Pharos Journal of Theology ISSN 2414-3324 online Volume 107 (1) Regular Issue (2026)

Theology of Pluralism in Historical Context: Cultural Encounters of Religions in Indonesia

Lestari Dara Cinta Utami Ginting*
Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0788-3224
*Corresponding author: lestaridaracinta@usu.ac.id

Indira Fatra Deni Peranginangin
Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia
Orcid : https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8893-016X

Rahmansyah Fadlul Al Karim Rambe
Faculty of Law and Sharia, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara
Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara 20371, Indonesia
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7894-7017

https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.12

Abstract

This study investigates religious diversity in Indonesia within a historical context, legal contradictions, and cultural acculturation which build the groundwork of living theology. Long-running contacts since the Hindu-Buddhist era, the arrival of Islam via trade and cultural infiltration, help to define Indonesian pluralism. It did not suddenly happen. preaching, Christian colonialism with contemporary education, and the dynamics of Reformasi and independence. Every stage provided particular types of engagement that together created a plurarity only found in the archipelago. The results of this study highlight contradictions at the current level: According to the Religious Harmony Index, interreligious peace is rather strong yet worldwide Studies confirm the high frequency of strict rules and social conflicts. This paradox implies that the state acts both as shield and restrictor, whereas society keeps social cohesiveness by cultural means. Maintaining pluralism has been shown to hinge mostly on cultural acculturation. Slametan, sekaten, yadnya, pela gandong, and grebeg Syawal show that pluralism is practiced daily rather than just founded on dogma or law. The hybridity hypothesis of Homi K. Bhabha helps to clarify that this cultural environment is a "third space" in which identities are negotiated and theological pluralism is formed. Therefore, this study provides a significant theoretical contribution: Indonesian pluralism is a living theology arising from historical negotiation, regulatory contradictions, and cultural conventions. Because this study relies on literature review, ethnographic field research is advised to further investigate the practice of pluralism at the community level. These results are intended to enrich the world dialogue by presenting a culturally grounded model of pluralism as an alternative amid the global crisis of bigotry.

Keywords: Living Theology, Pluralism, Historical Context, Cultural Encounters, Religions

Introduction

Religious plurality in Indonesia is a demographic fact that cannot be denied within the global academic discourse. The population composition shows a Muslim majority of about 87 per cent, followed by Christians at 11 per cent, with the remainder consisting of Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and adherents of local beliefs (Databoks, 2024; DataIndonesia.id, 2024). This proportion makes Indonesia not only the largest Muslim-majority country in the world but also

a testing ground for how religious diversity is managed within the framework of nationhood. These figures indicate scale, but beyond that, they reveal social complexity that requires theological and cultural mechanisms to sustain social cohesion (Isra & Tegnan, 2021).

Religious diversity is closely interwoven with the cultural reality of the archipelago. Official data indicate more than 1,340 ethnic groups and 718 local languages that are still actively used in daily interaction. Ethnic and linguistic identity is not a mere ornament but a medium shaping the way people interpret faith (Kemenag RI, 2023). The religiosity of the Batak with the HKBP church, Balinese spirituality with temples and *yadnya* rituals, and Javanese Islam with *slametan* demonstrate that religion in Indonesia is consistently intertwined with custom. From this perspective, pluralism in Indonesia does not stand in a vacuum but is rooted in the cultural plurality that animates it (Nurman, 2022; Ramli, 2022; Yuliandri, 2023).

Concrete manifestations of this diversity are visible in the proliferation of religious infrastructures across the country. The Ministry of Religious Affairs records more than 390,000 houses of worship across Indonesia, and several independent analyses even estimate that the number may exceed 400,000 in more recent years (Arifianto, 2023). Their physical presence signifies the existence of different communities who nevertheless share the same spaces in both urban and rural settings. A mosque standing adjacent to a church in one district, or a temple located not far from a vihara, illustrates coexistence that is often more natural than the outcome of policy engineering. Religious infrastructure thus functions as an indicator of the density of pluralism, as it demonstrates how public space becomes an arena for interfaith encounters (Supriyadi et al., 2023).

Interfaith interaction in the archipelago has always unfolded through cultural media, producing distinctive acculturation. The Menara Kudus Mosque, for instance, displays Hindu–Buddhist temple architecture within an Islamic place of worship (Supriyadi et al., 2022). The *wayang* tradition preserved by the Wali Songo was used as a medium of preaching by inserting messages of monotheism into Javanese cosmology. Inculturation also occurred in Christian missions in Flores and Maluku that adopted local symbols into liturgy, so that new religions did not arrive as intrusions but as adaptations. Such examples demonstrate that Indonesian pluralism has grown from cultural strategies of blending rather than from structural imposition (Tayeb, 2024; Yasa, 2021).

Culturally based pluralism presents a face different from Western paradigms of pluralism (Hunowu, 2025; Intan, 2023; Lengauer, 2023; Saehu, 2023). Western models are largely rooted in liberal-secular traditions that separate religion from the public sphere, whereas in Indonesia, culture functions as a bridge between religions. The practice of *slametan* in Java, which involves interfaith prayer, or *pela gandong* in Maluku, which unites Muslims and Christians in customary bonds, illustrates that harmony need not be born of secular social contracts but can grow from shared rituals supported by local symbols. Here lies the uniqueness of Indonesia: pluralism is not understood as the absence of religion but as a negotiated co-presence shaped culturally (Jindra, 2023).

The Religious Harmony Index (IKUB) reinforces this phenomenon in numerical form. The 2024 report shows a score of 76.47, an increase from the previous year's 76.02 (Barjah, 2024). The index is measured through the dimensions of tolerance, equality, and cooperation, three aspects that reflect everyday social conditions. The score is relatively high, demonstrating society's tendency to maintain harmonious interreligious relations. Nevertheless, the index also opens space for discussion: harmony may be preserved, but it is not without problems. Fragility exists that may be triggered at any time by political issues, identity politics, or state policies.

Paradoxes arise when global data reveal another side of Indonesia's reality. Pew Research notes that Indonesia is categorised as "very high" in the Government Restrictions Index, with a score of 7.9, and 4.7 in the Social Hostilities Index in 2022. This means that religious life in Indonesia is governed by strict regulation, while horizontal tensions persist. The situation

illustrates a contradiction: cultural harmony can be achieved, yet regulation and social conflict indicate persistent tensions. A fundamental question emerges: how can pluralism endure when the public sphere of religion is marked by restrictions and vulnerabilities?

Historical dynamics show that pluralism in Indonesia is not the result of a permanent consensus but the product of ongoing negotiation. The Ambon conflict from 1999 to 2002 is an example of when pluralism fractured, producing violence involving religious identities. Yet local wisdom such as *pela gandong* was used as a mechanism of reconciliation, binding Muslim and Christian communities in customary solidarity. This demonstrates that although conflict may erupt, local traditions possess the capacity to rebuild bridges of trust (Miharja et al., 2022; Pajarianto et al., 2022).

These realities reveal that pluralism in Indonesia possesses a theological basis inseparable from culture (Wijsen, 2023). The pluralist theology that has developed in the archipelago is not a normative theology detached from context but one embodied in social practice. *Slametan*, *sekaten*, or shared religious celebrations constitute forms of *living theology* that affirm faith's capacity to encounter without dissolving identity. Such a model refutes the assumption that pluralism can only emerge from modern secular frameworks.

The concept of culturally based pluralism born from Indonesian experience holds global relevance (Fuadi, 2024). The world today faces a widespread crisis of intolerance, from Islamophobia in the West to sectarian conflict in the Middle East. Indonesia, with all its complexities, offers another model: pluralism that is not predicated upon the absence of religion but upon encounters of faith mediated by culture. This proposal is crucial for enriching international theological discourse on pluralism, which has been overly Western-centric.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to academically articulate how the history of interfaith encounters in Indonesia has produced a distinctive theology of pluralism. A thorough study is required so that culturally based pluralism may be positioned as a new conceptual contribution to the global conversation on theology. This research is important not only for the Indonesian context but also for a world seeking models of religious coexistence that are more humane, contextual, and sustainable.

Literature Review

This study aims to examine how religious pluralism in Indonesia is shaped through historical interactions, contemporary paradoxes, and cultural acculturation that generate *living theology*. The focus is directed at filling the gap between studies of regulation-based pluralism and practice-based pluralism, thereby offering an alternative conceptual model relevant to global discourse. The theoretical framework employed is Homi K. Bhabha's (2012) hybridity theory, which emphasises that cultural encounters produce a *third space* in which new identities are negotiated. Within this framework, interreligious acculturation in Indonesia is viewed not as compromise but as a creative process shaping theological pluralism.

Harnish (2021) employed an ethnographic approach through participant observation at the Lingsar Festival in Lombok. The findings show that the festival serves as a symbolic negotiation space between Sasak Muslims and Balinese Hindus through performing arts and joint rituals. From this practice emerges a "tolerance of ambiguity" that sustains social cohesion despite doctrinal differences. The distinction from the present study is that Harnish focused on a local ritual case, whereas this research connects such acculturation to the construction of Indonesian theological pluralism within both historical and global contexts.

Damayanti and Yunanto (2022) used a qualitative method based on in-depth interviews and document analysis to examine changing threat perceptions between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia. Their findings reveal a shift from evangelisation issues towards worship restrictions, reflecting a transformation of interreligious relations into more political and

regulative patterns. This research differs by not only addressing threat perceptions but by situating such dynamics within the framework of paradoxical pluralism, highlighting ambivalence between social harmony and state restriction.

Hefner (2021) studied the issue of religious freedom using an institutional analysis approach, drawing on policy data and the practices of Islamic organisations. The results show tensions between the constitutional commitment to religious freedom and restrictive practices carried out by state institutions and majority groups. The main contribution of his study lies in highlighting "religious regulation" as an arena of political contestation. This research differs by adding cultural acculturation as an alternative foundation sustaining pluralism beyond institutional frameworks.

Intan and Bangun (2022) conducted a conceptual analysis with a normative-theological approach concerning the idea of "principled pluralism." Their findings assert that Pancasila can be positioned as the basis of pluralism capable of preventing radicalism and religious terrorism. Their study is more normative-ideological, while this research emphasises the praxis of pluralism through cultural interaction and historical processes that form *living theology*. Thus, this research broadens the horizon by introducing a cultural foundation often overlooked in normative pluralism discourse.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach (Weyant, 2022), positioned specifically as a literature-based interpretive inquiry. Such an approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to uncover the meaning of theological pluralism within the historical context of interreligious encounters in Indonesia in a contextual, text-sensitive manner. Within this framework, qualitative description narrates phenomena as they appear, while interpretively revealing the cultural, theological, and symbolic layers that shape culture-based pluralism (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2020). This approach emphasises the interpretation of processes and meanings rather than the testing of hypotheses, making it suitable for differentiating closely related concepts—such as pluralism, hybridity, tolerance, and coexistence—within Indonesia's lived religious landscape.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary materials (Johannesson & Perjons, 2021). Primary data were drawn from historical documents, archival records, and religious as well as cultural texts that document interreligious encounters in Indonesia, allowing the study to trace how pluralism is formed performatively across time. Secondary data comprised academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, and national and international survey results related to harmony and pluralism. Using these two types of data enables the analysis to move between empirical evidence and conceptual interpretation, strengthening the validity of the findings while ensuring sufficient depth to clarify conceptual distinctions central to this study.

Data collection techniques were carried out through a systematic literature study, involving the tracing of academic works, survey reports, and historical documents relevant to the research topic. Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, consisting of four stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2020). The credibility of the data was tested using triangulation techniques, both source triangulation and theoretical triangulation, ensuring that the results of the study are credible and consistent in addressing the research questions (Flick, 2022).

Results and Findings

The Historical Dynamics of Religious Encounters in Indonesia and Their Contribution to the Formation of Theological Pluralism

The religious history of Indonesia is not merely a chronological record of the arrival of major world religions, but rather a long process of interaction imbued with acculturation, contestation, and negotiation that produced a distinctive Nusantara pluralism. From the Hindu–Buddhist era to Islam and Christianity, and the presence of other religions in the modern period, these encounters demonstrate dynamics that are not linear but layered and contextual. The following periodisation summarises the principal historical stages that shaped the framework of theological pluralism in Indonesia.

Table 1. Periodisation of Religious Interaction in Indonesia

Period	Dominant/Incoming Religion	Form of Interaction	Empirical Example	Contribution to Pluralism
Pre-Islam (Hindu–Buddhist)	Hindu–Buddhist	Assimilation of cosmology and royal ritual	Borobudur, Prambanan, concept of *Tri Hita Karana*	Foundation of inclusive and symbolic cosmology
Islamisation (13th–16th c.)	Islam + Hindu–Buddhist	Cultural acculturation and missionary strategies	Menara Kudus Mosque, Wali Songo *wayang*, *sekaten* tradition	Adaptive missionary model, cultural pluralism
Colonial (16th–20th c.)	Christianity (Catholic & Protestant)	Contestation and inculturation	Local liturgy in Flores, missionary education, Maluku conflicts	Negotiation of identity, early interfaith dialogue
Independence–New Order	All recognised religions	Regulation and nation-building	Pancasila, PNPS Law 1965, FKUB	Legal-formal pluralism within the state framework
Reformasi–Contemporary	Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, local beliefs	Dialogue, conflict, and reconciliation	Ambon 1999–2002, *pela gandong*, recognition of indigenous beliefs	Culture- and regulation-based pluralism

Pluralism in Indonesia has roots in the Hindu–Buddhist period, which introduced a royal cosmology of inclusivity in which the harmony of cosmos and humankind formed the axis of teaching. Borobudur and Prambanan are not only religious monuments but also symbols of spiritual openness that enabled a peaceful transition when Islam began to arrive (Inayatillah et al., 2022). The Islamisation wave of the 13th to 16th centuries did not come by the sword but through trade, marriage, and cultural strategies. The Wali Songo adapted local arts, from *gamelan* to *wayang*, as vehicles of preaching so that Islam was embraced without dismantling existing cultural foundations. The Menara Kudus Mosque, featuring temple-style architecture, stands as concrete evidence of acculturation that generated an adaptive missionary model and reinforced cultural pluralism.

When colonialism introduced Christianity into the archipelago, the interaction patterns shifted into more contestatory forms. Catholic and Protestant missions confronted established Muslim communities, sparking tensions particularly in Maluku and North Sulawesi. Yet alongside conflict, inculturation also occurred, such as the use of local languages in Flores liturgy or the

incorporation of customary symbols into church rituals. Missionary education and social services further opened new avenues for interfaith engagement. From this point, Indonesian pluralism gained new dimensions: religious encounters occurred not only through culture but also via modern institutions introduced under colonialism (Mahfiana, 2025; Sitepu, 2025).

In the independence era, interreligious encounters were bound within the national framework through Pancasila, which affirmed belief in the One Supreme God. Regulations such as the PNPS Law 1965 restricted official religious recognition but at the same time established a legal-formal framework of pluralism. The Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB) functioned as a dialogue platform, though often seen merely as an administrative instrument (Hati et al., 2023; Humaizi et al., 2024). Pluralism during this phase relied more on state regulation than cultural spontaneity, but it remained significant in sustaining a shared religious space within one nation.

Reformasi brought broader freedoms yet also heightened vulnerabilities. The Ambon conflict of 1999–2002 exposed the fragility of Muslim–Christian relations when fuelled by political and economic factors. Despite deep social wounds, reconciliation based on the customary practice of *pela gandong* demonstrated the cultural capacity of Maluku communities to restore cohesion. This indicates that while state regulation is important, local mechanisms remain central to the recovery of pluralism (Farkhani et al., 2022).

These historical interactions hold significant implications for contemporary theological discourse, as they demonstrate that pluralism in Indonesia has never been merely a political arrangement but a lived theological negotiation shaped by ritual, spatial co-presence, and cultural adaptation. The long arc of interreligious encounter reveals that Indonesian pluralism is grounded in a hermeneutic of coexistence, where communities learn to recognise divine presence through the cultural other. Such a perspective contributes to global theology by offering a model of pluralism that emerges from embodied practices rather than secular-liberal abstraction.

Each historical period contributes differently to the formation of Indonesia's living theology. The Hindu–Buddhist era cultivated a cosmology of openness; the Islamisation period developed adaptive da'wah through cultural forms; the colonial era introduced institutional and educational modes of interfaith contact; the independence period formalised pluralism through legal frameworks; and the Reformasi era restored the prominence of local reconciliation mechanisms. Together, these layers create a composite theological landscape in which pluralism is enacted performatively across time, producing what may be described as an evolving, acculturated living theology.

The contemporary period (1998–present) has been marked by more inclusive recognition, most notably the Constitutional Court (2017) ruling that allowed adherents of indigenous beliefs to be officially recorded on national identity cards.[1] This legal shift broadened the spectrum of pluralism, extending recognition beyond the six state-sanctioned religions to communities of local belief systems that had long been marginalised. These developments reveal that Indonesian pluralism is negotiated between three main spheres: state regulatory frameworks, majority–minority interreligious dynamics—particularly between Muslim and Christian communities—and local indigenous groups whose cultural heritage continues to shape communal coexistence.

The historical trajectory of these five major periods affirms that Indonesian pluralism has never existed as a final consensus but as a continuous process. Each period made different contributions: Hindu–Buddhism offered an inclusive cosmological foundation; Islamisation introduced creative acculturation; colonialism brought inculturation and education; independence shaped a legal-formal framework; and the Reformasi to contemporary era has highlighted culture-based pluralism coexisting with state regulation. Altogether, these processes make Indonesia a laboratory of theological pluralism that is unique, where pluralism

is not simply normative tolerance but the tangible outcome of lived encounters between faith and culture across time.

Paradoxes of Regulation, Harmony, and Global Relevance: Weighing the Challenges of Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Indonesia

Religious pluralism in contemporary Indonesia reveals a paradoxical character. National data display the stability of interreligious harmony, yet global reports highlight the high levels of regulation and social hostilities. The state plays a dual role as both protector and restrictor, while society, on the one hand, manages to preserve harmony but, on the other, remains vulnerable to identity-based conflicts. These paradoxes make the Indonesian experience of pluralism unique and at the same time relevant to global theological conversations.

Table 2. Paradoxes of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia in Contemporary Indicators

Dimension	Positive Aspect (Harmony)	Problematic Aspect (Regulation/Hostilities)	Meaning of the Paradox
Religious Harmony Index (IKUB)	Score of 76.47 (2024), stable trend, relatively harmonious social relations	Regional disparities; identity politics issues easily trigger fractures	Harmony exists, but remains fragile
State Regulation	Pancasila as an ideological umbrella; FKUB as an interfaith dialogue forum (Indonesia's five-principle state philosophy)	PNPS Law 1965 restricts official religions; establishment of houses of worship often obstructed	The state guarantees while simultaneously restricting
Government Restrictions Index (GRI)	Constitution recognises religious freedom	Score of 7.9 (2022), very high category of restrictions	Normative inclusivity, practical exclusivity
Social Hostilities Index (SHI)	Everyday social interaction is fluid; local traditions support harmony	Score of 4.7 (2022), horizontal conflicts still occur (Ambon 1999–2002)	Cultural solidarity exists, vulnerabilities remain strong
Recognition of Local Beliefs	Constitutional Court ruling 2017 recognised indigenous beliefs on ID cards	Discriminatory administrative implementation in local areas	Legal inclusivity, practical exclusion

The Religious Harmony Index provides an entry point for understanding this paradox. The 2024 score of 76.47 confirms relatively harmonious social conditions, with tolerance, equality, and cooperation as its main dimensions (Barjah, 2024). Yet these numbers do not automatically represent uniform realities across all regions. Conflicts based on religion can erupt at any moment when triggered by identity politics or economic injustice. Harmony exists, but it is fragile and contextual.

The role of the state illustrates a similar ambivalence. Pancasila and official forums such as the FKUB were designed as instruments to preserve harmony, yet regulations such as the PNPS Law 1965 restrict the recognition of religions. Many communities face difficulties establishing houses of worship due to administrative rules. The state functions in two ways: as the guardian of pluralism and simultaneously as its constraint. This reveals that Indonesian pluralism is always negotiated between inclusive principles enshrined in the constitution and exclusive practices in policy (Faiz, 2023; Hamdi, 2021; Isra & Tegnan, 2021; Mursyid, 2024).

The paradox becomes sharper when considering global reports. Pew Research Centre (2022) indicates that Indonesia ranks in the “very high” category for the Government Restrictions Index (7.9 in 2022) and relatively high for the Social Hostilities Index (4.7 in 2022). While the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, regulatory restrictions and social tensions remain intense. The contradiction between legal norms and social realities shows that Indonesian pluralism is a contested space that is never concluded.

The dynamics of the Ambon conflict of 1999–2002 underscore this vulnerability. Muslim–Christian relations, seemingly stable, fractured when political and economic factors came into play. Yet reconciliation through customary practices such as *pela gandong* demonstrated the cultural capacity of local communities to rebuild cohesion. Pluralism is therefore not a final state but a recurring process, constantly threatened but also continually repaired through cultural instruments (Orishev, 2021; Rembierz, 2023; Yasa, 2021).

Ambivalence is also visible in recent policy. The 2017 Constitutional Court decision recognising indigenous beliefs as official identities on ID cards marked progress towards inclusivity. Yet, in practice, discriminatory administration persists in public services and marriage registration. This reflects another paradox: the state grants legal recognition, but social practice and bureaucracy continue to generate exclusion.

These paradoxes in fact highlight the strength of culture-based pluralist theology. Even though state regulations are stringent and social conflicts may occur, local solidarity through traditions such as *slametan*, *pela gandong*, or *yadnya* remains the foundation that preserves harmony. Culture functions as a safety net when the state and institutions fail to sustain pluralism. Indonesian theological pluralism is thus adopted not through normative theory but through lived practices (Fernández, 2022; Gillin, 2021; Schvarcz & Billig, 2022).

The global relevance of this experience lies in its offering of an alternative model of pluralism. Many nations that rely on liberal secularism to manage diversity are facing crises of intolerance. Indonesia demonstrates that pluralism can grow in spaces full of paradox, where culture, religion, and regulation are in constant tension. Its contribution to international conversations is that pluralism need not be ideal and sterile but can endure precisely because it adapts to contradictions.

Cultural Acculturation as the Closure of Dialectics: The Foundation of Theological Pluralism towards Living Theology

Pluralism in Indonesia finds its ultimate strength not only in the long history of interreligious encounters or in the paradoxes of regulation and contemporary harmony, but above all in cultural acculturation that generates lived theological practices. Religion in the archipelago does not stop at texts or institutions but permeates rituals, symbols, and local wisdom practised collectively. This is what enables Indonesian pluralism not merely to endure but to display its distinctive face: a culture-based pluralism that transforms into *living theology*.

Table 3. Cultural Acculturation Practices as the Foundation of Theological Pluralism in Indonesia

Cultural Practice	Communities Involved	Form of Acculturation	Theological Meaning	Contribution to Pluralism
Slametan (Java)	Muslims & non-Muslims	Collective prayers, interfaith participation	Social solidarity as worship	Trans-religious fraternity
Sekaten (Yogyakarta, Surakarta)	Javanese Muslims & royal courts	Celebration of the Prophet’s birthday with *gamelan* and palace rituals	Islam rooted in Javanese culture	Islam embraced without resistance

Pela Gandong (Maluku)	Muslims & Christians	Customary kinship bonds	Brotherhood as a sacred tie	Post-conflict reconciliation
Yadnya (Bali)	Balinese Hindus & interfaith relatives	Social participation in *yadnya* ceremonies	Harmony between humans, nature, and God	Inclusive plural cosmology
Grebeg Syawal (Central Java)	Muslims & general public	Cultural-religious procession in public spaces	Sacralisation of shared public space	Tolerance through cultural festivals

Such acculturation positions culture as the medium of theology that brings faith into contact with social reality (Maksum et al., 2023; Pradhana et al., 2021). The *slametan*, for instance, is not understood merely as a communal meal but as a collective prayer that embraces all neighbours regardless of belief. Its theological dimension lies in solidarity, where gratitude to God is expressed by sharing and embracing others.

Sekaten illustrates a subtle yet symbolic missionary strategy. Islam was received within the framework of Javanese culture because it appeared through *gamelan*, palace processions, and popular festivities. The theology expressed was not rigid dogma but one embodied in music, rhythm, and celebration. In this way, pluralism grew not from doctrinal compromise but from emotional connectedness through culture (Yasa, 2021).

Pela gandong demonstrates the spiritual dimension of custom in healing social wounds. The customary kinship that bonds Muslim and Christian communities as brothers is stronger than formal religious divisions. The reconciliation of Ambon after conflict shows that theologies of love and *ukhuwah* found their praxis through local traditions. Theology does not stop at the altar or pulpit but lives in the village streets where communities once again greet one another as kin.

Yadnya in Bali presents cosmological pluralism. The ritual affirms not only the relationship between humans and deities but also with fellow human beings and the natural world. The participation of interfaith relatives in the social dimension of *yadnya* reveals the inclusive nature of Balinese Hindu cosmology. The theology of harmony here is not confined to scripture but embodied in the practice of cosmic balance lived collectively (Intan & Bangun, 2022; Saehu, 2023). *Grebeg Syawal* in Central Java turns public space into an arena of interfaith encounters. The *gunungan* carried from the palace to the grand mosque symbolises blessings available to all citizens. A religious ritual is transformed into a social festival, and the sacredness of religion does not close itself off but opens to collective participation. Tolerance in *Grebeg* is not mere discourse but a shared experience lived together (Ropi, 2023; Setiabudi, 2021; Susanto, 2025).

Taken together, these practices affirm that cultural acculturation produces a pluralism that is performative rather than merely normative. Indonesian theological pluralism emerges as *living theology* woven from shared rituals, customary solidarity, local cosmologies, and social festivals. This pluralism is not free of conflict or paradox, but it endures precisely because it is rooted in lived social practices. Here lies Indonesia's strength: offering a model of theological pluralism that is not merely academic discourse but a lived social experience capable of inspiring the world.

Discussion

Religious pluralism in Indonesia displays complex dynamics, beginning with historical encounters and continuing through regulatory paradoxes into cultural acculturation (Orishev,

2021; Rembierz, 2023). The findings of this study affirm that Indonesian pluralism cannot be understood merely through normative or legal-formal lenses but must be recognised as a construction emerging from historical experience and cultural practice. This complexity shows that pluralism is a continuously negotiated process, not a static or final condition.

In global perspective, Indonesia's experience resonates with debates on how multireligious societies sustain coexistence. The crisis of intolerance in Europe, Islamophobia in the United States, and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East highlight the failure of liberal-secular models of pluralism to resolve identity tensions. Indonesia offers a different approach: pluralism that is built not by excluding religion from the public sphere but by integrating religion into inclusive cultural practices (Jegalus, 2024; Mursyid, 2024; Suharsono, 2024; Sutrisno, 2023).

Homi K. Bhabha's (2012) hybridity framework provides a theoretical lens for reading this reality. Religious acculturation in Indonesia may be understood as a *third space*, where new identities emerge from the negotiation between faith and culture. The Menara Kudus Mosque, *slametan*, or *pela gandong* are not merely local traditions but expressions of hybridity that transcend binary oppositions between majority and minority religions. Indonesian theological pluralism, therefore, takes shape in a hybrid space that is fluid, creative, and productive (Cornille, 2023; Knight, 2024).

The paradox of regulation and harmony further underlines the function of hybridity. On the one hand, the state restricts religious freedom with strict regulations, while on the other hand, communities build solidarity through culture. This paradox shows that pluralism arises not only from political institutions but also from cultural spaces that can preserve social cohesion when the state fails. The *third space* thus becomes both an arena of resistance and a locus of creation, demonstrating the vitality of Indonesian theological pluralism.

The relevance of these findings becomes evident when placed within global theological debates on pluralism. John Hick and Diana Eck emphasised normative pluralism as theological equality among religions (Eck, 2001; Hick, 2004). Indonesia presents a different face: equality is not achieved at the doctrinal level but within cultural spaces. Practices such as *slametan* or *yadnya* show that faith does not need to dissolve to coexist but can be enriched through shared cultural participation. This is Indonesia's contribution to global discourse: a pluralism grounded in social experience rather than theological abstraction.

The findings also underscore the importance of performative dimensions in theological pluralism. Pluralism is not sufficiently understood as an attitude or principle but as something lived and practised. Shared rituals, cultural festivals, or customary reconciliations are performances of *living theology* that affirm faith while cultivating solidarity. This performative aspect is rarely highlighted in global literature on pluralism, yet it constitutes the strength of Indonesian pluralism.

Thus, Indonesian pluralism challenges the dichotomy between secularism and religiosity. Pluralism is not the absence of religion but the presence of religion negotiated through culture. This model opens pathways to formulate a new theological pluralism that is more contextual, inclusive, and globally relevant.

Compared with Harnish's (2021) study, the findings here are broader. Harnish highlighted "tolerance of ambiguity" within the Lingsar Festival as a local case study, while this research situates cultural acculturation within historical and global frameworks as the foundation of *living theology*. Hence, the contribution is not merely ethnographic but conceptual.

In contrast with Damayanti and Yunanto (2022), Hefner (2021), and Intan and Bangun (2022), this research provides a different dimension. Those studies emphasised regulatory aspects, threat perceptions, or normative pluralism. This study adds the cultural dimension as a foundation capable of balancing regulatory paradoxes and social frictions. Through hybridity, Indonesian pluralism is understood not only as regulation or ideology but as *living theology* sustained amid contradictions.

The novelty of this study lies in its bold positioning of cultural acculturation as the theological basis of Indonesian pluralism within a hybridity framework. Unlike previous works that focused on regulation, institutions, or local case studies, this research demonstrates that Indonesian pluralism is a *living theology* born of historical negotiation, contemporary paradoxes, and cultural practice. This contribution is sharp because it proposes an alternative pluralism model for a world beset by growing intolerance, and it is compelling because it shifts pluralism from normative to performative domains: from text to praxis, from theory to lived experience.

Conclusion

The conclusion drawn in this study is that the existence of pluralism in Indonesia which is manifested in interreligious encounters and deliberations, cannot be separated from three important elements. They are the historical traces of the encounters, the regulation of the encounters that can be interpreted paradoxically, and cultural acculturation that is able to produce living theology. The Indonesian experience of pluralism, from Hindu–Buddhism to Islam, from Christian colonialism to *Reformasi* confirms that diversity is never given but the outcome of an ongoing negotiation. The paradox of harmonious societies and repressive states suggests that the pluralism of people from different backgrounds is not perfect but, rather, fragile cohesion strengthened by culture. Practice *slametan, sekaten, yadnya, pela gandong* and *Grebeg Syawal* show that the Indonesian pluralism has lived theology and performance theology. Both of these features are certainly different from the Western model of normative pluralism. The findings help the world debate: pluralism need not spring from secularisation but can emerge from particular cultural experiences that reaffirm faith and foster solidarity.

The study is limited because it concentrates on historical and cultural analysis through literature review to the extend that it does not make an empirical analysis at the community level. Future research should be more explicitly focused on the value of pluralism in performance by using historical methods with ethnographic fieldwork. It would also further enhance the global relevance of the findings comparing with other multireligious nations. More research is needed to create interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks (theology, anthropology, politics of religion) such that Indonesian pluralism is presented as a model in international academic discourse.

References

Arfianto, Y. (2023). *Evaluasi PBM 2006 Guna Menjaga Kerukunan Umat Beragama Jelang Pemilu 2024*. The Indonesian Institute. https://www.theindonesianinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Indonesia-Report-2023_Evaluasi-PBM-2006-Guna-Menjaga-Kerukunan-Umat-Beragama-Jelang-Pemilu-2024_Arfianto.pdf

Barjah. (2024). *Indeks Kerukunan Umat Beragama 2024 Naik Jadi 76,47*. Kementrian Agama Republik Indonesia.

Bhabha, H. K. (2012). The location of culture. In *The Location of Culture*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820551

Cornille, C. (2023). Religious pluralism and the challenge of relativism. *Studia Theologica Nordic Journal of Theology*, *77*(2), 186–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2023.2167862

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches 6th edition - John W. Creswell, J. David Creswell - SAGE. In *SAGE Publications, Inc.*

Damayanti, A., & Yunanto, S. (2022). From Evangelization to Worship Restrictions: The

Changing Characteristics of Threat Perception between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, *33*(4). https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2022.2158608

Databoks. (2024). *Mayoritas penduduk Indonesia beragama Islam pada semester I 2024*.

DataIndonesia.id. (2024). *Jumlah penduduk Indonesia menurut agama pada 2024*.

Eck, D. L. (2001). *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. HarperSanFrancisco.

Edmonds, W. A., & Kennedy, T. D. (2020). An Applied Guide to Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods. In *An Applied Guide to Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802779

Faiz, P. M. (2023). Big man, bag or ballot box? Upholding legal pluralism through noken as a traditional system of voting in elections in Papua, Indonesia. *Legal Pluralism and Critical Social Analysis*, *55*(3), 339–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/27706869.2023.2274167

Farkhani, Elviandri, Dimyati, K., Absori, & Zuhri, M. (2022). Converging Islamic and religious norms in Indonesia's state life plurality. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v12i2.421-446

Fernández, J. R. M. (2022). Religious Pluralism in Theology Today: Towards an Interreligious Hermeneutic. *Estudios Eclesiasticos*, *97*(381), 491–520. https://doi.org/10.14422/ee.v97.i381-382.y2022.007

Flick, U. (2022). The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529770278

Fuadi, M. A. (2024). Religious Moderation in the Context of Integration Between Religion and Local Culture in Indonesia. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, *19*(1), 47–59. https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol19no1.4

Gillin, J. (2021). Agonistic pluralism and the theology of self-revisionary identities. *Kerygma Und Dogma*, *67*(3), 198–219. https://doi.org/10.13109/kedo.2021.67.3.198

Hamdi, A. Z. (2021). Constructing Indonesian Religious Pluralism: The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Countering Violent Religious Extremism. *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, *15*(2), 433–464. https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2021.15.2.433-464

Harnish, D. (2021). Tolerance of ambiguity: Negotiating religion and sustaining the lingsar festival and its performing arts in lombok, indonesia. *Religions*, *12*(8). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080626

Hati, L. P., Al-Mujtahid, N. M., Kholil, S., Sahfutra, S. A., Ginting, L. D. C. U., & Fahreza, I. (2023). Religious Harmony Forum : Ideal Religious Moderation in the Frame of Building Tolerance in Medan City , Indonesia. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, *104*(4), 1–11. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.420

Hefner, R. W. (2021). Islam and institutional religious freedom in indonesia. *Religions*, *12*(6). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060415

Hick, J. (2004). *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.

Humaizi, Hasan, N. N. N., Dalimunthe, M. A., & Ramadhani, E. (2024). Harmony in virtual space: Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) development communication in creating digital literacy based on religious moderation. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*, *8*(7), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i7.4299

Hunowu, M. (2025). RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES:

Comparing Gorontalo, Indonesia and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. *Miqot Jurnal Ilmu Ilmu Keislaman*, *49*(1), 222–247. https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v49i1.1350

Inayatillah, Kamaruddin, & Anzaikhan, M. (2022). The History of Moderate Islam in Indonesia and Its Influence on the Content of National Education. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, *17*(2). https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol17no2.17

Intan, B. F. (2023). Religious pluralism, public religion, and principled pluralism in Indonesia. *Transformation*, *40*(4), 334–349. https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788231206020

Intan, B. F., & Bangun, C. (2022). Principled Pluralism and the Prevention of Religious Terrorism in Indonesia. *Religions*, *13*(5). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050429

Isra, S., & Tegnan, H. (2021). Legal syncretism or the theory of unity in diversity as an alternative to legal pluralism in Indonesia. *International Journal of Law and Management*, *63*(6). https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLMA-04-2018-0082

Jegalus, N. (2024). Unity in Diversity of Religions in Bumi Flobamora, Indonesia: From Traditional to Modern Pluralism. *Millah Journal of Religious Studies*, *23*(2), 703–742. https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol23.iss2.art7

Jindra, I. W. (2023). Negotiating Leaving Religion, Family Relationships, and Identity: The Case of LDS Faith Transitions in Therapy. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *51*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00822-y

Johannesson, P., & Perjons, E. (2021). An introduction to design science. In *An Introduction to Design Science*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78132-3

Kemenag RI. (2023). *Jumlah rumah ibadah menurut provinsi*. https://satudata.kemenag.go.id/dataset/detail/jumlah-rumah-ibadah?utm

Knight, C. C. (2024). Religious pluralism and historical-critical scholarship: a contemplative connection? *Theology*, *127*(5), 322–332. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X241276629

Lengauer, D. (2023). Searching for an 'Authentic Encounter': Exploring New Conceptualisations of Pluralism in Indonesia. *Social Anthropology*, *31*(2), 84–99. https://doi.org/10.3167/saas.2023.310207

Mahfiana, L. (2025). Influence of Religion and Culture on Women's Rights in Joint Property Settlements in Java, Indonesia. *Ijtihad Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan*, *25*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.18326/ijtihad.v24i1.117-138

Mahkamah Konstitusi Republik Indonesia. (2017). *Putusan Nomor 97/PUU-XIV/2016 tentang Pencantuman Penghayat Kepercayaan pada KTP dan KK*. https://www.mkri.id/public/content/persidangan/putusan/putusan_mkri_97_PUU-XIV_2016.pdf

Maksum, A., Azizah, N., Afif, M., & Sahide, A. (2023). Literation of the Acculturation of Islamic Culture in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. *Proceeding International Conference of Community Service*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.18196/iccs.v1i1.12

Miharja, D., Kusnawan, A., & Mustopa, S. (2022). Rediscovering the way of Islamic propagation by continuing the tradition of religion-based agriculture. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, *78*(4). https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7203

Miles, M. B., Huberman, M., & Saldana, J. (2020). Qualitative Data Analysis-A Methods Sourcebook -4th edition. In *SAGE* (Vol. 53, Nomor 9).

Mursyid, A. Y. (2024). Politics and Pluralism: Analyzing State Official Tafsir and Interfaith Discourse in Indonesia. *Jurnal Studi Ilmu Ilmu Al Qur an Dan Hadis*, *25*(1), 57–76. https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v25i1.5379

Nurman. (2022). Development of Pluralism Education in Indonesia: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *9*(3), 106–120. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1207

Orishev, A. B. (2021). A new look at the history of Islam (A review of thomas bauer's book "the culture of ambiguity and pluralism: Towards a different image of Islam"). *Religiovedenie*, *2021*(2), 148–151. https://doi.org/10.22250/2072-8662.2021.2.148-151

Pajarianto, H., Pribadi, I., & Sari, P. (2022). Tolerance between religions through the role of local wisdom and religious moderation. In *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* (Vol. 78, Nomor 4). AOSIS. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7043

Pew Research Center. (2024, December 18). Countries with 'very high' government restrictions on religion increases in 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/12/18/number-of-countries-with-very-high-government-restrictions-increases-in-2022/

Pradhana, R. I., Gunawan, A. P., Dianti, A., & Hartono, H. (2021). The development of the acculturation of the Chinese muslim and Java culture in Semarang with the case of comparison between Sam Poo Kong and Hivara Buddhagaya Watugong. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, *794*(1). https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/794/1/012241

Ramli, M. (2022). Case Studies in Indonesia: From Cultural Pluralism to Culturally Responsive Science Pedagogy. In *Culturally Responsive Science Pedagogy in Asia Status and Challenges for Malaysia Indonesia and Japan* (hal. 77–88). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003168706-8

Rembierz, M. (2023). Traces of transcendence... Contemporary religious thinking in the face of the pluralism of worldviews and intercultural relations. In *Transformations of Contemporary Culture and their Social Consequences Archerian Studies* (Vol. 3, hal. 39–79). https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?partnerID=HzOxMe3b&scp=85174556050&origin=inward

Ropi, I. (2023). Comparative religion, tolerance and islamic higher education in Indonesia. In *Islam Education and Radicalism in Indonesia Instructing Piety* (hal. 181–195). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003269229-11

Saehu, R. (2023). Religious Pluralism and Harmony among Buddhist-Muslim Communities Living in East Lampung, Indonesia. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, *13*(1), 245–256. https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.131.17

Schvarcz, B., & Billig, M. (2022). The Froman Peace Campaign: Pluralism in Judeo-Islamic Theology and Politics. *Politics and Religion*, *15*(3). https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048321000365

Setiabudi, W. (2021). To Explore the Issue of Religion and The Development of Tolerance Among Religious Communities, Especially the Youth in Indonesia. *Review of International Geographical Education Online*, *11*(3), 16–25. https://doi.org/10.33403/rigeo.800464

Sitepu, Y. S. (2025). Non-Profit Religion and Cultural Radio in Indonesia Facing the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities in Anticipating the Onslaught of Hoaxes. *Dirasat Human and Social Sciences*, *52*(6). https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v52i6.7771

Suharsono, A. (2024). Women's Inheritance Rights in Indonesia from the Perspective of the Triangular Concept of Legal Pluralism. *El Mashlahah*, *14*(2), 259–280. https://doi.org/10.23971/el-mashlahah.v14i2.7657

Supriyadi, S., Prameswari, N. S., Widiyastuti, E., & Athian, M. R. (2022). Hindu Culture at the Menara Kudus Mosque, Indonesia and Its Influence on Society. *ISVS e-journal*, *9*(4).

Supriyadi, S., Widiyastuti, E., Prameswari, N. S., & Swasty, W. (2023). Pragmatic-Semantic Analysis of the Demak Great Mosque and Acculturation of the Surrounding Communities. *ISVS e-journal*, *10*(5).

Susanto, T. (2025). Ethnography of harmony: local traditions and dynamics of interfaith tolerance in Nglinggi Village, Indonesia. *Asian Anthropology*, *24*(2), 146–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2024.2434988

Sutrisno, N. (2023). When Law and Morality Collide: The Indonesia's Halal Act Case for Constitutional Pluralism. *Asia Pacific Social Science Review*, *23*(1), 19–30. https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1483

Tayeb, A. (2024). Pondok education, public discourse, and cultural pluralism in Malaysia and Indonesia. In *Southeast Asian Islam Integration and Indigenisation* (hal. 208–233). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032702902-13

Weyant, E. (2022). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, 5th Edition. *Journal of Electronic Resources in Medical Libraries*, *19*(1–2). https://doi.org/10.1080/15424065.2022.2046231

Wijsen, F. (2023). Humans and Nature: Does Religion Make a Difference in Indonesia? *Journal for the Study of Religion Nature and Culture*, *17*(1), 30–55. https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.21211

Yasa, P. G. A. S. (2021). Distribution and Revenue Sharing of Natural Resources in Indonesia: Autonomous Region and Legal Pluralism Perspective. *Udayana Journal of Law and Culture*, *5*(2), 172–184. https://doi.org/10.24843/UJLC.2021.v05.i02.p05

Yuliandri. (2023). Shifting from Legal Pluralism to Legal Syncretism in Multi-Cultural Indonesia. *Isvs E Journal*, *10*(1), 182–192. https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?partnerID=HzOxMe3b&scp=85151296209&origin=inward

***Conflict of Interest Statement**: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*