



Considerations on the Prohibition of Interfaith Greetings in Indonesia: Between Religion and Harmony

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Abstract

Religious tolerance is important in maintaining social harmony in Indonesia, which is rich in diversity of faiths. This research analyses the considerations behind the prohibition of interfaith greetings and its implications for interfaith relations. The method used is qualitative research with a desktop literature review research approach, collecting data from various sources of documents and related literature. The results show that the ban issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) is based on theological aspects and has significant social impacts. People with more inclusive views show a desire to maintain harmony despite differences of opinion regarding the ban. On the other hand, despite the influence of religious authorities, interfaith dialogue and tolerance must continue to be upheld to create balance and harmony in society. As a way forward, more intensive dialogue between religious leaders and the community is needed to find common ground to strengthen unity amid diversity.

Keywords: Religious tolerance, Interfaith greetings, Social harmony, Interfaith dialogue, Theological differences

Introduction

Religious tolerance in Indonesia is an important foundation for maintaining national unity (Goli & Santosa, 2023). As a country with a predominantly Muslim population, Indonesia has always



faced challenges in managing this diversity, particularly in terms of interactions between followers of religions other than Islam. One of the issues that continues to grow is the debate about the boundaries in social interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims (Baidhaw, 2005), especially those that have always been discussed, such as holiday greetings to followers of other religions (Sulaeman, 2019). This debate is increasingly arising because of the different theological views in responding to this phenomenon and its impact on efforts to maintain social harmony in pluralistic Indonesian society.

The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) is one of the highest entities of religious institutions in Indonesia, and it has an important role in guiding Muslims, including on issues related to interfaith interaction (Ode et al., 2023). MUI, in one of its fatwas (formal rulings or interpretations on points of Islamic law as given by qualified legal scholars), stated that congratulating non-Muslims on religious celebrations is not considered a form of religious tolerance that is allowed according to Islamic teachings (Al-Qaradhawi, 2009; Sulaeman, 2019). This view eventually sparked widespread debate in society, both among Muslims themselves and among other religious groups (Bahri, 2016). This debate is not only theological but also concerns broader social issues, such as maintaining harmonious relations in a multicultural and multi-religious society and setting an example of desired attitudes to other multi-faith nations.

As an institution with the authority to provide religious guidance (Habibaty, 2017), MUI's fatwa is often seen as the official voice of Muslims in Indonesia (Alkawy, 2019; Fauzi, 2017). However, it is important to note that religious authority in Indonesia is not only in the hands of MUI. Various other religious authorities, such as village clerics, charismatic clerics, Islamic mass organizations (CSOs), and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), also have an important role in shaping religious views and attitudes in Indonesia. This shows that religious views in Indonesia are diverse and not monolithic. Regarding interfaith greetings, some religious authorities have a more flexible view, which supports interfaith tolerance and harmonization.

One of the theological bases often cited by MUI in prohibiting interfaith congratulations is the concept of loyalty (*al-wala'*) and disassociation (*al-bara'*) from teachings or cultures that are considered contrary to Islam. According to this view, congratulations on the holidays of other religions can be seen as a form of recognition of the truth of the religion, which is considered contrary to the teachings of Islam. This is in line with the fatwa issued by Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi, which states that a Muslim is not allowed to participate in other religions' celebrations because it violates the principles of the Islamic faith (Al-Qaradhawi, 2009).

On the other hand, this view has been challenged by groups who argue that the ban could hamper efforts at social harmonization in Indonesia. They argue that congratulating followers of other religions is not necessarily related to theological recognition but rather a form of respect and mutual appreciation in a multicultural society (Hardianti, 2022; Sugeng & Subandi, 2023). On the other hand, Indonesian society generally tends to maintain interfaith harmony through an inclusive attitude of tolerance, including in terms of holiday greetings (Kabanga, 2024; Sugeng & Subandi, 2023).

The MUI's more exclusive view can also be seen as a reflection of the institution's institutional and political position. MUI, established during the New Order era, cannot be separated from the political aspect, especially as a tool to legitimize the government's power. MUI was established to provide religious guidance; its formation could not be separated from political interference aimed at strengthening power through control over Muslims. Therefore, fatwas issued by the MUI, including the ban on interfaith congratulations, are often seen as politically charged (Schäfer, 2019).



However, while MUI's views have a strong influence among Muslims, it is important to recognize that the rest of society does not fully follow these views. As mentioned earlier, Indonesia has a variety of religious authorities who often hold different views from one another. These authorities, such as village kiai or charismatic kiai, are often closer to the grassroots and have a more pragmatic approach to dealing with religious issues. As such, people ultimately have the freedom to choose which religious views to follow, even if this often leads to internal divisions or conflicts among Muslims themselves.

Literature Review

Religious Tolerance in Islamic Perspective

Islam teaches the principles of tolerance through various teachings that emphasise respecting diversity of beliefs. The Qur'an states that 'There is no compulsion in religion' (QS. Al-Baqarah: 256), often the basis for supporting harmonious relations between Muslims and non-Muslims (Majid, 2008). However, this tolerance is often understood with clear boundaries, especially regarding belief and worship (Jamil, 2018; Mendus, 2019; Warsah, 2018). Scholars emphasise the importance of maintaining Islamic identity, including how to say greetings and congratulations in a religious context.

Several fatwas of scholars, including MUI, state that a Muslim is not allowed to congratulate other religions' holidays because it is feared that it could damage the faith. Yusuf al-Qaradawi explained that tolerance should not lead to compromise in essential matters of religion, such as belief and worship (Al-Qaradhawi, 2009). Al-Qaradawi also added that tolerance in Islam means respecting others' right to hold different beliefs, but it does not necessarily mean accepting or agreeing with those beliefs. It is a fine line between maintaining good relations with non-Muslims and maintaining the integrity of a Muslim's faith.

The Concept of Social Harmony and Interfaith Harmony

Social harmony in a plural society like Indonesia can be analysed from various social and religious theory perspectives. Sociologically, social harmony refers to a state in which individuals and groups can coexist peacefully despite differences in religious identity, beliefs, and practices (Harahap et al., 2023; Saumantri, 2023b). In this case, tolerance, mutual respect, and interreligious dialogue become important foundations for creating harmony (Islam, 2018).

The theory of religious pluralism emphasises that every religion has the right to exist and be recognised in people's lives without denying the existence of other religions (Abdullah, 2018; Muhtarom et al., 2020; Shofan, 2011). This concept reflects the view that religious plurality is not a threat (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2014; Riyadi, 2016; Saumantri, 2023a). In the case of Indonesia itself, pluralism is an introduction to the understanding that religious diversity in Indonesia can be used as a source of strength to build social harmony and harmony while providing positive interaction between different religious groups that can increase social stability. Mutual respect and openness to dialogue are key factors in creating harmonious relationships (Arifand et al., 2023; Fajri, 2023). In this view, social harmony is passive - simply the absence of conflict - and active, where different religious groups work together to achieve common goals for the common good.

Method

Due to its cost efficiency, this research used a qualitative desk research method (Hoover Green & Cohen, 2021). Desk research, or secondary research, is an approach that utilises existing data such as previous reports, documents, websites and survey data to gain a comprehensive understanding (Ortega-Gras et al., 2021). Conducting desk research is an important first step for several reasons, including comprehensively understanding the



research topic, identifying information gaps, and allocating relevant sources of information (Clarke, 2006). In the context of this research, the focus was on how views in literature, related to the ban on interfaith greetings influence social dynamics in the community and how people respond to these different views in their daily lives. This research includes identifying the topic and purpose, selecting relevant sources, collecting data from various documents and media, collating the data and analysing it to gain deeper insights (Johnston, 2014; Miles et al., 2014).

Results and Discussion

Review of Islamic Law, Social Implications, and Efforts to Maintain Harmony on the Prohibition of Interfaith Greetings in Indonesia

The Indonesian Ulema Council's (MUI) fatwa on the prohibition of interfaith greetings is based on Islamic legal principles that emphasise the importance of maintaining the oneness of Allah (tawhid) and not mixing religious beliefs with other religious practices. The fatwa refers to the concept of *tasyabbuh* (imitation) with non-Muslims, which is considered prohibited, especially in matters related to religious celebrations. For example, in a hadith narrated by Imam Al-Bukhari, the Prophet warned Muslims not to imitate non-Muslim traditions in terms of worship or celebrations of other religions (Al Bukhori, 1997). In this context, the MUI considers that congratulating other religions' holidays can damage the faith and blur the religious identity of a Muslim (Al-Qaradhawi, 2009).

However, this prohibition has a wider impact on social relations between religious communities in Indonesia. For most people who uphold pluralism and tolerance, the ban can be seen as a barrier to maintaining social harmony. Harmony is vital because it promotes coexistence, reduces tensions, and ensures a peaceful and inclusive society where diverse groups can thrive together. Religious pluralism emphasises the importance of harmonious relationships without mixing beliefs (Aswarm et al., 2024; Iqbal, 2023). This has led to a debate in which some parties support the ban to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings. In contrast, others see it as challenging to create interfaith harmony in Indonesia (Majid, 2008). Politically, the government is also caught between these two currents. This insight is based on the observation that governments often face conflicting pressures from opposing societal or political groups, reflecting divisions in public opinion or ideology. The extent to which this reasoning is supported depends on data such as public opinion polls, policy analysis, and examples of government actions responding to these pressures, showing a balancing act to maintain political stability.

On the one hand, Pancasila (the official, foundational philosophical theory of Indonesia) as the basis of the state, encourages religious freedom and harmony. On the other hand, the government must accommodate the views of the majority of Muslims who support the MUI fatwa (Indonesian Ulema Council - Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI). Open and inclusive dialogue between MUI, religious leaders and civil society can help create a common understanding of the necessary boundaries of interfaith interaction without compromising religious identity.

Religious diversity in Indonesia is one form of diversity, and it is the primary identity of the nation. Diversity itself demands awareness of differences, including differences in beliefs, so as Indonesian citizens, we must respect each other's beliefs. In Islam, there is no prohibition from interacting and doing business with people of other religions. We are encouraged to respect each other, cooperate, and maintain good relations with non-Muslims in worldly matters. However, what about matters of *aqidah* or worship? For example, attending Christmas celebrations with Christians. Is it permissible to celebrate Christmas with Christians?

In this regard, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) has long issued a fatwa on the ruling of joint Christmas celebrations, which was issued in Jakarta on 7 March 1981 (mui.or.id, 2023).



In the fatwa, MUI asserted that participating in a joint Christmas ceremony for Muslims is haram. This is solely so that Muslims do not fall into shubhat and the prohibition of Allah Swt to participate in the rituals of other religions, such as Christmas. There are at least six reasons based on the verses of the Qur'an which are the basis for the prohibition of Muslims participating in other religious celebrations, especially Christian celebrations, including:

Qur'anic Verse Reference	Key Points	Explanation
Qs. Al-Hujurat [49]: 13, Qs. Luqman [31]: 15, Qs. Muntahanah [60]: 8	Cooperation with people of other religions in worldly affairs	Islam teaches that Muslims are allowed to interact and cooperate with people of other religions in worldly matters, such as in economic, social, and community development issues, as long as they do not interfere in matters of aqidah and worship.
Qs. Al-Kafirun [109]: 1-6, Qs. Al-Baqarah [2]: 42	Prohibition of mixing aqidah and worship	Muslims are forbidden to mix their beliefs with the aqidah and worship of other religions. These verses emphasise the importance of maintaining religious identity and avoiding doubt in matters of aqidah.
Qs. Maryam [19]: 30-32, Qs. Al-Maidah [5]: 75, Qs. Al-Baqarah [2]: 285	Confession of Jesus' prophethood	Islam recognises Isa as a prophet and apostle, but does not consider him to be the son of God. This is important in distinguishing the Muslim faith from the Christian faith, which regards Jesus as the Son of God.
Qs. Al-Maidah [5]: 72-73, Qs. At-Taubah [9]: 30	Kafir for those who consider God to be more than one	Anyone who believes that God has a son or that God is more than one is considered a disbeliever and polytheist. This verse makes it clear that the Christian belief in the Trinity contradicts the Islamic concept of monotheism.
Qs. Al-Maidah [5]: 116-118	Allah's question to Isa on the Day of Judgement	On the Day of Judgement, Allah will ask Isa whether he told his people to worship himself and his mother as God. Isa will reply that he never did. This is a strong rebuke to that belief.
Qs. Al-Ikhlâs [112]: 1-4	Tauhid: Allah is One	Islam asserts that God is One, begotten and unbegotten. This concept contradicts the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which regards Jesus as the Son of God.

Table 1. References to Qur'anic Verses in the Footing of the Prohibition of Participating in Celebrations of Other Religions. Source: Author;s own.

MUI's fatwa on the prohibition of participating in other religious celebrations, such as Christmas, aims to maintain the purity of Muslims' aqidah, especially in terms of tawhid. Islam allows cooperation with people of other religions in worldly matters, such as social, economic, and development issues, through Qur'anic verses that support harmonious relations between religious communities (Hamidah, 2015; Yasin & Saputra, 2021).

However, regarding aqidah and worship, Islam prohibits its followers from mixing beliefs with other religions (Khoir & Anshory, 2023; Larasati & Mubarak, 2020). This includes not being allowed to participate in rituals of other religions because it can blur a Muslim's religious identity (Matin, 2018). This prohibition of mixing aqidah is also reinforced by the prohibition of tasyabbuh or resembling non-Muslims in matters related to religious rituals.

Participating in celebrations such as Christmas is considered an offence because it mixes other religious beliefs with Islamic religious practices. Islamic teachings strictly avoid practices that could lead to confusion in a Muslim's faith. The main inference is that Islamic teachings prioritize preserving the purity of faith by discouraging practices or influences that might compromise belief, concluding that clarity and adherence to core principles are essential for spiritual integrity and avoiding deviations.

Islam also recognises Jesus as a prophet, but not as the Son of God, as Christians believe (Amaliyah, 2023; Arifinsyah, 2015). Muslims are obliged to recognise Jesus as a messenger of God but reject the concept of divinity that considers Jesus as part of God. This is achieved through the teaching of monotheism, which emphasises the oneness of God and prohibits the belief that God has children. In this case, the belief that God is more than one or has children, as in the concept of the Trinity, is considered kufr (to cover, hide, and disbelieve) in Islam (Soetapa, 2010; Wahyuni et al., 2022). As the main foundation of aqidah, tawhid affirms that



God is One, begotten and unborn, as affirmed in Qs. Al-Ikhlās. This principle is the main reason why Islam prohibits its followers from engaging in celebrations of other religions that contradict tawhīd. Preserving the oneness of Allah is the primary obligation of a Muslim, and any action that has the potential to harm this principle is considered a serious offence in Islamic teachings.

Dynamics of Community Tolerance Towards Interfaith Greetings in Indonesia

In Indonesia, religious authority is spread across various groups, such as local kiai, charismatic kiai, community organisations, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI). The name 'majelis ulama', a collection of Islamic religious leaders, reflects its role as an institution that 'officially' holds authority over religious views in Indonesia. Using quotation marks on the word 'official' emphasises that the formation of MUI is inseparable from political aspects, as the New Order government established it to legitimise power through religion. Diverse religious authorities in Indonesia often have different views from each other, so people can choose which view to follow. Choosing a fatwa from a particular authority often influences people's social actions. In the context of the MUI's recent fatwa on the prohibition of interfaith greetings and interfaith holiday greetings, differences in views among religious authorities have also emerged. For example, the Ministry of Religious Affairs stated that interfaith greetings are not a threat to faith but rather important for strengthening harmony (Kemenag.go.id, 2023).

According to some, especially academics, MUI fatwas sometimes 'legitimise' acts of violence against different groups, especially minorities. For example, the blasphemy fatwa against Ahmadiyah and Gafatar is considered to have encouraged persecution against these groups (Alnizar, 2019). The blasphemy fatwa against Ahok is also considered to have triggered mass actions demanding legal proceedings against him.

Although MUI does not directly encourage persecution or mass action, it is difficult not to associate these social events with MUI's fatwas. As an important religious authority, MUI's fatwa has a significant role in Indonesia's religious and even state life. The attitude of Muslims as the majority certainly has an impact on social life in this country, where religious harmony is very influential and critical for the stability of the state and all citizens irrespective of religious orientation.

Hans Kung (1993) said there will be no peace between nations without inter-religious peace. Peace in a country will not be achieved without interreligious harmony (Harjuna, 2019; Kung et al., 2010). Therefore, the fatwa should ideally encourage harmony in the state's life. Bans on interfaith greetings, holiday greetings, and heretical judgements against certain groups have broad social dimensions. Fatwas's views on these issues can influence social actions towards certain groups in the long run.

Some scholars argue that extreme actions, including terrorism, often stem from exclusive attitudes that claim a single truth. On the other hand, efforts to strengthen group identity over some time have the potential to trigger extreme actions, including terrorism (Atran, 2011).

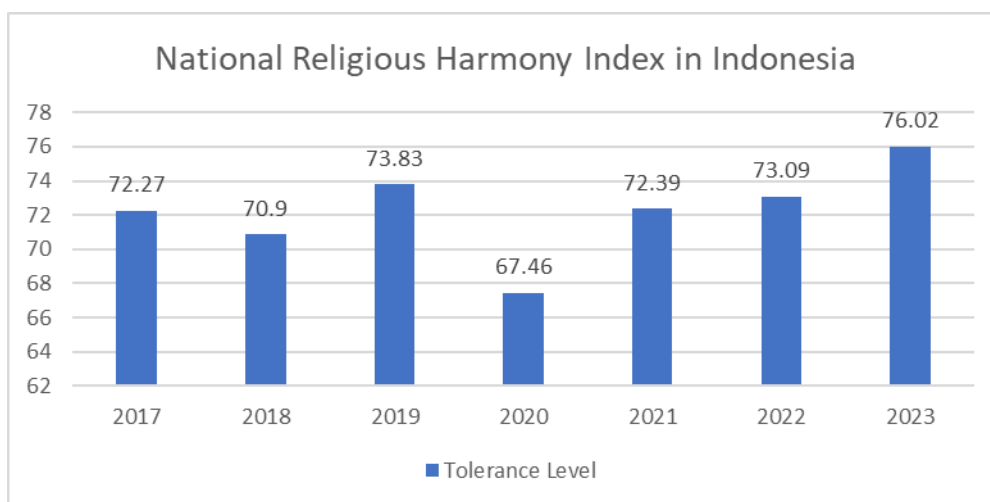
On the other hand, Indonesia will inevitably be known as a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, reaching around 231 million people or 86.7% of the total population, based on data from the Central Statistics Agency in 2023. However, although the majority of the population is Muslim, Indonesia also has a diversity of officially recognised religions, namely Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The religious holidays of each religion, such as Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, Nyepi, Vesak, and Chinese New Year, are recognised and celebrated nationally, becoming symbols of religious harmony in Indonesian social life. In this case, the issue of interfaith greetings becomes an



interesting topic. Interfaith greetings, or one of diversity, is the tradition of greeting from various religions, especially in Indonesia (Siahaan, 2020; Wafirah et al., 2020).

In addition, the prohibition of interfaith greetings can be seen as a form of strengthening the identity of certain groups. Although greetings from various religions have the same meaning, aimed at prayers for peace, safety, and blessings, restricting greetings to certain languages or procedures reinforces the group's identity, regardless of the substance. Indonesia has unique social capital in that some people are accustomed to interfaith and holiday greetings. Even in state events, interfaith greetings are often delivered, showing the social wealth that must be nurtured to maintain harmony amidst the diversity of religions, races, ethnicities, languages and cultures.

According to the National Religious Tolerance Index (KUB), in 2023, the level of religious tolerance in Indonesian society showed that 76.02% of people support coexistence with people of other religions. This data increased from 2022, when it was 73.09%. This data shows that although people generally accept the concept of diversity, issues related to religious symbols, such as interfaith greetings, still cause discomfort in certain circles. Because these practices may be perceived by some as compromising their religious identity or violating doctrinal principles



Graph 1. National Religious Harmony Index 2017-2023
Source: (Mui.or.id, 2023)

Interfaith greetings and interfaith holiday greetings are not only a form of respect for differences but also carry the message of not making a big deal out of differences. Despite different religions, all the nation's children have the same goal: A peaceful, safe and prosperous Indonesia. This message can strengthen social harmony. Conversely, restricting greetings to certain groups with certain languages has the potential to reinforce differences and become a threat to social harmony.

Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid once criticised the MUI, stating that the vast discourse of Islam was being simplified through fatwas, which could be contrary to the purpose of Muhammad's prophetic mission. History shows that the Prophet Muhammad lived in harmony with people of other religions. He would encourage his followers to pray for other groups in languages they understand, including interfaith greetings if he were still alive.



Recognition of Religious Holidays as a Form of Interfaith Tolerance in Indonesia

Indonesia is known as a country with a diverse society in terms of religion, ethnicity, culture, and language. With a majority Muslim population, Indonesia still upholds the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means Different but still one. This principle is realised by officially recognising six main religions: Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. To maintain inter-religious harmony, the Indonesian government sets several holidays for each religion as national holidays, which are stated in the official state calendar.

Establishing these religious holidays recognises religious freedom and manifests societal tolerance and equality (Fauzi, 2017). Every religious community is free to worship and celebrate their holidays with the government's full support, which guarantees these religious rights. In addition, by recognising religious holidays in the national calendar, Indonesia demonstrates its commitment to maintaining interfaith harmony, which is essential for social stability and national peace.

Religion	Big Day	Explanation
Islam	Isra Mi'raj of the Prophet Muhammad	Commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's journey from the Grand Mosque to the Aqsa Mosque, to Sidratul Muntaha.
	Beginning of Ramadan	The beginning of the month of fasting for Muslims, lasting for a whole month as one of the pillars of Islam.
	Eid al-Fitr (1 Syawal 1445 H)	The feast day after a month of fasting in Ramadan, characterised by Eid prayers and gatherings.
	Eid al-Adha (10 Dhulhijjah 1445 AH)	The sacrificial holiday commemorates the sacrifice of Prophet Ibrahim AS, who was willing to sacrifice his son, Ismail, on the orders of Allah SWT.
	Islamic New Year (1 Muharram)	It marks the beginning of a new year in the Hijri calendar, commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina.
	Maulid Nabi Muhammad SAW	Commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad as the central figure in Islam.
Protestant & Catholic	Good Friday	Commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice to atone for human sin.
	Easter	Celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day after His crucifixion.
	Ascension of Jesus Christ	Commemorates the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven after His resurrection.
	Christmas	The birthday of Jesus Christ, celebrated as a feast day by Christians around the world.
Hindu	Nyepi	The Saka New Year holiday in Hindu tradition, celebrated with fasting, meditation, and self-control, is accompanied by an atmosphere of silence in Bali.
	Galungan	Celebrating the victory of righteousness (Dharma) over evil (Adharma), and the presence of the ancestors.
	Brass	The last day of the Galungan series, when the ancestors return to their realm after visiting the world to receive offerings.
Buddha	Vesak	A major Buddhist holiday commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and death of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha.
Confucianism	Chinese New Year	The celebration of the new year in the Chinese calendar, celebrated by ethnic Chinese with worship to ancestors, prayers, and hopes for the new year.

Table 2. Religious holidays in Indonesia

Source: Author's own.

The Indonesian government recognises these religious holidays as part of its efforts to strengthen interfaith tolerance and maintain social peace. This recognition also shows that Indonesia values differences and embraces diversity as a national strength. Tolerance in daily life is greatly influenced by the recognition of these holidays, where every religion has the space to celebrate their holy days without discrimination. Through this policy, Indonesian people can continue to live in harmony and respect each other's differences. Religious



holidays are also an important symbol of respect for diversity, which must be maintained and strengthened to ensure the stability and prosperity of the nation amidst religious differences.

Conclusion

The ban on interfaith greetings in Indonesia shows that religious tolerance is fundamental to maintaining harmony in a diverse society. Although the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued a fatwa prohibiting congratulations to followers of other religions based on the principles of monotheism and loyalty to Islamic teachings, this view is not fully accepted by society. Many religious groups, including local kiai and community organisations, advocate a more inclusive stance, emphasising that interfaith congratulations are more a form of respect than theological recognition. This reflects the diversity of religious authorities in Indonesia, where different views can affect social dynamics and efforts to maintain harmony in society.

Furthermore, it is important to note that religious diversity in Indonesia is an integral part of the nation's identity. Awareness of differences and beliefs must be nurtured to create an essential harmonious social climate. Therefore, there needs to be a more pragmatic approach from religious leaders and religious institutions, including MUI, in dealing with issues of interfaith interactions in general. By promoting open dialogue and mutual respect, Indonesia can continue strengthening social harmony in the face of mounting challenges.

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