galima prasmingiau interpretuoti tekstą. Darome prielaidą, kad šis požiūris tinka suprasti religinę kalbą, susijusią su COVID-19 pandemijos metu. Tokiu atveju interpretatorius turi atsižvelgti į visas dimensijas, susijusias su socialine situacija, kad surastų esminę prasmę ir perprastų visus matmenis, sietinus su dabartine interpretatoriaus padėtimi, ir galėtų pritaikyti esminę konteksto prasmę konkrečiais atvejais.

Raktažodžiai: filosofinė hermeneutika, prietaras, laikas, horizonto sintezė, religinė kalba, COVID-19