



# Nafs Educational Research Journal

Vol. 2, No. 2 (2026), 77-85

Jalan. HR, Soebrantas Km.15, No. 155 Tuah Madani, Kec.

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Website: <https://irbijournal.com/index.php/NERJ/index>

E-ISSN: 3124-9043

## Fawatih al-Suwar and Their Implications for the Understanding of Qur'anic Verses and Islamic Religious Education

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the urgency and classification of *fawatih al-suwar* (the opening passages of Qur'anic chapters), with a primary focus on the phenomenon of *al-ahruf al-muqaththa'ah* (disjointed letters). This study employs a library research approach to explore the definitions, forms, and underlying wisdom of these opening expressions. The findings reveal that, terminologically, *fawatih al-suwar* refer to various types of expressions that initiate the discourse of a surah. Broadly speaking, there are ten forms of openings in the Qur'an, including praise (*al-thana'*), vocative expressions (*al-nida'*), declarative statements (*al-khabariyyah*), oaths (*al-qasam*), conditional clauses (*al-shart*), commands (*al-amr*), interrogatives (*al-istifham*), supplications, causal statements (*al-ta'wil*), and the disjointed letters (*al-muqaththa'ah*). With specific regard to the disjointed letters, there are fourteen letter combinations distributed across twenty-nine surahs. Muslim scholars have differed in their interpretations of these letters, forming two major perspectives: the *tawqifi* approach, which maintains that these letters are divine secrets categorized as *mutashabihat* (ambiguous verses) known only to God, and the *ta'wil*

approach, which attempts to uncover their communicative and rhetorical functions. The wisdom behind the existence of *fawatih al-suwar* includes their role as *tanbih* (a form of alert or attention-grabbing device) for listeners, as evidence of the Qur'an's linguistic miracle that challenges the eloquence of the Arabs, and as a means of enhancing the aesthetic structure of divine discourse. The diversity of interpretations reflects the dynamic nature of Islamic intellectual tradition and the limitations of human reason in comprehending metaphysical realities, while simultaneously affirming the Qur'an's position as an inexhaustible source of knowledge open to continuous exploration and interpretation.

**Keywords:** *Fawatih al-Suwar, Qur'anic Verses, Islamic Education*

## A. Introduction

The Qur'an is the word (*kalam*) of Allah that contains miraculous qualities, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the mediation of the Angel Jibril, recorded in written form within the *mushaf*, transmitted through *mutawatir* narration, and whose recitation is considered an act of worship. It begins with Surah al-Fatihah and concludes with Surah al-Nas [Ahmad, 2021: 145]. One of the aspects of the Qur'an's miraculous nature lies in the way Allah initiates certain chapters with disjointed or separated Arabic letters (*al-ahruf al-muqaththa'ah*). In the study of Qur'anic sciences, these letters are commonly referred to as *fawatih al-suwar* (the openings of the chapters). The study of this subject aims to uncover the wisdom embedded within these opening forms. The majority of scholars agree that *fawatih al-suwar* fall under the category of *mutashabihat* (ambiguous verses), as their true meanings are known only to Allah سبحانه وتعالى.

However, there exists another group of exegetes who maintain that, while the ultimate interpretation (*ta'wil*) belongs to Allah, certain aspects of their meaning may still be explored by humans through adequate scholarly understanding, leading to diverse interpretive possibilities. It is widely accepted that the Qur'an was revealed with multiple dimensions of miraculousness, including its legal distinctions between lawful and unlawful matters, its textual authenticity, its accessibility to the linguistic understanding of the Arabs, and aspects whose interpretation remains known only to Allah. The discussion of *fawatih al-suwar* belongs to this last category, namely those elements whose ultimate interpretation is exclusively within divine knowledge, and over which humans hold no definitive interpretive authority.

This study aims to describe the phenomenon of *al-ahruf al-muqaththa'ah* within the framework of *fawatih al-suwar*, encompassing discussions on their definition, classifications, scholarly perspectives, and the wisdom underlying their presence in the Qur'an [Rahmawati, 2022: 33].

## B. Literature Review

The study of *fawatih al-suwar* has become an important subject within the discipline of *'Ulum al-Qur'an*, particularly in efforts to understand the linguistic features and miraculous nature of the Qur'an. Classical as well as contemporary scholars have devoted significant attention to this phenomenon of chapter openings, especially those related to the *al-ahruf al-muqaththa'ah* (disjointed letters), which are considered unique and rich in symbolic meaning. In general, discussions on *fawatih al-suwar* can be found in the works of classical scholars such as al-Zarkashi in *Al-Burhan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* and al-Suyuti in *Al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*. Both scholars explain that *fawatih al-suwar* belong to the category of *mutashabihat* (ambiguous verses), whose meanings cannot be fully grasped by human reason. Al-Zarkashi

emphasizes that the disjointed letters fall into the realm of the unseen (*ghayb*), the true knowledge of which is known only to Allah سبحانه وتعالى. Therefore, not all Qur'anic verses can be interpreted rationally without a strong textual basis (*nass*).

On the other hand, some scholars have attempted to offer interpretive approaches to *fawatih al-suwar*. For instance, Ibn Jarir al-Ṭabari and Ibn Kathir view these letters as having a rhetorical function, serving as a form of *tanbih* (an alert or attention-grabbing device) for listeners before introducing the main message of the verses. This perspective demonstrates that *fawatih al-suwar* possess not only a theological dimension but also a communicative function in conveying the Qur'anic message.

Further studies have been conducted by modern scholars such as Mohammad Nor Ichwan (2008), who situates *fawatih al-suwar* within the framework of the Qur'an's miraculous nature, particularly from a linguistic perspective. According to him, the use of disjointed Arabic letters at the beginning of certain chapters serves as evidence that the Qur'an is composed of linguistic elements familiar to the Arabs, yet remains inimitable in terms of its eloquence and depth of meaning.

Moreover, contemporary research indicates that *fawatih al-suwar* can also be analyzed through stylistic and rhetorical approaches. In this regard, the openings of the chapters function as a form of divine communication strategy aimed at attracting attention, establishing a particular tone, and guiding readers or listeners toward the central theme of the discourse. The variation in opening forms such as praise, vocative expressions, oaths, and interrogatives reflects the richness and diversity of the Qur'anic style. Thus, it can be concluded that the literature on *fawatih al-suwar* reveals two major tendencies: the *tawqifi* approach, which emphasizes the absolute incomprehensibility of their meanings to human beings, and the *ta'wili* approach, which seeks to understand their functions and underlying wisdom contextually. These two perspectives highlight the dynamic nature of intellectual discourse in Qur'anic studies and open avenues for further research from theological, linguistic, and pedagogical perspectives.

### C. Research Method

The methodology of this study is designed to provide a systematic framework for examining and analyzing the *tafsir maudhu'i* method. This research employs a qualitative approach, with a primary focus on literature review and textual analysis. The study begins with the collection and critical examination of relevant literature on *tafsir maudhu'i*. The sources utilized include academic journal articles and scholarly works by Muslim intellectuals who have discussed this method. Through this approach, the study is expected to offer a comprehensive overview of the *tafsir maudhu'i* method, as well as its contribution to the understanding and application of Qur'anic teachings in the modern era.

### D. Results and Discussion

#### 1. The Definition of *Fawatih al-Suwar*

Linguistically, *fawatih al-suwar* consists of two words. The word *fawatih* is the plural form of *fatih*, which means beginning, opening, or introduction [Yunus, 1990: 307]. Meanwhile, the word *al-suwar* is the plural of *surah*, referring to chapters or collections of verses revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whose number and structure have been divinely determined. Thus, *fawatih al-suwar* refers to the opening elements of Qur'anic chapters, as they mark the beginning of the textual discourse within each *surah*. When these openings consist of disjointed Arabic letters, they are referred to as *al-ahruf al-muqaththa'ah*

(separated letters), due to their isolated form, which does not combine into a complete linguistic structure. In terms of pronunciation, however, they are recited in the same manner as individual Arabic letters [Aini, 2020: 201].

According to Ibn Abi al-Iṣba' in his work *Al-Khawāṭir al-Shawānih fi Asrar al-Fawatih*, the term *al-fawatih* denotes various forms of expressions that initiate Qur'anic chapters. He classifies these openings into ten categories, one of which includes the *huruf al-tahajji* (letters spelled individually), commonly known as *al-muqaththa'ah*. The remaining categories include praise (both *tahmid* and *tasbih*), vocative expressions (*nida'*), declarative statements (*jumlah khabariyyah*), oaths (*qasam*), conditional clauses, commands, supplications, and causal expressions (*ta'ilil*). Similarly, Ibn Akhdhar defines *fawatih al-suwar* as the openings of chapters due to their position at the beginning of the Qur'anic discourse. When these openings consist of disjointed letters, they are referred to as *al-ahruf al-muqaththa'ah*, reflecting their isolated and non-syntactical nature [Karim, 2021: 59-74].

In this regard, al-Zarkashi argues that such elements belong to the realm of the unseen (*ghayb*), similar to verses concerning the Day of Judgment, rainfall, the contents of the womb, the nature of the soul, and the disjointed letters (*al-huruf al-muqaththa'ah*). According to the mainstream position of *ahl al-ḥaqq*, these *mutashabihat* (ambiguous verses) are not open to independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in their interpretation. Rather, understanding them must be based on one of three sources: explicit textual evidence from the Qur'an, explanations from the Prophet (peace be upon him), or the consensus (*ijma'*) of the Muslim community. In the absence of such authoritative explanations, it must be acknowledged that their true meaning is known only to Allah سبحانه وتعالى [Fitriyah, 2022: 101].

Therefore, similar to matters such as the Day of Judgment, resurrection, the unseen realities of the womb, and the nature of the soul, the disjointed letters found in *fawatih al-suwar* represent knowledge that belongs exclusively to Allah and remains beyond the full reach of human interpretation. For this reason, early Muslim scholars classified these verses as part of the *mutashabihat*, affirming that their ultimate meaning is known only to Allah alone [Hidayat, 2023: 77].

## 2. Forms of *Fawatih al-Suwar*

In the Qur'an, there are ten general forms of *fawatih al-suwar* (chapter openings), which can be outlined as follows:

- a. **Openings with praise (*al-thana'*)**. Fourteen surahs begin with praise to Allah. Five of them begin with *tahmid* (e.g., *al-ḥamdu lillah*) namely Surah al-Fatihah, al-An'am, al-Kahf, Saba', and Fāṭir. Seven begin with *tasbih* in various grammatical forms (past, present, and verbal noun), such as al-Isra', al-Hadid, al-Hashr, al-Saff, al-Jumu'ah, al-Taghabun, and al-A'la. Two others, al-Furqan and al-Mulk, begin with the expression *tabaraka*.
- b. **Openings with vocative expressions (*al-nida'*)**. Ten surahs begin with forms of address, such as *Ya ayyuha al-muddaththir* (al-Muddaththir), *Ya ayyuha al-muzzammil* (al-Muzzammil), *Ya ayyuha al-nabi* (al-Aḥzab, al-Tahrim), and *Ya ayyuha alladhina amanu* (al-Nisa', al-Hajj, al-Ma'idah, al-Hujurat, and al-Mumtahanah).
- c. **Openings with declarative statements (*al-khabariyyah*)**. Twenty-three surahs begin with declarative sentences, including al-Anfal, al-Tawbah, al-Nahl, al-

Anbiya', al-Mu'minun, al-Nur, al-Zumar, Muḥammad, al-Fath, al-Qamar, al-Raḥman, al-Mujadilah, al-Ḥaqqah, al-Ma'arij, Nuḥ, al-Qiyamah, 'Abasa, al-Balad, al-Qadr, al-Bayyinah, al-Qari'ah, al-Takathur, and al-Kawthar [Gunawan, 2023: 25].

- d. **Openings with oaths (*al-qasam*)**. Fifteen surahs begin with oaths, such as al-Ṣaffat, al-Dhariyat, al-Ṭur, al-Najm, al-Mursalat, al-Nazi'at, al-Buruj, al-Ṭariq, al-Fajr, al-Shams, al-Layl, al-Duḥa, al-Tin, al-'Adiyat, and al-'Asr.
- e. **Openings with conditional forms (*al-shart*)**. Seven surahs begin with conditional structures, including al-Waqi'ah, al-Munafiqun, al-Takwir, al-Infīṭar, al-Inshiqāq, al-Zalzalah, and al-Naṣr.
- f. **Openings with commands (*al-amr*)**. Six surahs begin with imperative expressions: al-Jinn, al-'Alaq, al-Kafirun, al-Ikhlāṣ, al-Falaq, and al-Nas.
- g. **Openings with interrogatives (*al-istifham*)**. Six surahs begin with questions, such as al-Jathiyah, al-Naba', al-Ghashiyah, al-Inshirah, al-Fil, and al-Ma'un [Dewi, 2024: 167].
- h. **Openings with supplication or imprecation (*al-du'a'*)**. This form appears in three surahs: al-Muṭaffifin, al-Humazah, and al-Lahab.
- i. **Openings with causal expressions (*al-ta'il*)**. This type appears only once, in Surah Quraysh.
- j. **Openings with disjointed letters (*al-ḥuruf al-muqaththa'ah*)**. These consist of isolated Arabic letters that appear at the beginning of certain surahs [Yusuf, 2020: 89].

From a structural perspective, the disjointed-letter openings (*al-muqaththa'ah*) can be further classified into several categories:

- a. **Single-letter openings**: found in three surahs Sad (ص), Qaf (ق), and al-Qalam (ن).
- b. **Two-letter openings**: found in ten surahs, including seven beginning with *ḥa mim* (حم), and others such as Ṭa Ha (طه), Ta Sin (طس), and Ya Sin (يس).
- c. **Three-letter openings**: found in thirteen surahs, such as *alif lam mim* (الم), *alif lam ra* (الر), and *ṭa sin mim* (طسم).
- d. **Four-letter openings**: found in two surahs, such as *alif lam mim sad* (المص) and *alif lam mim ra* (الر).
- e. **Five-letter openings**: found only in Surah Maryam, beginning with *kaf ha ya 'ayn sad* (كهيعص) [Rahmat, 2021: 210].

In total, these disjointed letters appear in 29 surahs with 14 distinct combinations, including:

الم، الر، المص، المر، كهيعص، طه، طسم، طس، يس، ص، حم، حمعسق، ق، ن

Notably, the Qur'an employs a selection of Arabic letters such as ع، ك، ق، ي، ا، الم، الر، المص، المر، كهيعص، طه، طسم، طس، يس، ص، حم، حمعسق، ق، ن which together constitute nearly half of the Arabic alphabet. This highlights the linguistic miracle of the Qur'an, as it is composed of familiar elements yet remains inimitable. Further observation shows that verses following these disjointed letters often introduce major Qur'anic themes. For example:

- a. كهيحص “This is a mention of the mercy of your Lord to His servant Zakaria” (Maryam 19:1-2).
- b. طسم “These are the verses of the clear Book” (al-Qaṣaṣ 28:1-2).
- c. يس “Ya Sin. By the wise Qur’an” (Ya Sin 36:1-2).

Another distinctive feature is their patterned distribution. Some letter combinations recur across multiple surahs (such as الم، الر، حم), while others appear only once (such as ن). Additionally, surahs that begin with the same disjointed letters often exhibit similarities in theme and style, a phenomenon not found in other surahs [Ningsih, 2023: 55].

### 3. The Wisdom of *Fawatih al-Suwar*

The surahs of the Qur’an, revealed among the Quraysh community who were renowned for their linguistic mastery possess extraordinary features in terms of language, reflecting the Qur’an’s nature as a divine miracle. Through the study of *fawatih al-suwar*, the miraculous aspects embedded within the Qur’an become increasingly evident, while also highlighting the limitations of human intellect in comprehending matters related to the unseen (*ghayb*). This, in turn, provides a form of divine understanding conveyed through sensory and experiential awareness familiar to human beings.

According to some exegetes (*mufasssirun*), the forms of *fawatih al-suwar* serve to demonstrate the limitations of the intellectual capacity of the Arabs. Although the Qur’an is composed of the same letters known to them sometimes even consisting of only a single letter they were unable to produce a text comparable to it. Another opinion suggests that *fawatih al-suwar* function as *tanbih* (a form of warning or attention capturing device) before presenting the main discourse of the Qur’an, thereby preparing and directing the listener’s focus. This differs significantly from conventional expressions of attention used in classical Arabic speech.

Regarding the intended audience of this *tanbih*, some scholars, such as al-Khuwaibi, argue that it was directed to the Prophet Muhammad, reminding him amid his worldly engagements to turn attentively toward the revelation delivered by the Angel Jibril. Meanwhile, Rashid Rida clarifies that the warning was primarily directed toward the polytheists of Mecca. At a time when they discouraged others from listening to the Qur’an, the recitation of the *muqaththa’ah* letters aroused their curiosity and compelled them to pay attention to the Prophet’s recitation. This effect could also extend to the People of the Book in Medina.

Another function of *fawatih al-suwar* is to enhance and beautify the structure of Qur’anic discourse through stylistic expression, including forms of praise conveyed through letters. Additionally, these openings are seen as encapsulating the core themes that will be elaborated upon in the subsequent verses. In this context, Surah al-Fatihah can be viewed as a model of an opening that comprehensively summarizes the essential messages of the Qur’an. The assertion that the Qur’an, as a source of Islamic law, possesses both linguistic and semantic excellence is not without foundation. Allah repeatedly emphasizes the uniqueness of the Qur’an. One such aspect of its uniqueness is reflected in the discussion of *fawatih al-suwar*, also referred to as *awa’il al-suwar* or *al-ahruf al-muqaththa’ah*, and described in

Western scholarship as “the mystical letters of the Qur’an.” Among the various forms of Qur’anic openings, the *muqaththa’ah* letters have received particular attention from scholars and have often generated debate. Consequently, these letters are frequently categorized as *mutashabihat* verses, whose true meanings are known only to Allah, although some scholars maintain that interpretive efforts (*ta’wil*) may still be pursued with adequate scholarly depth.

It is important to recognize that the study of *fawatih al-suwar*, particularly those in the form of these “mysterious letters,” continually encourages diverse interpretive efforts. This ongoing process fosters intellectual dynamism and prevents rigid, dogmatic understandings, as individuals bring different perspectives shaped by their own interpretive experiences. Such diversity may reflect one of the deeper secrets of ultimate truth within the Qur’an truth that ultimately resides solely with Allah [Syukri, 2022: 134].

#### 4. Scholars’ Perspectives on the Wisdom of *Fawatih al-Suwar*

Scholarly opinions regarding the meaning and wisdom of *fawatih al-suwar*, particularly the *al-ahruf al-muqaththa’ah* (disjoined letters), can generally be classified into two major groups:

- a. **The Tawqifi Approach (Meaning as Hidden/Divinely Known).** This group maintains that *fawatih al-suwar* constitute divine secrets that are beyond the reach of human intellect. Abu Bakar Ash-Shiddiq is reported to have said, “Every revealed book has its secret, and the secret of the Qur’an lies in the openings of its surahs.” Similarly, Ali bin Abi Thalib stated that the disjoined letters represent the essence of the Qur’an. This perspective is also supported by prominent companions such as Abdullah bin Mas’ud and Abdullah bin Abbas, as well as by the majority of early Muslim scholars (*ulama salaf*). They regard these letters as part of the *mutashabihat* verses whose ultimate meanings are known only to Allah.
- b. **The Ta’wili Approach (Interpretative Understanding).** The second group attempts to interpret the meanings and functions of *fawatih al-suwar*. Scholars such as Ibnu Jarir al-Tabari, Ibnu Katsir, Al-Zarkasyi, Jalaluddin as-Suyuthi, Al-Khuwaiby, and Muhammad Rashid Rida argue that these openings serve a rhetorical purpose, particularly as *tanbih* a device to attract attention and prepare the audience for the message that follows. More specifically, Al-Khuwaiby suggests that these openings function as a form of divine reminder directed to the Prophet Muhammad, encouraging him to attentively receive the revelation. Meanwhile, other scholars propose that the disjoined letters may also serve as symbolic names for the surahs in which they appear. Overall, these differing perspectives illustrate the richness of Islamic intellectual discourse, reflecting both a recognition of the limits of human understanding and a continuous effort to uncover the deeper meanings embedded within the Qur’anic text [Syarifuddin, 2024: 98].

#### 5. Implications of *Fawatih al-Suwar* in Islamic Religious Education

The study of *fawatih al-suwar* carries broad implications within the field of education, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam*). Based on the analysis of the ten forms of Qur’anic openings, several educational values can be identified:

- a. **Apperception Method and Lesson Opening Strategies.** The variety of openings found in *fawatih al-suwar* demonstrates that every process of

communication and learning requires an engaging introduction (*apperception*). The use of *muqaththa'ah* letters functions as a means of capturing the audience's attention before delivering the core message. In the context of Islamic education, teachers can adopt similar strategies by initiating lessons with thought-provoking questions, surprising statements, or engaging media to stimulate students' interest.

- b. **Variation in Teaching Methods.** The diversity of *fawatih al-suwar* indicates the importance of employing varied teaching methods. The Qur'an conveys its messages through multiple forms, including praise, calls, questions, commands, and oaths. Educators can learn from this diversity by avoiding monotonous instruction and instead applying different approaches tailored to students' needs and learning contexts [Arifin, 2021: 173].
- c. **Tawhid Values and Character Building.** Openings that contain praise to Allah, such as *tahmid* and *tasbih*, reflect strong messages of *tawhid* (monotheism). In education, these elements serve as a foundation for character development, encouraging students to consistently remember and express gratitude to Allah. Habituating students to begin activities with praise and remembrance (*dhikr*) can be effectively integrated into daily learning practices.
- d. **Rhetorical and Communication Skills.** *Fawatih al-suwar* possess significant rhetorical functions, including the delivery of symbolic meanings and the strengthening of emotional engagement with the audience. In Islamic education, this highlights the importance of developing effective communication skills, whether in preaching (*da'wah*), public speaking, or everyday social interactions.
- e. **Development of Critical Thinking Skills.** The diversity of interpretations regarding *fawatih al-suwar*, particularly the *muqaththa'ah* letters, encourages the development of critical thinking among students. Engaging learners in discussions about differing scholarly perspectives helps cultivate their abilities in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation when approaching religious texts. Overall, these implications demonstrate that the study of *fawatih al-suwar* is not only relevant from a theological and linguistic perspective but also offers meaningful contributions to pedagogical practices in Islamic education [Lina, 2025: 1-2].

## E. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of *fawatih al-suwar* reveals a profound dimension of the Qur'an that integrates theological depth, linguistic sophistication, and pedagogical relevance. As the opening elements of Qur'anic chapters, *fawatih al-suwar* function not merely as introductory expressions, but as meaningful components that shape the structure and delivery of divine discourse. The existence of ten distinct forms of Qur'anic openings ranging from praise, vocative expressions, and oaths to interrogatives and disjointed letters demonstrates the richness and diversity of the Qur'an's communicative style. Particularly significant is the phenomenon of *al-ahruf al-muqaththa'ah*, which appears in twenty nine surahs in fourteen unique combinations. These disjointed letters have generated diverse scholarly interpretations, broadly categorized into two major approaches: the *tawqifi* perspective, which affirms that their ultimate meanings belong exclusively to Allah and remain beyond human comprehension, and the *ta'wili* perspective, which seeks to explore their rhetorical and communicative functions. This diversity of interpretation reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of Islamic intellectual tradition, while also emphasizing the limitations of human reason in grasping metaphysical realities. Moreover, the wisdom embedded in *fawatih al-suwar* highlights their role as a form of *tanbih* (attention-directing device), a manifestation of the Qur'an's linguistic miracle, and a means of enhancing

the aesthetic and structural coherence of the text. These openings serve to engage the listener, prepare the audience for the message, and reinforce the uniqueness of the Qur'an as a divine revelation that remains inimitable despite being composed of familiar linguistic elements. From an educational perspective, the study of *fawatih al-suwar* offers valuable implications for Islamic Religious Education. It provides insights into effective teaching strategies, such as the importance of engaging lesson openings, methodological variation, and the integration of rhetorical techniques. Additionally, it reinforces foundational values of *tawhid* and supports the development of critical thinking skills through exposure to diverse scholarly perspectives. Ultimately, the study of *fawatih al-suwar* affirms that the Qur'an is not only a source of spiritual guidance but also a rich field of intellectual exploration. Its meanings continue to inspire reflection, dialogue, and discovery across generations, underscoring its position as an inexhaustible source of knowledge whose depths can never be fully exhausted by human inquiry.

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