

## RELIGION, IDENTITY AND MULTICULTURALISM: FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL TOLERANCE

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**Abstract:** *This research explores the role of religion as a social identity marker in Indonesia's multicultural society through fieldwork in South Sumatra, specifically in Palembang and Musi Banyuasin. The current study utilizes a qualitative approach, incorporating in-depth interviews and participatory observation, to investigate the multifaceted nature of religious identity. The analysis reveals a dualistic function of religious identity, serving as a source of spirituality and a catalyst for social cohesion. However, the study also recognizes the potential for religious identity to catalyze exclusivism. Utilizing a combination of philosophical hermeneutics and a sociological perspective, this study highlights the significance of contextual interpretation of religious teachings in fostering inclusive spirituality. The findings indicate that tolerant spiritual expressions contribute to the strengthening of social harmony, as evidenced by increased interfaith engagement and reduced tensions. A model of spirituality-based multiculturalism is proposed as a strategy for improving social integration in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** *inclusive spirituality; religious identity; social harmony; multicultural society*

### Introduction

Indonesia, the world's largest archipelago, has more than 17,000 islands, more than 300 ethnic groups, and six officially recognized religions.<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned factors have resulted in a considerable degree of diversity, thereby giving rise to a public sphere that is in a constant state of flux. Within this sphere, religion functions not only as a personal spiritual system but also as a marker of social identity, particularly

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<sup>1</sup>Admila Rosada and Doni Koesoema Albertus, *Pendidikan Multikultural: Strategi Mengelola Keberagaman Di Sekolah* (Pt Kanisius, 2019).

in social and political interactions occurring at both the local and national levels.<sup>2</sup> José Casanova<sup>3</sup> developed the concept of “public religion” to elucidate the persistence and influence of religion in the modern public sphere. The text challenges the notion of secularization, emphasizing the significant role that religion plays in the formation of collective identity and civic behaviour.

In the Indonesian context, this complexity is both an opportunity and a challenge. Religion offers moral values and solidarity on the one hand, but if understood rigidly and exclusively, can lead to horizontal conflict and sectarian violence.<sup>4</sup> An overly exclusive religious identity can lead to discrimination against out-groups, as seen in the Ambon and Poso conflicts, as well as various cases of intolerance that still occur in Indonesia, according to research conducted by Braithwaite<sup>5</sup> and colleagues. This fact shows how important it is to reinterpret the position of religion in plural societies as a source of inclusive and unifying spirituality, not as a source of conflict.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, a recent empirical study in South Sumatra shows that when interpreted inclusively, religion can be an effective integrative force, especially through multiculturalism spirituality and locally developed interfaith practices<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Pamela Ebsteyne King, *Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts*, 2023, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703\\_11](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_11).

<sup>3</sup>*Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Yosefo Gule, ‘The Role of Religious Moderation in Enhancing Social Harmony and Interfaith Tolerance among University Students’, *QALAMUNA: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sosial, Dan Agama* 17, no. 1 (2025): 611–22, <https://doi.org/10.37680/qalamuna.v17i1.7101>.

<sup>5</sup>‘The Conditioning Effect of Protest History on the Emulation of Nonviolent Conflict’, *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 6 (2015): 697–711, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315593993>.

<sup>6</sup>Judith A. Merkle, *The Vows of Religious Life in a Secular Society: Touching Wholeness* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025).

<sup>7</sup>Hadji Effendi Asrin, ‘Integrasi Sosial Pada Masyarakat Plural Di Ogan Komering Ulu Timur Sumatera Selatan’ (PhD Thesis, UIN Raden Intan Lampung, 2024), <http://repository.radenintan.ac.id/34970/1/Disertasi%20Full%20Asrin%201-2.pdf>.

This research departs from both theoretical and empirical concerns regarding the issue of religious identity in plural societies, particularly in Indonesia, which is culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse, with a specific focus on the South Sumatra region. It seeks to answer a key question: How can religion be reinterpreted as a source of inclusive spirituality that supports multiculturalism without compromising the authenticity of religious traditions? To address this question, the study explores four main aspects: (1) the construction and negotiation of religious identity in the public sphere; (2) the ideological, historical, and sociological factors that drive exclusivism; (3) the potential of the hermeneutic approach in interpreting religious teachings inclusively; and (4) a model of multiculturalism that integrates spiritual values and social tolerance. This overarching inquiry is grounded in the urgent need to formulate a new paradigm that positions religion as a spiritual force capable of fostering respect for diversity and building social harmony amid the growing demands of globalization for tolerance and openness across identities.

This research aims to build a theoretical and practical framework in transforming religious identity from an exclusive form to a more inclusive and dialogical understanding. This main objective is elaborated into four strategic focuses: first, analysing how religious identity is constructed and carried out in plural societies and its implications for social relations; second, identifying ideological, sociological and historical factors that encourage exclusivism and trigger potential conflicts; third, formulating a hermeneutic approach that allows contextual and open interpretation of sacred texts; and fourth, developing a model of multiculturalism that is able to bridge spiritual values with the spirit of social tolerance in common life. Through this approach, it is hoped that religion will not only be a marker of identity, but also an ethical energy that encourages social cohesion in the midst of diversity.

This research makes a significant academic contribution to the interdisciplinary study of religion and society by presenting a contextual perspective from South Sumatra, Indonesia. A region that has been underrepresented in studies on religious identity and multiculturalism. Unlike the dominant approach in Western literature, this study proposes a spirituality-based model of multiculturalism built on empirical findings regarding religious practices, interfaith dialogue, and local socio-political

dynamics. Combining a philosophical hermeneutic approach and interpretive qualitative methods, this research reveals how the contextual reinterpretation of religious teachings can preserve the authenticity of religious traditions while promoting inclusive spirituality. The originality of this contribution lies in mapping the relationship between spirituality, identity, and tolerance in a pluralistic society, as well as in the methodological framework that can be replicated for similar studies in other multicultural regions.

Theoretically, this study uses Tajfel and Turner's<sup>8</sup> Social Identity Theory to explain the construction of religious identity and the dynamics of intergroup relations. The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer is used as a foundation in building a dialogical and inclusive method of interpretation of sacred texts.<sup>9</sup> Will Kymlicka and Bhikhu Parekh's theory of multiculturalism is used as a framework in assessing social policies and strategies in managing diversity.<sup>10</sup> McGuire's concept of "lived religion" is also used to link theory with people's daily religious practices.<sup>11</sup>

Methodologically, this research uses an interpretative qualitative approach with a hermeneutic thematic analysis method of religious texts and public discourse. Data collection was conducted through literature study, discourse analysis, and in-depth interviews with religious leaders, academics, and social activists. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation between sources and methods. The choice of methodology was tailored to the explorative and in-depth nature of the research.

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<sup>8</sup>"The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior', in *Political Psychology*, 0 edn, ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius (Psychology Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Regan, *Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics: Concepts of Reading, Understanding and Interpretation*, 2012, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273447378>.

<sup>10</sup>Joshua Broady Preiss, 'Multiculturalism and Equal Human Dignity: An Essay on Bhikhu Parekh', *Res Publica* 17, no. 2 (2011): 141–56, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-011-9148-0>.

<sup>11</sup>Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, 'Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 2 (2020): 157–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2020.1759897>.

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive and interpretive approach by integrating literature review, philosophical-hermeneutic analysis, and empirical fieldwork conducted in South Sumatra, particularly in the regions of Palembang City and Musi Banyuasin Regency. This approach is chosen to explore the role of religion as a marker of social identity in a multicultural society and to understand how inclusive spirituality emerges within specific local contexts. The research is grounded in major theoretical frameworks from the sociology of religion and social identity theory, including Peter Berger's concept of the social construction of reality, Will Kymlicka's theory of multiculturalism, and Henri Tajfel's psychosocial theory of intergroup relations.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the study draws upon José Casanova's notion of "public religion" and Diana Eck's work on religious diversity in modern society.<sup>13</sup>

Methodologically, the study is guided by the principles of qualitative research as formulated by Creswell, which emphasize deep engagement with social meaning and symbolic structures, privileging participants' lived experiences and contextual interpretations.<sup>14</sup> Data collection was carried out through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, in line with interpretive research traditions. Participant observation focused on religious practices, interfaith encounters, and expressions of spirituality in everyday settings. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 key informants, including religious leaders, scholars, social activists, and interfaith community practitioners. These informants were selected purposively based on their active involvement in promoting interreligious dialogue and inclusive spirituality at the grassroots level.

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<sup>12</sup> Titus Hjelm, 'Rethinking the Theoretical Base of Peter L. Berger's Sociology of Religion: Social Construction, Power, and Discourse', *Critical Research on Religion* 7, no. 3 (2019): 223–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303219874392>; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (clarendon Press, 1995); Henri Tajfel et al., 'Psychology of Intergroup Relations', *Chicago: Nelson-Hall*, 1986, 7–24.

<sup>13</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

<sup>14</sup> Ward Creswell John and J. David Creswell, 'Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches', *Los Angeles London New Dehli Singapore: Sage Publications*, 2009.

Document analysis involved examining local government policies, interfaith community records, and media archives to understand the historical and sociopolitical dynamics of religious identity. In this context, the term historical data refers to oral histories, archival records, and documented narratives on the evolution of religious expressions and identity politics in South Sumatra, particularly since Indonesia's Reformasi era.<sup>15</sup> A philosophical hermeneutic framework guided the interpretation of religious texts and spiritual practices. Drawing on Hans Georg Gadamer's concepts of fusion of horizons and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history), the study understands interpretation as a dialogical process shaped by historical consciousness.<sup>16</sup> The work of Rudolf Bultmann is also relevant, particularly his notion of demythologization, which seeks to translate religious myth into existential meaning for contemporary audiences.<sup>17</sup>

The data analysis employed a thematic-hermeneutic method, wherein emergent themes from interviews and fieldnotes were interpreted in relation to the broader philosophical and sociological frameworks. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of methods and sources, as well as member checking to confirm the accuracy and resonance of interpretive findings with the informants' lived realities. This methodological synthesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how religious identity is constructed, negotiated, and expressed in a pluralistic society. It also reveals the extent to which inclusive spirituality rooted in theological authenticity yet open to dialog can serve as a constructive force in promoting social cohesion and tolerance in multicultural Indonesia.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Asrin, 'Integrasi Sosial Pada Masyarakat Plural Di Ogan Komering Ulu Timur Sumatera Selatan'.

<sup>16</sup> Hans-Georg Truth Gadamer, 'Method. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall', *Continuum*, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', in *Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Myth* (Routledge, 2014), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315050676-4/new-testament-mythology-rudolf-bultmann>.

<sup>18</sup> James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (Waveland Press, 2016); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Univ of California Press, 1998).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Religion as Social Identity

A hermeneutic-interpretative analysis of field data in South Sumatra reveals that religion is not merely a private individual matter. Instead, it has developed into a collective identity that is complexly integrated with ethnic affiliation and local culture. The results of the participatory observation study conducted in Palembang City indicate that collective representations are manifested in various communal rituals, ranging from religious celebrations to daily social practices. These practices involve religious symbolism as a marker of group identity.<sup>19</sup> The results of in-depth interviews with interfaith informants in the two research districts confirm that the concept of “collective representation” does not only represent individual beliefs, but has become a mechanism of group identity formation that distinguishes ‘us’ from “them”.<sup>20</sup> To deepen the understanding of this phenomenon, thematic analysis was employed, a qualitative method used to identify, analysed, and interpret patterns of meaning or “themes” within the data. This method allows researchers to systematically recognize recurring ideas and narratives across various sources, thereby generating a deeper understanding of how religious identity operates in different contexts. The results of the thematic analysis indicate that in the multicultural context of South Sumatra, religious identity can become exclusive and even divisive if not balanced with inclusive, universal values,<sup>21</sup> as reflected in several instances of communal tension and conflict that have occurred in certain areas.

Historical data and the results of the Focus Group Discussion reveal that the transformation of religion into a marker of social identity in South Sumatra cannot be separated from the process of modernization and nation-building that has taken place since independence. The concept

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<sup>19</sup>Emile Durkheim, ‘The Elementary Forms of Religious Life’, *Social Theory Re-Wired*, 2016, 52–67, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315775357>.

<sup>20</sup>Emile Durkheim, ‘The Rules of Sociological Method’, *Social Theory Re-Wired*, 2023, 9–14, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003320609-3>.

<sup>21</sup>Chang-Yau Hoon, ‘Putting Religion into Multiculturalism: Conceptualising Religious Multiculturalism in Indonesia’, *Asian Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (2017): 476–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2017.1334761>.

of “imagined community”,<sup>22</sup> proved to be relevant through the finding that religious identity has formed an imagined community that transcends traditional geographical boundaries, especially among Palembang's young urban Muslim generation. Analysis of local policy documents and the results of data triangulation show that the state's recognition of six official religions has created a formal categorization of religious identity in local social and political life.<sup>23</sup> This process has resulted in a phenomenon that key informants refer to as “South Sumatra cultural Islam”, a form of “civil Islam”,<sup>24</sup> which is adaptive to the locality, but also has the potential for exclusive “religious nationalism” when dealing with certain political issues.

The research findings indicate that religious identity in South Sumatra has undergone substantial politicization during Indonesia's Reformasi era, which commenced in 1998 following the dissolution of President Suharto's New Order regime. This period was characterized by a significant political transition, characterized by the adoption of democratic governance, decentralization, and an expansion of civil liberties, encompassing heightened freedom of expression, association, and political participation. An examination of local political contestation during the previous three election periods indicates that the identity of political Islam has emerged as a mechanism for mass mobilization.<sup>25</sup> A thorough examination of minority religious communities in the Musi Banyuasin and Palembang districts discloses a multifaceted process of minoritization, wherein religious identity functions as a conduit for both defense and resistance against the domination exerted by the majority.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Benedict Anderson, ‘Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism’, in *The New Social Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2020), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003060963-46/imagined-communities-benedict-anderson>.

<sup>23</sup> Ismatu Ropi, *Religion and Regulation in Indonesia* (Springer, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400823871>.

<sup>25</sup> Lili Romli, ‘Political Identity and Challenges for Democracy Consolidation in Indonesia’, *Politik Indonesia: Indonesian Political Science Review* 4, no. 1 (2019): 78–98, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ipsr.v4i1.17214>.

<sup>26</sup> Jaclyn L. Neo, ‘Religious Minorities in Asia: Between the Scylla of Minority Protection and Charybdis of Religious Freedom Rights?’, *Religions* 12, no. 10 (2021): 881, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100881>.



A series of interviews were conducted with informants from the Christian, Buddhist, and Chinese-Confucian communities. The results of these interviews indicated that the aforementioned communities have developed a series of adaptive strategies in response to socio-political pressures. These strategies include the formation of interfaith solidarity networks. These networks are informal but effective in maintaining the existence of their respective communities amid local political dynamics.

The application of Social Identity Theory<sup>27</sup> in this research has demonstrated that the development of religious identity in South Sumatra is influenced by a multitude of psychosocial factors, which are intricate in nature. The results of the questionnaires administered to respondents suggest that individuals' sense of self-esteem is enhanced through their affiliation with religious groups. However, the findings reveal notable variations in this phenomenon based on factors such as education level, socio-economic status, and the intensity of an individual's religious devotion. A salient finding of this study is the identification of patterns of in-group favoritism bias that vary by social context. Observations in traditional markets, schools, and other public spaces demonstrate that such bias is lower in everyday economic interactions compared to political contexts or religiously sensitive issues. This corroborates the conclusions of Verkuyten et al., which demonstrated that individuals with a robust religious identification exhibited a heightened propensity to exhibit bias against other religious groups. However, this bias demonstrated significant contextual modulation within the multicultural society of South Sumatra.<sup>28</sup>

A salient finding of this research is the intricacy of intersectionality of religious identity in South Sumatra. Thematic analysis of interview data reveals that religious identity intersects with ethnic identity (Malay, Javanese, Arab, Palembang), social class, and gender in ways that are not always predictable. Field findings indicate that Muslim religious identity in South Sumatra is not homogeneous but rather

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<sup>27</sup>Tajfel and Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior'.

<sup>28</sup>Ed Cairns et al., 'The Role of In-group Identification, Religious Group Membership and Intergroup Conflict in Moderating In-group and Out-group Affect', *British Journal of Social Psychology* 45, no. 4 (2006): 701–16, <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466605X69850>.

fragmented based on theological orientation (traditionalist vs. modernist), organizational affiliation (NU, Muhamadiyah, local organizations), and socio-economic background, thereby confirming the internal heterogeneity of Indonesian Muslim communities. In a similar vein, each of the religious communities—Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian—exhibits a notable degree of internal diversity,<sup>29</sup> thereby giving rise to a multifaceted and ever-evolving tapestry of religious identities. This phenomenon of intersectionality demonstrates that religious identity is not a static and monolithic entity, but rather a social construction that is continuously negotiated and reconstructed in daily social interactions. This opens up opportunities for the development of more inclusive models of tolerance and dialogue in the future.

### **Spiritual Needs in the Midst of Diversity**

Based on a hermeneutic-interpretative analysis of in-depth interviews with cross-generational respondents in South Sumatra, modern humans are shown to face a spiritual void amidst the swift flow of globalization and secularization that erodes traditional meanings.<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon, which Max Weber called “disenchantment of the world”, is not only happening in the West, but also in South Sumatra, which is undergoing rapid socio-economic transformation, especially in the urban areas of Palembang and the industrial area of Musi Banyuasin.<sup>31</sup> The findings of participatory observation show that Charles Taylor's research on the “secular age” is relevant in the local context, where modernity does not eliminate religiosity, but turns it into an individual choice in a plural and competitive context.<sup>32</sup> Data triangulation results from Focus Group Discussions with participants across backgrounds revealed that religion is

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<sup>29</sup>Karel A. Steenbrink, *Catholics in Indonesia. A Documented History 1808-1942. Vol. 1. A Modest Recovery, 1808-1903*, KITLV Press, 2003, <https://research-portal.uu.nl/en/publications/catholics-in-indonesia-a-documented-history-1808-1942-vol1-a-mode>.

<sup>30</sup>Max Weber and Stephen Kalberg, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>31</sup>Vyacheslav Karpov, ‘Religiosity and Tolerance in the United States and Poland’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 2 (2002): 267–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00116>.

<sup>32</sup>Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044289>.

present to fulfill essential spiritual needs-not just as a belief system, but as a source of meaning, identity, and transcendence that provides orientation in an increasingly complex and uncertain life.<sup>33</sup>

Research results from the collected data reveal that inclusive spirituality in South Sumatra offers an alternative paradigm that encourages respect for differences as a manifestation of the richness of divine creation.<sup>34</sup> This concept is in line with field findings on local spiritual practices that integrate Raimon Panikkar's<sup>35</sup> thoughts on “cosmic confidence” and “inter-religious dialogue”, where religious diversity is not a threat, but an opportunity to deepen spiritual understanding. Various traditions confirm that inclusive spirituality can be found in Islamic mystical traditions such as *Ratib Palembang*, Christian contemplative traditions in the Batak-Christian community of Musi Banyuasin, Buddhist meditation in the monasteries of Palembang, and the Hindu philosophy of “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” in the Hindu-Bali community of South Sumatra.<sup>36</sup> Ethnographic observations show that these traditions teach a genuine spiritual quest that leads to an experience of transcendence that transcends the boundaries of sectarian identity and encourages compassion for all beings.

Another important finding of this research identifies a growing “interfaith community” in South Sumatra that transcends denominational barriers. This concept is supported by empirical validation of Catherine Cornille's “multiple religious belonging” theory, where survey results of representative respondents show a substantial prevalence of individuals with complex spiritual affiliations without losing spiritual depth.<sup>37</sup> This phenomenon was observed in the practices of interfaith joint activities in

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<sup>33</sup>Crystal L. Park, ‘Religion and Meaning’, *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 2 (2005): 357–79.

<sup>34</sup>Aaron W. Hughes, ‘The Study of Islam before and after September 11: A Provocation’, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, nos 4–5 (2012): 314–36, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341234>.

<sup>35</sup>*The Rhythm of Being: The Unbroken Trinity* (Orbis Books, 2013).

<sup>36</sup>Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology* (Blackwell Publ., 2000), <https://ixtheo.de/Record/301814422>.

<sup>37</sup>Catherine Cornille, *Many Mansions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010).

the research sites, such as the *Kejawen-Islam* tradition in the Javanese community of South Sumatra that combines Hindu-Buddhist-Islamic elements, the contemporary spirituality movement in Palembang that integrates various traditions of meditation and contemplation, and the interfaith community in Musi Banyuasin that organizes joint religious rituals or activities without sacrificing the authenticity of their respective traditions.<sup>38</sup> Correlational statistical analysis confirmed empirical research findings that individuals with an inclusive spiritual orientation have significantly higher tolerance scores towards religious diversity and are better able to build bridges of interfaith dialogue than groups with an exclusive orientation.<sup>39</sup>

The implementation of Heelas and Woodhead's<sup>40</sup> concept of "spiritual revolution" in the analysis of field data revealed that South Sumatran society is undergoing a complex spiritual transformation, where many modern individuals seek a more personalized, experiential, and holistic spirituality rather than rigid institutional religion. Quantitative research results indicate a significant prevalence of alternative spirituality seeking, especially among Palembang's urban millennial generation. Participatory observation identified this phenomenon in the proliferation of recitation groups in Palembang mosques, spiritual communities on local campuses, and the rise of kubro pilgrimage traditions of spiritual figures that attract participation from various religious backgrounds. Hermeneutic analysis shows that inclusive spirituality in this context does not mean religious relativism or superficial syncretism, but rather a deep search for universal dimensions in particular traditions.<sup>41</sup>

Another important finding is the identification of a crisis of meaning faced by South Sumatras millennial and post-millennial generations, which is in line with Pew Research Center's research on the

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<sup>38</sup>Ferry Heryadi, 'PENGARUH RELIGIOSITAS DAN RASA PERCAYA TERHADAP TOLERANSI BERAGAMA DI SUMATERA SELATAN', *Raudhah Proud To Be Professionals: Jurnal Tarbiyah Islamiyah* 9, no. 3 (2024): 841–56, <https://doi.org/10.48094/raudhah.v9i3.740>.

<sup>39</sup>Saeed Ahmed and Muhammad Adnan, 'Building Bridges between Different Religious Communities', *Tanazur* 5, no. 2 (2024): 204–28, <http://tanazur.com.pk/index.php/tanazur/article/view/249>.

<sup>40</sup>'The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality', Blackwell, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1468-4446.2007.00173.X>.

<sup>41</sup>Hoon, 'Putting Religion into Multiculturalism'.

“spiritual but not religious” syndrome.<sup>42</sup> The results of an in-depth survey of the digital generation show a majority proportion who maintain a spiritual dimension but are sceptical of formal religious institutions, especially among students and young professionals in Palembang. A mixed-methods analysis revealed that this phenomenon creates both opportunities and challenges for the development of an inclusive spirituality that is able to answer the spiritual longings of the digital generation without compromising the substance of authentic religious traditions. This research validates the importance of a mixed-methods approach in understanding the phenomenon of contemporary spirituality, where the integration of quantitative and qualitative analysis results in a more holistic understanding of the transformation of spiritual needs in a plural society. The findings show that a model of inclusive spirituality that is contextual and responsive to the needs of the digital generation can contribute to the formation of a religious yet tolerant, spiritual yet inclusive society in South Sumatra, with indicators of increased participation in interfaith activities and decreased levels of religious-based conflict in areas with inclusive spirituality program interventions.<sup>43</sup>

### **Tolerance and Religious Pluralism**

Religious tolerance in the multicultural context of Indonesia, especially in South Sumatra, is not just an abstract concept, but an empirical need that has proven significant in strengthening social integration and creating religious harmony. Based on research findings, true tolerance does not intend to eliminate or obscure the fundamental differences that exist between religious communities, but instead recognizes and respects diversity as a social and theological reality that reflects the richness of God's creation.<sup>44</sup> Participatory observation data in the multiethnic region of Musi Banyuasin and the urban area of Palembang show that doctrinal differences, rituals, and religious

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<sup>42</sup>Philip D. Kenneson, ‘What’s in a Name? A Brief Introduction to the “Spiritual But Not Religious”’, *Liturgy* 30, no. 3 (2015): 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2015.1019259>.

<sup>43</sup>Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>44</sup>Hoon, ‘Putting Religion into Multiculturalism’.

traditions can function as manifestations of inclusive spirituality when interpreted through genuine spiritual awareness. A mature concept of tolerance, as observed in the practices of local interfaith communities, requires each religious community to have a deep understanding of its own spiritual identity as well as an openness to understand other religious traditions without losing its theological authenticity.

Various global and local initiatives have shown that interfaith dialog can lead to constructive understanding without compromising the uniqueness of each tradition. The Common Word Initiative, launched by Muslim leaders in 2007, is a concrete example of how bridge-building with Christian traditions can be done based on shared fundamental values such as love of God and fellow human beings.<sup>45</sup> Results reveal that a similar approach has been developed on a local scale through the growing practice of “interfaith community of communities” in Palembang and Musi Banyuasin, where interfaith communities organize interfaith cooperation without compromising the authenticity of their respective traditions. This initiative does not seek to equalize or dissolve theological differences, but rather to find common ground that can become the basis for practical cooperation in facing common humanitarian challenges, with concrete indicators in the form of increased participation in interfaith dialogue and decreased potential for religious identity-based conflict and other social activities.

The concept of Islam as *rahmatan lil ālamin* (mercy for the universe) provides a strong theological framework for understanding the role of religion in realizing broader social harmony,<sup>46</sup> as reflected in the phenomenon of “South Sumatra cultural Islam” which is adaptive to multicultural locality. The research findings show that the principle of *rahmatan lil alamin* emphasizes the spiritual mission of Islam which is not limited to the Muslim community alone, but has a universal dimension that prioritizes the welfare of all humanity regardless of religious background. In the context of South Sumatra's pluralism, this concept is integrated with local traditions such as the *Ratib Palembang* tradition, creating a form of spirituality that key informants referred to as “civil

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<sup>45</sup>Miroslav Volf et al., *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010).

<sup>46</sup>Lazuardi Ramadhan, ‘Religious Moderation in Realizing Islam Rahmatan Lil Alamin’, *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies* 7, no. 4 (2024): 1015–26, <https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v7i4.1706>.

Islam” that is responsive to diversity. This understanding is in line with the universal values found in various major religious traditions in the research area. Buddhism with the concept of compassion in Palembang monasteries, Christianity with the tradition of contemplation in the Batak-Christian community of Musi Banyuasin, and Hinduism with the philosophy of “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” in the Hindu-Bali community of South Sumatra both teach the importance of compassion, justice, and service to others.<sup>47</sup>

Building authentic tolerance requires a stronger foundation than political slogans or formal top-down policies, as confirmed by the empirical findings of the research in South Sumatra. The mixed-methods analysis revealed that sustainable tolerance must be rooted in genuine spiritual awareness, where individuals and communities understand that religious diversity is part of a divine plan that needs to be respected.<sup>48</sup> Interview data shows that this spiritual awareness involves developing virtues such as humility, empathy, and wisdom that enable one to appreciate the truths found in other traditions without feeling threatened in one's own beliefs. This approach proved to be fundamentally different from tolerance based solely on political pragmatism or social pressure, as it has deeper roots in the transcendental dimension of human experience, as observed in the syncretic spiritual practices in the research sites that demonstrate the integration of various religious and cultural traditions without losing authenticity.

The application of tolerance based on spiritual awareness demands a holistic transformation in the way individuals and communities understand the relationship between religious identity and citizenship in the context of multicultural Indonesia. Research findings on South Sumatra's millennial and post-millennial generations indicate the prevalence of a “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon that creates both opportunities and challenges for the development of inclusive

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<sup>47</sup>Fitria Rahmadani, ‘Implementasi Moderasi Beragama Pada Masyarakat Islam Dan Hindu Di Desa Rejo Binangun’ (PhD Thesis, IAIN Metro, 2023), <https://repository.metrrouniv.ac.id/id/eprint/9354/>.

<sup>48</sup>Dwi Aprilianto et al., ‘Religious Moderation as a Counter-Narrative of Intolerance in Schools and Universities’, *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 6, no. 1 (2025): 188–212, <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v6i1.1361>.

spirituality.<sup>49</sup> This requires the development of an integrative pedagogy in religious education, where understanding of one's own tradition is enriched by respectful knowledge of other traditions. Correlational statistical analysis confirms that religious institutions need to develop leadership capable of articulating an inclusive spiritual vision without compromising the theological depth of their traditions, with the empirical indicator being a significant positive correlation between inclusive spiritual orientation and tolerance of religious diversity scores. In the long run, tolerance built on mature spiritual awareness will result in a society that is not only externally peaceful, but also has strong resilience in the face of various challenges and provocations that can threaten social harmony, as evidenced in research areas with inclusive spirituality program interventions that show a decrease in the level of religious-based conflict.

### **Hermeneutics of Religious Identity**

The hermeneutic approach, particularly as formulated by Rudolf Bultmann through the concept of *demythologization*, offers a transformative method for reinterpreting religious teachings from mythic literalism to existential relevance. In the context of Indonesia's multicultural reality, such reinterpretation is not merely theoretical, but a practical necessity in navigating pluralism, identity politics, and social cohesion. Bultmann's hermeneutics affirms that religious texts must be understood in a way that speaks to the existential concerns of modern individuals, without diluting their core spiritual truths.<sup>50</sup> This aligns with empirical findings from South Sumatra, where communities that actively reinterpret their religious traditions within local and contemporary frameworks exhibit notably higher levels of tolerance, interfaith cooperation, and social adaptability.

Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides a deeper framework for analyzing the formation of religious identity as a dynamic process of fusion of horizons wherein the legacy of historical tradition enters a dialogical encounter with present-day experiences. Gadamer's notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history) reinforces the idea that understanding is never detached from context; it is always

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<sup>49</sup>Kenneson, 'What's in a Name?'

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Bultmann, 'Hermeneutics and Theology', *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 11–36.



mediated by historical consciousness and cultural situatedness.<sup>51</sup> This dynamic is evident in the spiritual practices of the *Ratib Palembang* and *Ziarah Kubro*, where Islamic classical spirituality fuses meaningfully with Malay local customs.<sup>52</sup> These practices exemplify how a living hermeneutic can sustain religious authenticity while fostering cultural relevance.

A contextual hermeneutic thus enables religion to function as a constructive moral and ethical force rather than a divisive one. Paul Ricoeur, through his work *The Symbolism of Evil*, argues that symbolic interpretation opens access to the universal dimensions of meaning within sacred texts beyond surface literalism, which often reinforces sectarian boundaries.<sup>53</sup> Research findings show that religious communities in South Sumatra who employ such symbolic and contextual readings are more inclined toward inclusive interfaith dialogue and demonstrate a tangible contribution to social harmony.

Furthermore, a hermeneutic approach to religious identity in Indonesia requires a recognition of the complex historical and cultural fabric of the archipelago's spiritual landscape. Clifford Geertz's view of religion as a system of symbols that provides meaning to human existence within specific cultural contexts underscores the necessity of culturally embedded interpretation.<sup>54</sup> The study confirms that in South Sumatra, religious identity is not monolithic, but constantly negotiated through interactions with ethnic, cultural, and socio-political forces. The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging observed in this research demonstrates that hermeneutic openness allows individuals to remain rooted in their faith while constructively engaging with other traditions without falling into relativism or superficial syncretism.

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<sup>51</sup> Regan, *Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics: Concepts of Reading, Understanding and Interpretation*.

<sup>52</sup> Sikahall Urizar and Esgrid Esteban, *Gadamerian Approach to Science and Religion Historiographies: Reinterpreting Essentialism, Anachronism, and Complexity in Recent Science and Religion Historiographies through the Thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, The University of Edinburgh, 2023, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/3205>.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, vol. 18 (Beacon Press, 1967).

<sup>54</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'The Interpretation of Cultures Basic Books', *New York*, 1973.

The broader significance of religious hermeneutics lies in its capacity to reframe potential sources of conflict into opportunities for dialogical understanding and mutual transformation. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, warned against reductionist interpretations of the “other” that reinforce dominance and prejudice. In contrast, authentic hermeneutics fosters empathetic, critical, and dialogic engagement qualities evident among South Sumatra’s younger generations who are increasingly exposed to pluralistic realities.<sup>55</sup> The research reveals that youth equipped with hermeneutical literacy are more likely to become agents of peace, bridging religious boundaries through inclusive spirituality while maintaining deep commitments to their own traditions.<sup>56</sup>

In conclusion, the hermeneutics of religious identity offers a critical methodology for reimagining religion as a resource for social integration rather than division. It provides both the epistemological tools and ethical orientation to interpret sacred traditions in ways that are theologically grounded, culturally situated, and socially transformative. In plural societies like Indonesia, particularly in diverse regions such as South Sumatra, hermeneutics becomes indispensable for cultivating an inclusive spirituality that is dialogical, compassionate, and conducive to enduring peace.

## CONCLUSION

This research reveals that religion in the context of Indonesia's multicultural society, especially in South Sumatra, not only functions as an individual spiritual expression, but also as a marker of social identity that has a major influence on the dynamics of inter-group relations. The research shows that when interpreted exclusively, religious identity has the potential to trigger tension; but on the contrary, when interpreted through a hermeneutic approach and inclusive spirituality, religion can become a unifying force in building social harmony.

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<sup>55</sup> Atalia Omer, ‘The Hermeneutics of Citizenship as a Peacebuilding Process: A Multiperspectival Approach to Justice’, *Political Theology* 11, no. 5 (2010): 650–73, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v11i5.650>.

<sup>56</sup> Sehan Rifky Arfanaldy and Mohammad Bintang Pamuncak, ‘The Urgency of Multicultural Education in Building a Civil Society: The Perspective of Islamic Educational Philosophy’, *International Journal of Islamic Thought and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2025): 117–29, <https://doi.org/10.54298/ijith.v4i1.399>.

Through the integration of the approaches of sociology of religion, philosophical hermeneutics, and multiculturalism theory, it is found that the spirituality and interfaith dialog practices that grow in Palembang and Musi Banyuasin are concrete evidence that transcendental experiences do not have to be shackled by theological sectarianism. The findings on spirituality-based multiculturalism and the transformation of spiritual needs among the millennial generation strengthen the argument that inclusive spirituality is a relevant and adaptive model of future religiosity.

The research concludes that the reinterpretation of religious identity through contextual hermeneutics can increase people's capacity to manage diversity in a peaceful and civilized manner. This approach does not erase differences, but rather transforms them into a foundation for dialog that respects the authenticity of each tradition while building a shared public ethic. Ultimately, an inclusive spirituality grounded in profound theological acumen constitutes a pivotal prerequisite for fortifying social integration and forestalling identity conflicts within Indonesia's pluralistic milieu.

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