

Harmony to Tension: Understanding the Role of Religion in Social Conflict

Izzatul Salsa Bila Simamora^{1*}, Ni'matul Magfiroh², Mujtahid³

Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim

Corresponding Author: Izzatul Salsa Bila Simamora salsasim16@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords : Harmony,
Religious Roles, Social
Conflicts

Received : 05, March

Revised : 20, March

Accepted: 10, April

©2025 Simamora, Magfiroh,
Mujtahid : This is an open-access
article distributed under the terms of
the [Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0
Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

Interreligious harmony has begun since the Abbasid era which continued with the Mughal period to the Sriwijaya kingdom in the 13th century. Some of the histories among the tense moments that have occurred at that time are such as the crusades, the Protestant Reformation, the division of India, and the Rwandan genocide. The purpose of this article is to provide readers with an overview of how to understand the role of religion in society. Then this article also provides readers with an overview of what are the factors that cause conflicts in the political and economic fields. And this article also provides an overview to readers about things that can affect the social and economic structure of society. The research method used in this article is the library research method, where the method is used by looking for sources in the form of books, journals, and other scientific works to be used as reference materials or references in this article. This article provides insight into the role of religion in shaping social identities and values, the factors that cause conflict, and its impact on social and economic structures.

INTRODUCTION

The history of interreligious harmony in Indonesia is a story full of various colors, reflecting the diversity of cultures and beliefs that exist in the archipelago. Being a country with a very ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse population, Indonesia has a long history of interaction between various religious groups. Since the days of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms until the spread of Islam and the introduction of Christianity by European colonialists, Indonesian society has gone through various phases of inter-religious cooperation and tension.

This inter-religious harmony can be seen from the Abbasid era (750-1258 AD), showing a form of tolerance in Baghdad, which at that time was the center of culture and science. In this place there is high religious tolerance, where Muslims, Christians, Jews and other groups can live side by side and contribute to the progress of science and art. Religious harmony can then be seen in the period of the Mughal empire (1526-1857 AD), it can be seen that during that time there was a Mughal emperor who was famous for his policy of religious tolerance. He introduced Din-Illahi, a syncretic religion that combines elements from various religions with the aim of creating inter-religious harmony. So under Akbar's leadership, there were efforts to integrate and respect the religious practices of various communities in India. Then further inter-religious harmony can be seen during the Srivijaya kingdom (7th to 13th centuries AD), which was famous as a center for Buddhist learning, but also showed tolerance towards Hinduism and other local religions.(Azyumardi:2007)

Among the harmony that occurs, there is also tension experienced by several interfaith figures. Like the crusades in the form of a series of military conflicts between Christian European powers and Muslim powers in the Middle East. Then the next conflict was the Protestant reformation which started with Martin Luther who protested against the practices of the Catholic Church, resulting in the formation of various Protestant denominations. The conflict led to civil war, persecution, and major changes in the political and religious structure of Europe. Then the next conflict was the partition of India in 1947 with the division of Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan which caused large-scale population shifts based on religion which was often accompanied by communal violence which resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. And the next conflict was the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 with the conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups who played a religious role in the genocide. So many churches became sites of massacres, and the role of religious leaders in supporting or opposing violence added to the complexity of the situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study draws on Lewis Coser's conflict theory, which sees conflict as a necessary part of social integration and group identity reinforcement. Coser argues that conflict is not inherently destructive but can serve as a mechanism to maintain group unity and catalyze social change. Additionally, the article adopts insights from Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism, which views

religion as a stabilizing force that contributes to social cohesion. These perspectives help explain how religion, under different conditions, can both unify and divide. These theoretical lenses are employed to contextualize the causes and resolutions of religious conflict in political and economic settings.

METHODOLOGY

The object studied and focused on is the role of religion in social conflict. The type of research used is library research or known as library research. The reason for choosing this method is because it attempts to express the results descriptively through data obtained from several data so that it can answer the role of religion in social conflict. The data sources used are books, journals and all references that support writing about the role of religion in social conflict. The analytical method used is a descriptive analytical method, namely trying to describe and then analyze it critically.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with previous research such as Hasan (2013), who emphasized the importance of inclusive policies in reducing religious tension. Faridah (2013) also found that tolerance grows stronger in economically homogeneous yet religiously plural communities. These studies support the argument that structural and systemic arrangements largely determine whether religion acts as a unifier or a trigger for conflict.

Furthermore, in the Indonesian context, practices such as interfaith consultations facilitated by the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) serve as real-life examples of how religion can become a vehicle for peace. FKUB, established under a Joint Ministerial Regulation, has played a significant role as a forum for dialogue and consultation across various regions. In many cases, FKUB's presence has managed to reduce tensions arising from issues such as house of worship construction or inter-religious community disputes.

Additionally, the multicultural education approach introduced in several schools and universities acts as a preventive strategy to address potential religion-based conflicts. Education that emphasizes inclusivity and tolerance has proven effective in shaping a younger generation that is more open to diversity. In this regard, religious education is not only focused on doctrinal aspects but also on ethical and social practices that foster empathy toward adherents of other religions.

Horizontal conflicts involving religion are often rooted in socioeconomic disparities. When certain groups feel marginalized in the distribution of economic resources or access to public services, religious identity becomes a means of expressing dissatisfaction. Case studies such as the Poso and Ambon conflicts in the late 1990s illustrate how local economic and political factors played crucial roles in forming what appeared to be religious conflicts. However, the underlying issues were more complex and cannot be explained merely by interfaith antagonism.

On the other hand, the role of mass media and social media cannot be ignored. The spread of hate speech, provocation, and fake news through digital

media often exacerbates conflict. Therefore, digital literacy has become an urgent need in developing a society that is more resistant to religion-based provocation. Government and NGO-led digital literacy programs must be integrated with peaceful and moderate religious understanding.

Efforts to resolve conflict based on religious values have also been undertaken by interfaith leaders in Indonesia. One approach is community-based peacebuilding, which involves religious leaders, traditional figures, and youth in the conflict resolution process. This approach has proven successful in several regions, such as Maluku, Papua, and Kalimantan. The active participation of local communities in designing and implementing peace programs makes the solutions more sustainable.

The legal framework is also an essential instrument in managing religious conflict. Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights and Law No. 7 of 2012 on the Handling of Social Conflict provide a strong legal foundation for the state to act in preventing and resolving conflict. However, the implementation of these laws still faces serious challenges, especially regarding law enforcement impartiality and consistency in addressing discriminatory violations.

On a global scale, religious conflict cannot be separated from the influence of international geopolitics. Foreign support for specific groups in conflicts such as those in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen demonstrates how religion can be exploited for global power interests. This underscores the importance of international cooperation in creating a more just and peaceful world order, including through the roles of transnational organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and ASEAN.

Based on these explanations, it can be concluded that religious conflict is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires interdisciplinary and multilevel approaches. Structural, cultural, and actor-centered perspectives must complement one another in understanding and mitigating conflict. In this context, religion can become a transformative instrument when supported by social justice values, economic equality, and respect for cultural diversity.

The Role of Religion in Social Conflict

Religion is not just a belief that each human being has, but also a guideline for living the life we live. Religion has several benefits as follows:

- 1) Firstly, as an educational function, religion is tasked with guiding and providing lessons to further master the teachings of that religion. The religious teachings given are conveyed through the intermediary of people who really understand the religion. All religions have their own teaching staff such as Kyai, Pastors, Pastors and so on. With the teaching process, there are also institutions that emerge as places for the delivery of teachings from each religion, such as surau, madrassas, monasteries, dormitories and so on.
- 2) Second, as a saving function, all humans want safety and peaceful life. When humans have difficulties within themselves, they will solve the problem and find a way out through the teachings of the religion they believe in.

- 3) Third, as a function of social control, religion is tasked with enforcing moral rules that are considered good for the moral life of society, securing and controlling the disruption and violations that arise in society.
- 4) The four religions function as brotherhood, namely the existence of unity and unity of faith. Each human being has faith by surrendering, obeying and submitting to the "Most High Being". So in this case, humans always look for friends of the same faith and religion to express their deepest and strongest feelings.
- 5) The five religions function as transformation, the function of religion here plays a role in changing the form of life of an old society that is not good into a new, better society. This function drives the dynamics of teachings in religion which is the creative work of clever people, so that religion will remain actual and never lose its identity and existence. (M.Zainuddin: 2019)

Many people view that conflict only has a negative side, but if you pay close attention, conflict is actually necessary. Because conflict has positive benefits that we rarely know about. The following is the function of conflict:

1. Conflict can help to strengthen group ties and improve integration cohesion
2. Conflict can help create cohesion through alliances with other groups,
3. Conflict can help activate individual roles that were previously isolated
4. Conflict can also help the function of communication between groups or individuals

Factors that Cause Conflict in Politics and Economics

a. Political Field

1. Instrumentalization of Religion by Political Elites

In this case, there is exploitation of religion for political interests. Elites often use religious issues to gain mass support. So they use religious sentiments to win elections or maintain power. Then, there is the formation of group identity in the form of religion-based identity politics which creates exclusivity and polarization in society. This can trigger tensions between groups of different religions.

2. Discrimination and Structural Injustice

In this case, policies that discriminate against certain religious groups, such as unfair government policies towards minority religious groups, can trigger dissatisfaction and conflict. Then the absence of fair political representation in the form of religious groups who feel they are not well represented in the political structure tend to feel marginalized and are more easily provoked.

3. Controversial Legislation and Public Policy

In this case, sharia law and religious legislation such as the implementation of sharia law or policies based on certain religious teachings can trigger conflict with other religious groups who feel threatened or disadvantaged. Then the regulation of places of worship in

terms of permits to build places of worship is often a source of tension between religions, especially if the licensing process is considered unfair.

4. Geopolitical Interests and External Intervention

In this case, support or intervention from other countries towards political or financial support from foreign countries for certain religious groups can exacerbate domestic tensions. Then the existence of extremist propaganda, namely the influence of international extremist groups spreading radical ideology, can trigger religious conflict.

b. *Economics*

1. Economic Injustice and Social Inequality

In this case, the unequal distribution of resources, such as the striking economic inequality between different religious groups, often triggers dissatisfaction and conflict. Then high levels of unemployment and poverty among certain religious groups can strengthen feelings of injustice and exacerbate conflict.

2. Struggle for Natural Resources

In this case, conflicts over land and resources in the form of disputes regarding rights to land, water and other natural resources often trigger conflicts between religious communities that live side by side. Then, the presence of multinational companies that exploit natural resources without paying attention to the welfare of local communities can cause conflict.(Bagir : 2007)

3. Economic Exclusion

In this case, economic discrimination such as discrimination in employment opportunities and access to economic services based on religion can trigger tensions. Then the emergence of minority religious groups who feel marginalized in economic activities tend to more easily experience conflict with the majority.

4. Economic Globalization

In terms of rapid economic change, it often brings instability which can trigger conflict, especially if certain religious groups feel disadvantaged or are unable to adapt. Then, economic competition between religious groups to obtain limited economic opportunities can cause conflict.

Strategy for Overcoming Religious Conflict

In the life of a society that coexists with various religions, there will definitely be some conflicts that arise due to differences in religious beliefs. We must know strategies for dealing with problems or conflicts involving religion.(Suparlan :2002) Here are some strategies that we can do :

1. Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is an approach that involves representatives of various religions to communicate and understand each other. The main goal is to reduce tension and increase tolerance. Some strategies in interreligious dialogue include:

a. Building Trust by establishing a basis of mutual trust between different religious communities by holding regular meetings and joint activities.

- b. Intercultural Education by holding educational programs that explain the basic values and teachings of various religions.
 - c. Cooperation in Social Projects by involving religious communities in social projects aimed at the public interest, such as disaster relief, health programs and poverty alleviation.
 - d. Establishment of a Dialogue Forum by creating a structured and sustainable forum for open dialogue on sensitive issues.
2. Mediation
- Mediation is a process in which a neutral third party helps conflicting parties to reach an agreement. Mediation strategies include:
- a. Identifying the Main Problem is by analyzing the root of the problem and ensuring all parties understand the real issue.
 - b. The Neutral Approach means having a mediator who must be neutral and impartial to build the trust of all parties.(Zainuddin, Arifianto: 2009)
 - c. Creative Resolution, namely by encouraging innovative and creative solutions that may not have been thought of by the conflict parties.
 - d. Communication Facilitation is by helping to overcome communication barriers and ensuring dialogue takes place constructively.
3. Government Regulations
- The government plays an important role in resolving conflict through policies designed to create peace and stability. Some effective policies include:
- a. Anti-Discrimination Legislation which contains the adoption of laws that prohibit discrimination based on religion, race, ethnicity and gender.
 - b. Reconciliation Program which contains implementation of a national reconciliation program which aims to restore relations damaged by conflict.
 - c. Inclusive Economic Development which consists of developing inclusive economic policies to reduce disparities and injustice which are often the root of conflict.
 - d. Peace Education which contains about integrating peace education in the school curriculum to instill the values of tolerance and conflict resolution from an early age.
 - e. Public Awareness Campaign which consists of holding a public campaign to increase awareness about the importance of peace and social harmony.(Hadi : 2010)

CONCLUSION

Based on the things explained above, we can conclude that the role of religion in social conflict includes the functions of education, rescue, social control, brotherhood and transformation, which can provide solutions and guidance in human life. However, conflict also has positive sides, such as strengthening group bonds and improving communication. In the political field, religious conflicts are often triggered by the instrumentation of religion by

political elites, structural discrimination, controversial legislation, as well as geopolitical interests and external intervention. In the economic field, economic injustice, competition for natural resources, economic exclusion and economic globalization are the main factors causing conflict. Strategies to address religious conflict include interfaith dialogue, mediation, and government policies designed to create peace and stability through peace education, anti-discrimination legislation, reconciliation programs, inclusive economic development, and public awareness campaigns. This article concludes that religion plays a multifaceted role in society, both as a unifying and divisive force. It contributes to moral education, social order, and cultural transformation, but may also be instrumentalized for political and economic agendas. The study's main limitation lies in its reliance on secondary sources without empirical field data. Future research could explore direct interviews or case studies to deepen the empirical understanding of how religious identities intersect with political and economic structures.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

The author recognizes that this article may have shortcomings in language, writing and presentation due to the limitations of the researcher's knowledge and experience. To improve the work, constructive criticism and suggestions from readers are welcome.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have provided support, guidance, and encouragement during this writing process.

First of all, I express my gratitude to God Almighty for all His mercy and grace, so that I can complete this work well, the Head of the Islamic Education Study Program, Islamic State University Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang and friends who have been willing to support and collaborate in this writing.

REFERENCES

Azra, Azyumardi, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII & XVIII: Akar Pembaruan Islam Indonesia*. (Jakarta: Kencana, 2007)

Bagir, Z. A., *Dialog Antariman: Sejarah, Teori, Dan Praktik Di Indonesia*. (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2007)

Faridah, Ika Fatmawati. Toleransi Antar Umat Beragama Masyarakat Perumahan. *Jurnal Komunitas*. Vol. 5 No 1. Semarang: Universitas Negeri Semarang, 2013.

- Hadi, S., *Mediasi Konflik: Studi Kasus Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press., 2010)
- Hasan, Moh Abdul Kholiq. Merajut Kerukunan dalam Keberagaman Agama di Indonesia, *Jurnal Studi Islam*. Vol. 14 No. 1. Surakarta: Institut Agama Islam Negeri Surakarta, 2013.
- Hermawati, Rina dkk. Toleransi Antar Umat Beragama di Kota Bandung, *Indonesian Journal of Anthropology*. Vol. 1 Nomor 2. Bandung: Universitas Padjadjaran, 2016.
- Jamrah, Surya A. Toleransi Antar Umat Beragama: Perspektif Islam. *Jurnal Ushuluddin*, Vol. 23 No. 2. Riau: UIN Suska, 2015.
- Khotimah. Toleransi Beragama. *Jurnal Ushuluddin*. Vol. XX No. 2. Riau: Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim, 2013.
- M. Zainuddin, *Contemporary Studies Of Religion* (Malang: UIN Maliki Press, 2019)
- Nisvilyah, Lely. Toleransi Antar Umat Beragama dalam Memperkokoh Persatuan dan Kesatuan Bangsa (Studi Kasus Umat Islam dan Kristen Dusun Segaran Kecamatan Dlanggu Kabupaten Mojokerto). *Jurnal Kajian Moral dan Kewarganegaraan*. Vol. 2 No. 1. Surabaya: Universitas Negeri Surabaya, 2013.
- Pangeran, Ismail. Toleransi Beragama Sebuah Keniscayaan Bagi Muslim dalam Bermasyarakat. *Jurnal Al-Miskeah*. Vol. 13 No. 1. Palu: Institut Agama Islam Negeri Palu, 2017.
- Simarmata, Henry Thomas dkk. *Indonesia Zamrud Toleransi*. Jakarta Selatan: PSIK-Indonesia, 2017.

Suparlan, P., *Hubungan Antar Agama Di Indonesia* (Jakarta: LIPI Press, 2002)

Wibisono, S., *Resolusi Konflik: Pengalaman Dari Berbagai Kasus Di Indonesia*.
(Malang: Bayumedia Publishing, 2008)

Widiyanto, Delfiyan. Pembelajaran Toleransi dan Keragaman dalam Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan di Shofiah Fitriani 192 Sekolah Dasar. Jurnal Prosiding Konferensi Nasional Kewarganegaraan III, Vol. I No. I. Yogyakarta: Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, 2017.

Zainuddin, I., & Arifianto, A. R., *Mengelola Konflik Dan Mediasi Di Indonesia*.
(Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2009)