

The Dual Faces of Religion: Tolerance and Intolerance in a Sociological Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the dual role of religion in contemporary society—as both a source of tolerance and a driver of intolerance—by critically analyzing the socio-political, cultural, and global contexts that shape religious discourse. The research responds to the urgency of understanding religion beyond theological essentialism, emphasizing the need for a sociological approach to interpret the contradictory manifestations of religion in plural societies. Employing a qualitative design through critical literature review, the study analyzes academic texts and discourse on religion using thematic content analysis. The data sources include influential works by Diana Eck, John Hick, Mark Juergensmeyer, Karen Armstrong, Jeremy Menchik, Robert Hefner, and others. The findings reveal three significant patterns: religion as a moral force fostering interfaith dialogue; religion as an ideological tool legitimizing social exclusion; and the ambivalent image of religion shaped by state politics, popular media, and transnational religious networks. The study demonstrates that religion is never neutral—it is continuously constructed and contested within power relations, identity politics, and symbolic representation. These insights underscore the functional and dysfunctional roles of religion in shaping social cohesion and polarization. The implications of this research highlight the urgency of promoting critical religious literacy, interfaith education, and inclusive public policies that prevent the instrumentalization of religion for sectarian or authoritarian interests. The originality of this study lies in its multidimensional mapping of the social construction of religion, shifting the analytical lens from sacred texts to contextual forces. By integrating classic sociological theories with the Indonesian context, this research offers a comprehensive and contextually grounded contribution to the sociology of religion.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi peran ganda agama dalam masyarakat kontemporer—sebagai sumber toleransi sekaligus pemicu intoleransi—dengan menganalisis secara kritis konteks sosial-politik, budaya, dan global yang membentuk wacana keagamaan. Studi ini merespons urgensi untuk memahami agama secara non-esensial, dan menekankan pentingnya pendekatan sosiologis dalam membaca kontradiksi ekspresi keagamaan di masyarakat plural. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif melalui studi pustaka kritis, dengan teknik analisis isi tematik terhadap berbagai literatur akademik dan wacana keagamaan. Sumber data mencakup karya-karya penting dari Diana Eck, John Hick, Mark Juergensmeyer, Karen Armstrong, Jeremy Menchik, Robert Hefner, dan lainnya. Temuan menunjukkan tiga pola utama: agama sebagai kekuatan moral yang mendorong dialog lintas iman; agama sebagai alat ideologis yang melegitimasi eksklusi sosial; dan wajah ambivalen agama yang dibentuk oleh politik negara, media populer, dan jaringan keagamaan transnasional. Penelitian ini memperlihatkan bahwa agama tidak pernah netral—ia selalu dikonstruksi dan diperebutkan dalam relasi kuasa, politik identitas, dan representasi simbolik. Temuan ini menegaskan fungsi ganda agama dalam membentuk kohesi maupun polarisasi sosial. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menunjukkan urgensi penguatan literasi keagamaan kritis, pendidikan lintas iman, serta kebijakan publik yang inklusif untuk mencegah banalitas agama sebagai alat sektarian atau otoritarian. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada pemetaan multidimensi terhadap konstruksi sosial agama, dengan menggeser fokus analisis dari teks-teks suci ke arah kekuatan-kekuatan kontekstual. Dengan mengintegrasikan teori-teori sosiologi klasik dan konteks Indonesia, studi ini memberikan kontribusi yang komprehensif dan relevan terhadap pengembangan kajian sosiologi agama.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paradoxical phenomenon of religion serving both as a source of tolerance and as a driver of intolerance remains a socially relevant issue in contemporary life. On one hand, the world's major religions teach noble values such as love, justice, and compassion—as seen in Islam's emphasis on *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy to all creation) (Gulen, 2014), Christianity's focus on love, Hinduism's principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence) (Kumar, 2022), and Buddhism's reverence for *karuna* (compassion) (Vajpayee & Sanghani, 2022). These values provide the moral foundation for building a peaceful and inclusive society. In the Indonesian context, the spirit of religious diversity—rooted in religious teachings—serves as a pillar of *Pancasila* and is embodied in the pluralist practices of figures like KH. Abdurrahman Wahid and Father Mangunwijaya (Syihabuddin, 2021).

On the other hand, both history and current realities show that religion frequently becomes a source of conflict, discrimination, and violence. The Rohingya tragedy in Myanmar (2021), sectarian conflicts in Ambon

and Poso (Ruagadi et al., 2024), and the forced displacement of Ahmadiyya (Nurdin et al., 2019) and Shia (Syarif et al., 2017) communities in Indonesia expose religion's darker side, triggered by exclusive interpretations and the politicization of religious symbols. The Setara Institute (2022) recorded 333 violations of freedom of religion and belief in a single year, ranging from worship restrictions to hate speech. These facts indicate that religious intolerance is not merely sporadic but rather a structurally and culturally embedded social phenomenon. This issue is crucial to examine, as it directly impacts social stability, democratic quality, and the future of diversity in society.

Several previous studies have highlighted the complex relationship between religion and tolerance. First, normative-theological research such as that conducted by Sya'roni and Supian (2021) emphasized the disparity between the Qur'an's inclusive teachings and the exclusive religious practices observed, particularly in areas like Tasikmalaya. Second, communication studies in *dakwah* (Islamic preaching), as shown by Wabisah et al., (2021), found that *dakwah* can serve as a bridge to peace or a trigger for conflict depending on its rhetorical style. Third, phenomenological approaches, as explored by Kamaluddin et al. (2021), noted that perceptions of intolerance are highly influenced by religious leaders' social experiences and life contexts. Additionally, esoteric perspectives in Setyabudi's study (2023) offer more spiritual and inclusive readings of religious teachings. However, the majority of these studies focus on doctrinal, communicative, or individual-experiential aspects. Few have systematically examined how religion is socially constructed as a symbolic entity with dual meanings that shift depending on sociopolitical context. This research gap serves as the foundation for applying a sociological approach to understanding religion's dual faces.

This study aims to identify and deeply analyze the social factors that cause religion to play a dual role in society—as both a unifier and a driver of conflict. Employing a sociological lens, particularly through the perspectives of symbolic interactionism and Berger's theory of social construction (1991), this study investigates how religious interpretations are shaped by social dynamics, power relations, and political interests. The central focus lies in examining the interactions among religious elites, lay communities, and state policies in constructing religious meanings. The study also seeks to reveal the social structures and cultural mechanisms that enable either tolerance or intolerance to thrive within religious communities. Accordingly, this research aspires to contribute both conceptually and practically to reframing religious narratives in a more humanistic and contextual direction.

This paper argues that religion's tolerant or intolerant expressions are not determined by doctrine itself, but by how teachings are interpreted, practiced, and disseminated by social actors within particular power relations. In other words, religion is not a static or monolithic entity—it is a social construct whose meaning shifts with the political, economic, and cultural tides. When society manages religion inclusively, it can foster social harmony. Conversely, when religion is politicized in exclusive ways, it becomes a tool for legitimizing conflict and domination. Based on this argument, the article will demonstrate that the transformation of religion into a force for peace or a source of violence depends heavily on the social context and interpretive structures that emerge within society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is religious discourse contained in academic literature that directly or indirectly discusses the role of religion in shaping social dynamics, particularly those related to tolerance and intolerance. The study primarily focuses on how religion is positioned, interpreted, and represented within scholarly discourses that have developed in multicultural societies. It analyzes these discourses as symbolic representations that construct the social reality of religion's contradictory nature—as both a unifying force and a trigger for conflict. Thus, the object of study is not religious doctrine in its theological-normative form, but rather the social construction of religion within complex discursive contexts.

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a library research design, specifically in the form of a critical literature review (Djunatan et al., 2024). This approach aligns with the research objective, which is to examine the social and ideological meanings embedded in scholarly narratives concerning religion and diversity. A qualitative design enables the researcher to explore depth of meaning rather than seeking quantitative generalizations. In addition, the study applies a sociological perspective to understand how social structures, actors, and contexts influence the ways in which religion is interpreted and practiced in social life.

The primary data sources for this research consist of published academic literature, including books, journal articles, and relevant scholarly writings. Some of the key works analyzed include *A New Religious America* by Diana L. Eck (2001), *An Interpretation of Religion* by John Hick (1989), *Terror in the Mind of God* by Mark Juergensmeyer (2003), and *Fields of Blood* by Karen Armstrong (2014). The researcher selected these sources based on their academic credibility and relevance to issues of religious tolerance and intolerance from social, political, and historical perspectives.

The data collection process involved close reading, note-taking, and categorizing information from the selected literature (Severino, 2023). The researcher carried out these activities systematically to identify dominant themes, contradictions, and analytical frameworks used by each author. Furthermore, the study included a contextual examination of the background in which each piece of literature was written in order to understand the ideological and historical positions embedded within the narratives. The study did not employ field instruments such as interviews or observations, as the entire process focused on processing text-based secondary data.

The researcher conducted data analysis using a thematic and interpretive content analysis method (Miles & Huberman, 2013). This analysis proceeded through three main stages: (1) identifying religious concepts and values related to tolerance and intolerance; (2) comparing the authors' perspectives on the social, political, and theological factors that shape religion's dual faces; and (3) synthesizing the findings to formulate a comprehensive understanding of socio-religious dynamics. This analysis not only confirms previous findings but also expands the discourse by highlighting the importance of sociological dimensions in understanding the complexity of religion within plural societies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religion as a Source of Tolerance

The literature review reveals that religion, in essence, holds significant potential as a source of tolerance and peace. Conceptually, scholars define religion as a set of beliefs, practices, and symbols that connect human beings with the sacred or the transcendent. In his classic definition, Clifford Geertz (1960) refers to religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." This definition highlights that religion is not merely a matter of personal belief, but a complex cultural system and structure of social meaning that shapes how people understand reality and coexist.

From a sociological perspective, the understanding of religion extends beyond individual expressions toward God and encompasses its function as a social institution that regulates and shapes social relationships. Peter L. Berger defines religion as the structuring force of the social world, a system that offers meaning and legitimizes existing social structures. Religion provides a symbolic order that informs the creation of norms, values, and mechanisms for social cohesion within plural societies (Berger, 2015).

Émile Durkheim long theorized religion's social function as a unifier and a generator of solidarity. In his works, Durkheim views religion as a collective force that strengthens solidarity through *collective conscience*. He argues that religion plays a central role in creating social order by bridging differences and fostering moral bonds among individuals. The values of love, justice, honesty, and mutual respect—taught by major world religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism—form a moral foundation for building inclusive societies (Durkheim, 2001).

Michael Walzer (1999) further argues that tolerance serves as a precondition for peaceful life in pluralistic societies. In religious frameworks, tolerance does not require uniformity of belief but instead makes room for diverse beliefs to coexist peacefully and equally. This resonates with Karen Armstrong's (2014), where she affirms that nearly all religions embrace compassion and respect for others as core moral teachings. She rejects the view that religion is inherently violent, instead insisting that when people understand and practice religion authentically, it becomes an empathetic force that encourages dialogue and reconciliation.

The following key quotations from the literature reinforce religion’s function in promoting tolerance:

Table 1. Foundational Scholarly Views on Religion’s Role in Meaning, Society, and Tolerance

Author	Quotation	Core Theme
Clifford Geertz	“Religion is a system of symbols that shapes strong and profound moods and motivations.”	Religion as a structure of meaning
Peter L. Berger	“Religion is a sacred canopy that legitimizes social reality.”	Religion as a social constructor
Michael Walzer	“Tolerance is a vital foundation for coexistence in plural societies.”	Tolerance and pluralism
Karen Armstrong	“Values like love and justice are the moral foundations of all religions.”	Religion as an empathetic force

Source: Research Findings, 2023.

In simple terms, the literature clearly shows that religion does not merely regulate spiritual relationships between humans and the divine but plays a vital role in shaping harmonious social order. The major world religions explicitly emphasize love, justice, and mutual respect as the heart of religious life. In pluralistic societies, these values underpin tolerant attitudes among different faith communities.

The literature review reveals several consistent patterns that illustrate religion’s role as a source of social tolerance. *First*, religion appears not merely as an individual belief system but as a social structure that organizes societal realities. It forms cognitive frameworks, norms, and value systems that underpin social interactions. Religion thus functions as an institution that gives meaning to human existence and guides collective behavior. *Second*, moral values embedded in religious teachings play a crucial role as a collective force that unifies communities. Durkheim’s concept of social solidarity shows that religion offers a public ethical foundation that strengthens social cohesion amidst diversity. Religion fosters a *collective conscience* that provides shared references for navigating social challenges. *Third*, nearly all major world religions promote universal values such as compassion, justice, and respect for others. These values are not confined to theology but serve as sources of inspiration for peaceful coexistence. Such teachings of tolerance position religion as a potential moral force for building multicultural societies. Fourth, this study underscores the importance of interreligious dialogue and openness in religious life. Progressive voices like Diana L. Eck and Karen Armstrong emphasize that inclusive attitudes and active engagement with diversity are key to making religion a force for peace. In today’s complex and modern societies, tolerance is not merely optional; it is a necessity that must be nurtured through interfaith interactions and strengthened religious literacy.

These findings demonstrate that both conceptually and socially, religion holds immense potential as a moral compass and cultural force that fosters social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Religion does not operate in a vacuum; it emerges as a lived experience that is socially constructed and historically situated. The tolerant character of religion is not merely embedded in sacred texts or theological formulations, but in how individuals, communities, and institutions interpret and implement those teachings in real-life contexts. When religious expressions are informed by empathy, inclusivity, and dialogical ethics, they generate a culture of acceptance and mutual respect that transcends doctrinal differences. In this way, religion contributes not only to personal spiritual fulfillment but also to the collective good by strengthening civic trust and intercommunal harmony.

Moreover, the data underline that religious tolerance is a product of conscious engagement with difference. It is not an automatic outcome of religious belief but rather a cultivated disposition nurtured through education, interfaith interaction, and ethical reflection. The presence of universal moral teachings such as compassion, justice, and human dignity across various religions underscores a shared ethical groundwork that can be mobilized to counter prejudice, sectarianism, and social fragmentation. As Berger and Durkheim suggest, religion’s sociological function extends beyond ritual and devotion—it provides a framework for communal values and shared responsibility. These functions become increasingly critical in pluralistic societies where peaceful coexistence depends on the willingness of individuals to transcend their particularistic identities for the sake of the common good.

Therefore, acknowledging and institutionalizing religion’s tolerant dimension is essential for shaping inclusive public policies and educational frameworks. Governments, civil society actors, and faith-based organizations must invest in religious literacy programs that highlight diversity within and across religious

traditions. This requires shifting the pedagogical emphasis from dogma to dialogical understanding, from exclusivist truth claims to relational ethics. When people are exposed to the lived realities and common struggles of other faith communities, they are more likely to develop empathy and recognize shared humanity. Ultimately, religion's role as a force for tolerance and reconciliation depends on its capacity to be reimagined—not as a boundary-marker of identity but as a bridge of solidarity in the pursuit of justice and peace.

Religion as a Source of Intolerance

Although many academic works describe religion as a moral force that fosters peaceful societies, empirical realities reveal that religion can also serve as a source of intolerance, discrimination, and even collective violence. Historically, many bloody conflicts have involved religious sentiment, such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, and sectarian wars across Europe and the Middle East. In the modern era, sectarian conflict in Iraq and Syria, violence against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar, and discrimination against Coptic Christians in Egypt clearly illustrate how religion, when employed exclusively and politically, can legitimize acts of violence.

Max Weber underscores how religious teachings function not only as ethical systems but also shape dominating behavior when linked to authority. Weber explains that in deeply rooted religious traditions, obedience to charismatic authority often generates exclusivist actions and resistance toward other groups—especially when that authority promotes a narrow interpretation of divine revelation. This phenomenon constitutes the ideological foundation of what is known as *religious authoritarianism*, where one interpretation monopolizes truth and categorizes all others as deviant (Weber, 1993).

Meanwhile, Bryan Turner (2011) argues that religious intolerance often arises from collective fears of identity loss. Within the dynamics of globalization and modernization, religion frequently becomes a tool for defending cultural and political boundaries, thus rejecting all forms of pluralism perceived as threatening the “purity” of faith. This process intensifies when religious or political elites promote “us versus them” narratives to strengthen group loyalty.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, in her book *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (2009), asserts that religion's involvement in the public sphere—absent ethical supervision and critical reflection—can lead to social fragmentation. She notes that religion-based policies in countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan often result in legal discrimination against minority groups and women. Furthermore, many state policies founded on literal religious interpretations produce intolerant regulations, such as bans on worship, restrictions on religious propagation (*dakwah*), and the criminalization of beliefs considered deviant.

In the Southeast Asian context, Farish A. Noor (2009) critiques how states often use religious institutions to suppress political opposition and minority groups. He observes that in Malaysia and Indonesia, fatwas or religion-based regulations may serve to delegitimize the civil rights of particular communities, including LGBT individuals, adherents of local beliefs (*penghayat kepercayaan*), or members of non-mainstream religious sects. In these cases, religion no longer functions as an inclusive spiritual space but instead becomes politicized as a mechanism of social control.

A similar phenomenon occurs in Indonesia, where religious-based intolerance continues to surface despite the state's normative commitment to pluralism and religious freedom as enshrined in Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. According to a report by the Setara Institute (2022), there were at least 180 incidents of religious intolerance in a single year, including bans on religious activities, physical violence, and social discrimination against Ahmadiyya, Shia, and Christian communities. Data from Komnas HAM (2021) indicate that more than 20 churches faced obstacles in obtaining construction permits due to community rejection, particularly in West Java.

Beyond physical restrictions, social discrimination against minority groups remains widespread, especially in access to public services and education. Setara Institute reports that over 60 percent of violations of religious freedom stem from structural discrimination against minority communities. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (*Lembaga Perlindungan Anak Indonesia*, LPAI) (2020) also reveals that more than 10 percent of schools in Indonesia contain discriminatory content in their religious curricula—reinforcing biases against religious minorities from an early age.

The government's response remains inadequate. Although policies for protecting religious freedom exist, implementation proves ineffective. The violent attacks against Ahmadiyya members in Cirebon (2015),

for instance, did not result in penalties severe enough to deter future offenses. This reflects weak law enforcement and a lack of preventive measures through transformative tolerance education.

The following table summarizes empirical data highlighting various forms of religious intolerance in Indonesia in recent years:

Table 2. Reported Violations of Religious Freedom and Discrimination by Year, Source, and Target Group

Year	Source	Type of Violation	Target Group	Number / Cases
2022	Setara Institute	Religious violence and discrimination	Ahmadiyya, Shia, Christians	180 incidents of intolerance
2021	Komnas HAM	Barriers to house of worship construction	Christian minorities (e.g., GKI Yasmin)	Over 20 churches denied permits
2021	Setara Institute	Religious freedom violations	Minority religious groups	Over 60% of cases stemmed from structural bias
2021	LPAI	Discriminatory religious curriculum	Children from minority religious families	Over 10% of schools have discriminatory content
2020	Local media & advocacy	Violence against Ahmadiyya communities	Ahmadiyya	Dozens of attacks, many unpunished
2019–2023	Regulatory analysis	Criminalization of local beliefs	<i>Penghayat kepercayaan</i> , indigenous communities	Over 10 regional laws based on single-faith views

Source: Research Findings, 2023.

The data above demonstrate that although Indonesia normatively upholds the value of diversity and guarantees religious freedom in its Constitution, its social reality remains highly vulnerable to both structural and cultural forms of intolerance. Religious minority groups continue to suffer discrimination in the form of restrictions on building houses of worship, violence, social exclusion, and limitations on civil rights. Even the national education system—which should stand at the forefront of cultivating tolerant character—contains content that reproduces biases against non-mainstream religious adherents. These facts strongly suggest that religious intolerance in Indonesia is not incidental but deeply embedded in social structures and formal institutions.

The integration of empirical data and literature review reveals that religious intolerance in Indonesia is not merely rooted in personal belief or interpersonal relations but is systematically produced and sustained through interconnected social, political, and cultural mechanisms. Four key patterns emerge: *first*, structural and regulatory intolerance manifests when the state and religious institutions, through legal instruments and regional bylaws based on mono-religious interpretations, actively or passively restrict the religious rights of minority groups, fostering an environment of fear and exclusion. *Second*, social discrimination and limited access to public services are evident as communities such as the Ahmadiyya, Christian minorities, and local spiritual adherents (*penghayat kepercayaan*) frequently face systemic barriers to education, civil administration, and public facilities, resulting in their treatment as second-class citizens. *Third*, the normalization of violence and the persistent absence of firm legal enforcement allow attacks on religious minorities to go unpunished, reinforcing a culture of impunity and deepening insecurity. *Fourth*, the formal education system contributes to the reproduction of intolerance by embedding religious bias and exclusivist narratives within curricula, thereby nurturing prejudice from an early age. Collectively, these patterns highlight how intolerance becomes embedded in institutional practices and public consciousness, perpetuating exclusion and undermining the ideals of religious freedom and pluralism.

These findings strongly affirm that religious intolerance in Indonesia is not merely the result of individual prejudice or fanaticism but stems from entrenched socio-political structures that instrumentalize religion through exclusive interpretations, power-laden symbols, and repressive legal apparatuses. In such a context, religion ceases to serve as a liberating spiritual force and instead functions as a restrictive tool that legitimizes the marginalization of those deemed different. Max Weber's theory in *The Sociology of Religion* aptly explains how authoritarian religious traditions concentrate interpretive authority in the hands of charismatic figures, fostering religious authoritarianism that suppresses diversity and criminalizes deviation. Bryan Turner adds a cultural layer by emphasizing that globalization-induced fears of identity loss prompt elites to deploy religion as a fragile identity marker, constructing exclusionary "us versus them" narratives to solidify in-group cohesion. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd underscores how the public presence of

religion, when stripped of ethical scrutiny, often leads to repressive state policies—particularly targeting women and minorities—under the guise of sacred authority. This pattern also appears in Indonesia, where national and local laws often reflect literalist interpretations that deny religious plurality. Farish A. Noor further reveals how religious institutions in Southeast Asia are politicized to discipline dissent and silence vulnerable communities such as LGBT individuals, local spiritual adherents (*penghayat kepercayaan*), or heterodox groups, thus reducing religion to a mechanism of control rather than ethical liberation. Therefore, addressing religious intolerance in Indonesia requires more than legal reform or punitive measures—it demands a fundamental reconstruction of the public religious sphere into an inclusive, dialogical space grounded in universal ethics and social justice, or else religion will continue to serve as fertile ground for exclusion, discrimination, and legitimized violence.

Contextual Factors Shaping Religion's Dual Faces

This study found that religion's dual faces—as a force that fosters peace and simultaneously provokes tension—are inseparable from the social contexts in which religion is practiced, represented, and disseminated. Religious discourse in society is never neutral; it constantly interacts with economic-political dynamics, local cultures, power structures, and media practices. In this regard, religion functions as a flexible arena of representation—at times serving as an instrument of solidarity, while at other times turning into a vehicle for exclusion.

One crucial factor is the political economy of identity. Jeremy Menchik (2014) explained that in Indonesia, religious tolerance is often practiced within a political framework aimed at maintaining stability rather than out of ideological commitment to pluralism. He showed how the state, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and official bodies like the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), constructs a version of “civilized religion” that imposes restrictions on non-mainstream groups. This dynamic explains why religion may appear tolerant on the surface but structurally retains exclusionary tendencies.

Another contextual factor is the role of popular culture and digital media in shaping public perceptions of religion. According to Finucane and Feener (2014), the portrayal of religion in soap operas, YouTube sermons, and hijrah influencers on social media not only conveys religious teachings but also frames religion as a visual identity, a lifestyle, and even a political symbol. In this space, religion shifts from being a purely spiritual concern to becoming a cultural commodity that can be symbolically manipulated. This pattern encourages binary constructions of religion—such as “moderate vs. radical Islam” or “peaceful vs. harsh religion”—leaving little room for complexity.

In addition, Robert Hefner's (1997) revealed that local actors and transnational networks significantly shape the face of religion. In Indonesia, many local Islamic groups are ideologically and financially connected to global Middle Eastern networks that carry distinct agendas, interpretations, and *da'wah* (missionary) methodologies compared to the archipelago's indigenous Islamic traditions. As a result, tension emerges between contextualized local values and puritanical global discourses, which affects how religion is communicated and practiced at the grassroots level.

Table 3. Influential Contextual Factors and Their Impact on Religious Expressions

Contextual Factor	Main Source	Key Finding
State Identity Politics	Jeremy Menchik (2016)	Tolerance is practiced for political stability, not ethical commitment.
Media and Popular Culture	Feener & Finucane (2010)	Religion is represented as lifestyle and identity in social and entertainment media.
Globalization and Networks	Robert Hefner (2011)	Transnational agendas reinforce exclusivity and suppress local values.

Source: Research Findings, 2023.

In short, the data above shows that religion's dual nature cannot be explained solely through internal doctrines or interpretations. Instead, it must be understood through the sociocultural, political, and media contexts that surround religion. The state, media, and global networks play significant roles in shaping how religion is understood, represented, and practiced in everyday life. As such, religion may appear progressive

in one context and reactionary in another—depending on who articulates it, through which medium, and for whose benefit.

The analysis reveals four dominant patterns demonstrating how social contexts shape the dual face of religion in contemporary society. *First*, religion often functions as a political tool where tolerance is conditional—used by states or political elites not as a universal moral commitment, but as a means to secure stability, legitimizing their authority while suppressing dissenting religious groups. *Second*, the symbolic commodification of religion through popular media transforms it into a consumable identity rather than a critical or spiritual journey, as seen in the proliferation of hijrah trends, celebrity preachers, and viral da'wah content. *Third*, tensions between local and global religious expressions emerge, with inclusive, culturally rooted traditions in the Indonesian archipelago often clashing with transnational, puritanical narratives, creating inconsistencies in how religion is practiced and understood. *Fourth*, while religion fosters grassroots solidarity through practices like zakat, infāq, and ṣadaqah, it simultaneously serves as a divisive instrument during elections or identity conflicts, fueling polarization and group antagonism. These patterns demonstrate that religion's ambivalence does not stem from sacred texts alone, but from its entanglement with broader political, cultural, and social forces.

This finding deepens the understanding that religion's contradictory roles—as both tolerant and intolerant—stem not merely from doctrinal interpretation or personal morality, but from the intricate interplay of political structures, popular culture, and power relations. As Menchik, Feener, and Hefner explained, religion in modern society never exists in a vacuum. It is always constructed, disseminated, and negotiated in a public arena saturated with interests. Therefore, scholars must move beyond theological or ethical approaches and adopt a sociological-contextual lens to analyze religion's role in society. A reflective and critical approach to the representation and use of religion in public space is essential—so that religion does not devolve into a banal instrument of power or a symbolic industry, but remains a living moral force that liberates and enriches collective life.

Discussion: The Dual Faces of Religion

This study identifies three conflicting yet simultaneously present faces of religion in contemporary social life: (1) religion as a source of tolerance, (2) religion as a source of intolerance, and (3) the dual face of religion shaped by socio-political contexts, popular culture, and globalization flows. These findings underscore that religion should not be understood in an essentialist or monolithic way—as a singular entity with a fixed moral nature—but rather as a dynamic and contextual reality. In practice, religion can become a unifying and liberating force, but it can also transform into an instrument of domination or exclusion, depending on how it is interpreted, who interprets it, and within what social and political environment it is enacted.

These results emerge because religion operates not only as a spiritual or metaphysical belief system but also as a social meaning system embedded within societal structures. Religion is intricately interwoven with politics, economics, culture, and communication technologies; it both shapes and is shaped by various forces in society. When practiced within a dialogical and interpretive ethical framework, religion can generate noble values such as compassion, justice, and respect for diversity—as reflected in the notion of social solidarity by Émile Durkheim or the ethics of compassion emphasized by Karen Armstrong. In this context, religion becomes a vehicle for social cohesion and a space for human encounter across differences.

However, religion's face can drastically shift when practiced in a scripturalist, rigid, and exclusive manner, especially when intertwined with hegemonic political interests. Under such conditions, religion tends to be reduced: from a spiritual value system to an ideological identity or a means to legitimize exclusive policies. It then ceases to be a tool for moral transformation and becomes a source of discrimination, intolerance, and symbolic violence against those perceived as deviant or different. The representation of religion in popular media and the use of religious symbols in electoral politics further reinforce this ambivalence. Thus, the face of religion in society is not solely determined by sacred texts, but is deeply influenced by socio-historical contexts, power relations, and evolving interpretive dynamics.

This study aligns with several international investigations that highlight the ambivalence of religion as both a source of tolerance and intolerance. Carlile et al., (2020) emphasized that personal religiosity—especially when accompanied by interfaith communication and openness to dialogue—tends to foster a

more tolerant attitude toward diversity. They argued that religious commitment does not inherently lead to exclusivism; instead, when enacted in inclusive and reflective spaces, it becomes a foundation for social solidarity. However, consistent with Altınöğlü (2018), rigid, literalist, and scripturalist religious orientations—particularly those that interpret texts in a traditionalist-textualist fashion—often lead to intolerant attitudes toward groups considered to deviate from a “single truth.” These findings suggest that it is not religiosity per se that causes division, but the approach to religiosity that determines whether religion promotes cohesion or fragmentation.

In societies marked by high sectarian tensions, such as in the Arab world, Hoffman (2020) demonstrated that private and contemplative religious practices, such as personal prayer, actually reinforced tolerance toward religious minorities. This implies that religious intensity does not necessarily breed fanaticism; on the contrary, deep personal spirituality can cultivate greater empathy. This observation is reinforced by Barth (2014), who highlighted that theological principles like the Golden Rule and the Christian ethic of love can serve as ethical foundations for peaceful coexistence. Al-Kubise and Haq (2023) also noted that interfaith education and contextual interpretation of sacred texts such as the Qur'an are crucial to reducing intolerance arising from misinterpretation of religious teachings. Collectively, these studies position education, theological openness, and personal spirituality as critical pillars in advancing a religion-based tolerance agenda.

On the other hand, several historical and sociopolitical studies reveal the structural roots of religion's intolerant face. Beneke and Grenda (2011), in their analysis of early America, showed that religious intolerance was often linked to ideological state efforts to shape a common moral identity, which inadvertently excluded others. In a modern context, Golovushkin (2004) analyzed Russia and found that religious intolerance was closely tied to national identity politics, which equated Orthodoxy with citizenship. These phenomena confirm that religious intolerance is not merely a matter of doctrine or dogma, but also a political tool used to restrict pluralism and reinforce dominant cultural narratives.

In the Indonesian context, this study expands upon the above findings by showing how the state, social media, and transnational religious networks reshape the face of religion in everyday practice. The state uses the discourse of tolerance as an instrument for stability and political accommodation—as observed by Menchik (2016)—while simultaneously limiting certain religious expressions through regulations and official mechanisms. Social media and popular culture accelerate the commodification of religion, turning it into a lifestyle and identity symbol that can be capitalized upon, as explained by Feener and Finucane (2014). Meanwhile, global Islamic networks from the Middle East import doctrines and da'wah methods that often conflict with local values, thus creating tension between the inclusive Islam Nusantara and the more puritanical transnational Islam.

Karpov and Lisovskaya (2008) deepened this analysis by asserting that religious intolerance is more often fueled by reactionary ideologies and specific socio-political structures than by the content of religious teachings themselves. This claim holds particular relevance in Indonesia, where religion is frequently used as a political vehicle during elections or in identity polarization. In this framework, this study contributes to broadening the understanding of how religion's face is not shaped solely by theological essence but by power relations, symbolic distribution, and the surrounding social construction. Therefore, enhancing religious literacy, interfaith education, and public policies that emphasize constitutional pluralism are vital to ensuring that religion remains a reconciliatory force rather than a tool of social exclusion.

These findings indicate that religion's face in society is not a pure reflection of sacred texts but the result of a complex social construction. Religion can be a source of peace when guided by openness, interfaith education, and a commitment to inclusive values. Conversely, it can fuel exclusivism when used as a tool of power or sectarian identity. This demonstrates the importance of interrogating dominant religious narratives circulating in public spaces, whether institutional or mediated by digital platforms (Haq & Setia, 2024; Setia & Haq, 2023).

Functionally, religion has shown great capacity to strengthen social cohesion and foster collective moral awareness. In many communities, religious teachings serve as the foundation for social solidarity, interpersonal cooperation, and the fulfillment of communal obligations such as zakat, charity, and mutual assistance. Moral values like compassion, justice, and concern for others are often cultivated through deeply rooted religious institutions (Supriatna et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the dysfunctional potential of religion

cannot be ignored. When manipulated by political interests or approached exclusively and textually, religion can become a tool that reinforces identity divides, creates moral hierarchies between the “righteous” and the “deviant,” and legitimizes acts of intolerance toward those of different faiths (Huriani et al., 2022). In Indonesia’s multicultural and multireligious democracy, this dual face of religion becomes a battleground between ethical imperatives for reconciliation and political interests seeking legitimacy through identity mobilization (Rofiqi & Haq, 2022). This tension is clearly visible in electoral dynamics, religious policies, and the public representation of religion. Failure by the state, society, and religious elites to understand and manage this ambivalence could result in repressive policies against minority groups or entrench a majoritarian exclusivism that contradicts constitutional principles and human rights.

Based on these findings, strategic measures are necessary to transform religion’s role from a vehicle of social segmentation into a driver of cohesion and social justice. *First*, the state and civil society must integrate critical religious literacy into the national education system, both formally in schools and universities, and informally through community and religious organizations (Cuciniello, 2022; Hanafi et al., 2022). Such literacy should go beyond teaching dogma to engage students in understanding interpretive diversity, interfaith history, and the progressive role of religion in building a just and peaceful society. *Second*, amid the dominance of social media as the primary arena for religious discourse, ethical regulation and public accountability policies are needed, especially for religious influencers and digital da’wah content (Setia et al., 2025; Setia & Rosele, 2024). Digital education and interfaith communication training for religious figures and content creators can help mitigate the spread of religious hate speech and replace it with narratives that promote tolerance and empathy. *Third*, the state must strengthen protections for religious minorities through consistent and non-discriminatory law enforcement (Finke et al., 2017; Finke & Mataic, 2021). This includes safeguarding places of worship, ensuring the right to practice faith freely, and establishing responsive mechanisms to address acts of intolerance. These efforts align with Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution and various international instruments on religious freedom ratified by Indonesia. Thus, transforming religion into a liberating and constructive force can only be achieved through synergy among pro-pluralism public policies, critical and inclusive education, and active civil society engagement in maintaining a just and civilized public sphere (Hjarvard, 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religion in contemporary society presents two primary faces: as a force that fosters tolerance and as a source that fuels intolerance. On one hand, religion can strengthen values such as empathy, social solidarity, and interfaith dialogue when practiced ethically and with openness. On the other hand, religion can also serve as a tool to justify exclusivism, discrimination, and even symbolic violence when framed through literal interpretations, political identity, or the hegemony of dominant groups. These two faces do not inherently arise from religious doctrines themselves but emerge from contextual factors that mediate religious expression in social spaces.

The main contribution of this study lies in identifying and mapping the contextual factors that shape these dual faces of religion. By synthesizing classical theoretical frameworks with empirical findings from the Indonesian context, the research shows that identity politics, the commodification of religion in popular media, and the tension between locality and globality all play significant roles in shaping how religion is interpreted and practiced in society. This approach enriches the field of religious studies by shifting the analytical focus from purely textual and theological dimensions toward more complex sociological and cultural dimensions that resonate with current realities.

However, this research has limitations in terms of field data depth, as most of the findings rely on secondary literature and discourse analysis. The lived experiences of religious actors at the community level—both in practicing tolerance and in facing conflict—remain underexplored from a qualitative perspective. Therefore, future studies should explore the praxis dimension of religion’s dual faces through ethnographic approaches or more in-depth local case studies. Such research would allow for a more grounded understanding of religion’s role in social life—one that is not only theoretical but also contextual and applicable.

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