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Managing Differences Through Religiousness That Has An Impact In A Fragmented Society: Thoughts On The Sociology Of Religion

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Abstract

The phenomenon of modern multicultural societies and diversity of identities often leads to social fragmentation. This paper emphasizes the role of religion as a mediator of social integration, a provider of shared values, and a symbolic space that unites society. This research was conducted using a reflective qualitative approach through literature study and theoretical analysis of the sociology of religion. Data collection techniques involved documentation, specifically the review of academic works, journal articles, and key books in the field of religious sociology relevant to the topics of social integration and religiosity. Meanwhile, data analysis techniques employed thematic content analysis, focusing on the interpretation of meaning, values, and the social functions of religious practices within the context of a multicultural society. The results of the analysis show that open and impactful religious practices can be a middle ground in dealing with the complexity of a fragmented society. This article recommends strengthening inclusive religiosity through education, social policies, and interfaith forums in order to build sustainable social cohesion.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Impactful Religiosity, Social Fragmentation, Social Capital Sociology of Religion

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INTRODUCTION

Social life is becoming increasingly complex and rich with diversity of identities due to the development of globalization, human mobility, and advances in communication technology. This diversity encompasses various religions, cultures, languages, ethnicities, and value orientations. Diversity should be a social asset that encourages interaction and mutual understanding. However, in reality, these differences often lead to segregation, exclusion, and even conflicts that threaten social integration (Ansori, Budiman, & Nahdi, 2020; Umi & Ichwayudi, 2022). One tangible result of society's failure to manage diversity inclusively is social fragmentation. In this regard, it is important to examine how cultural components, including religion, can play a strategic role in maintaining social cohesion.

The relevance of religiosity as a social tool in addressing divisions within multicultural societies is the reason why this research is important. Inclusive and reflective religious practices offer hope for building bridges between groups amid rising intolerance and identity polarization occurring in various parts of the world. Impactful religiosity encompasses not only individual spiritual aspects but also social roles such as values of mutual sympathy, empathy, justice, and solidarity. These values can encourage discussion and cooperation among multiple actors from diverse identities. Sociological studies of religion have not extensively explored this discourse, particularly in relation to issues of modern social fragmentation.

There are two main gaps that underlie this research, namely the theory gap and the research gap. First, in classical works of sociology of religion such as those of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, religion is positioned as a social structure that provides ethical motivation or forms solidarity. However, this paradigm needs to be expanded in the context of today's multicultural and post-secular societies. Religiosity is no longer seen merely as a system of meaning regulated by institutions. Instead, it is now viewed as an interactive, contextual, and transformative practice focused on context. Second, in empirical studies, there is little research that explicitly addresses the influence of religiosity on mobility in public spaces to manage differences and resolve social conflicts. Many studies focus on religious extremism, fundamentalism, or the relationship between religion and conflict, but few pay attention to the benefits of religion as a unifying force in diverse societies. Research on religious practices that promote social inclusion is still scarce, especially in countries like Indonesia, where religious pluralism is the foundation of society.

To analyze the relationship between religion and social life, the literature on the sociology of religion provides a strong theoretical foundation. According to Émile Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, religion builds social solidarity. Religion is considered a

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symbolic representation of the principles held by a society (Putri, 2022). Mechanical solidarity is relatively easy to form in a homogeneous society. However, religion must play a more dialogical and adaptive role in complex and pluralistic societies. In The Sacred Canopy, Peter Berger (1967) views religion as nomos or the order of meaning (Hjelm, 2018). Religious authority becomes more relative as society enters an era of value pluralism. This poses challenges in maintaining social cohesion. In such situations, a reflective and open religiosity becomes important to maintain the relevance of religion in society. José Casanova (1994) states that viewing religion in the public sphere is crucial.

In his 2000 book Bowling Alone, Putnam emphasizes the importance of participating in value-based communities to strengthen social solidarity, and how religiosity functions as a source of networks, trust, and social norms that support social cohesion. The literature on social capital also contributes greatly to this understanding (Morrow & Scorgie-Porter, 2017). Within this framework, impactful religiosity can be seen as social capital that brings shared values to life in social spaces. This study recommends the development of a modern sociological perspective on religion that views religiosity as a social practice and doctrinal structure that impacts intergroup relations in a pluralistic society. This is based on the importance of the issue, theoretical differences, and the literature review above. This study suggests how religious practices are carried out in social fragmentation and how religious values are used to counter polarization and create space for discussion and cooperation.

In addition, this study proposes that the sociology of religion should explore social practices rather than just theory. This includes research on different religious communities, interfaith discussion forums, social actions based on religious principles, and humanitarian movements driven by spiritual ethics. It is hoped that this emphasis on religious practices will strengthen the role of religion as a middle ground that can overcome differences without eliminating identity. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to fill a scientific gap that has not been widely discussed, namely how religiosity can function as a sociological solution to strengthen social cohesion and social adhesion in a society that is vulnerable to disintegration and polarization. In addition to its theoretical benefits, this research has practical benefits for developing social policies, multicultural education, and strengthening the role of religion-based civil society.

RESEARCH METHOD

The focus of this study is to understand how religious influence plays a role in managing

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social differences in fragmented societies, from the perspective of the sociology of religion. This study employs a qualitative approach using literature review and reflective analysis of relevant literature and cases (Adlini, Dinda, Yulinda, Chotimah, & Merliyana, 2022; Darmalaksana, 2020; Wahyudin, 2017). Data collection techniques involved an in-depth review of books, journal articles, policy documents, and reports on interfaith social practices. Data analysis techniques used content analysis and thematic interpretation to identify patterns of meaning related to the role of religiosity in social integration. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, theoretical validation, and the connection between literature findings and the actual social context. Conclusions were drawn inductively and reflectively, synthesizing religious sociology theory and inclusive religious practices that have an impact in pluralistic societies. This method enables a deep understanding of religion's potential as a social force in responding to social fragmentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Social Fragmentation and Identity Polarization

The phenomenon of social fragmentation is one of the major challenges in today's modern and multicultural societies. Social fragmentation refers to a condition in which social cohesion in society weakens, and interactions between groups disintegrate due to differences in identity, interests, and perspectives. One of the main causes of this fragmentation is identity polarization, which is the tendency of individuals or groups to identify exclusively with their own group, while separating themselves from or even opposing other groups that are different (Volkan, 2009).

In the context of a pluralistic society, identity polarization often occurs along lines of religious, ethnic, cultural, and political affiliation differences. The exclusive nature of these identities causes society to lose its cross-border meeting space, which ultimately deepens social divides and increases the potential for conflict. This polarization of identity does not occur in a vacuum, but is reinforced by various factors such as social inequality, structural injustice, and narratives of identity that are intensively produced in the media. One important aspect that exacerbates social fragmentation is when religion is used as an instrument of political identity. In many cases, religious teachings that should serve as moral and spiritual guidelines are manipulated to reinforce the claims of truth of certain groups. Religion is then no longer positioned as a sacred and inclusive space, but is reduced to an exclusive symbol for certain groups to build rigid social boundaries. This religiously based identity polarization gives rise to sectarianism, intolerance, and even symbolic and physical violence toward those with different

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beliefs or religious interpretations (Sopiyan, Hidayat, Setiawati, & Hadi, 2022).

Concrete examples of this polarization can be found in several social contexts, including in Indonesia, when elections or socio-political dynamics involve religious sentiment as a tool for mass mobilization. Religious or sectarian differences become a means of differentiation that is then attached to moral or political superiority. This situation reinforces the "us" versus "them" mentality in the social structure, and damages national unity and the spirit of unity in diversity. Furthermore, social media and digital communication technology also play a role in reinforcing social fragmentation. Digital platforms often become open arenas for the reproduction of exclusive identity narratives, hate speech, and the spread of hoaxes targeting different groups. Social media algorithms tend to reinforce echo chambers, where individuals are only exposed to views that align with their identity, closing off dialogue with other groups. This accelerates the process of identity radicalization, including in the form of religious extremism that rejects diversity and dialogue.

However, it is important to note that identity is essentially dynamic and negotiable. Social fragmentation is not a final condition, but rather a social process that can be mitigated and restored towards integration. To that end, an approach is needed that can bridge differences and encourage inclusive social interaction. The sociology of religion views religion as an ambivalent social force. On one hand, it can be a source of exclusivity and conflict, but on the other hand, it also has great potential to build social cohesion, expand solidarity, and create spaces for dialogue across identities. This is where the importance of developing impactful religiosity lies—religiosity that does not stop at symbolic and ritualistic expressions but is manifested in social practices that open spaces for collaboration and recognition of diversity.

Religiousness that has an impact can be a significant alternative in addressing social fragmentation. Through the values of compassion, justice, and mutual respect found in almost all religious traditions, individuals and groups can transcend the barriers of identity that divide them. Inclusive religious practices can also create shared values that serve as a common foundation for various social groups. In this context, multicultural education based on religious values, strengthening interfaith forums, and creating open public spaces for intergroup dialogue are concrete steps to address fragmentation. Furthermore, the state and religious institutions have a strategic role in promoting religious narratives that are liberating, tolerant, and value humanity as a core principle. Thus, understanding social fragmentation and identity polarization is not only important for identifying contemporary societal issues but also serves as the foundation for designing impactful religiously-based solutions, as proposed in this study.

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B. Religiousness as Social Capital

Religiousness in the context of the sociology of religion is not only understood as a personal spiritual expression that is individual in nature, but also as a social dimension that has transformative power in society. When religiosity is practiced inclusively and impactfully, it can shape and strengthen social capital—a set of norms, beliefs, networks, and values that enable cooperation and solidarity between individuals and groups. Impactful religiosity emerges when religious teachings are not merely memorized dogmas but are truly internalized and manifested in daily behavior. Noble values such as love, justice, tolerance, honesty, and empathy, which are at the core of the teachings of almost all major world religions, when deeply internalized, will encourage the formation of harmonious social structures. In this framework, religion serves as a source of shared values that connect individuals from diverse backgrounds, even if they differ theologically.

Group trust, cross-identity social networks, and social norms that encourage cooperation in social life are some examples of social capital derived from religiosity. Interfaith practices such as interfaith community service, intercommunity humanitarian aid during disasters, and interfaith dialogue in mediating local conflicts are some examples of interfaith practices. According to sociologists such as Robert Putnam, social capital is an important component in building a democratic and stable society. In his book Bowling Alone (2000), Putnam explains that the likelihood of mutual trust and shared responsibility emerging is related to the level of citizen participation in value-based social activities (Badescu & Uslaner, 2003). Places of worship, religious organizations, and interfaith religious activities serve as media for the formation of bridging social capital, which is a social bridge that unites different groups.

In Indonesia, there are many real examples of the use of religion as social capital. The Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) in various regions does one thing: it facilitates meetings between religious leaders of different faiths to resolve issues that could lead to interfaith conflict. Interfaith trust and understanding are built through this forum, and this has an impact on the social life of the community. Another example is the joint social action taken by interfaith communities when dealing with natural disasters. Religious organizations from various backgrounds often collaborate in humanitarian activities such as fundraising, health services, or community kitchens during floods, earthquakes, or pandemics. In such situations, religious differences no longer act as barriers; instead, they become catalysts for unity and mutual care.

Religion as social capital has great potential to become a unifying force in a fragmented society. Social capital is formed when religious values are applied in actions that honor human

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dignity and recognize that diversity is part of God's creation (Banout & Henderson, 2018). It also strengthens social structures and encourages cultural transformation towards a more tolerant and just society. Therefore, influential religiosity not only enhances individual spirituality but also builds a social foundation to address the challenges of separation and identity polarization. Religion is a moral means of uniting differences.

C. Religiousness and the Middle Path in Multicultural Societies

Multicultural societies, which consist of diverse religions, ethnicities, cultures, and worldviews, face serious challenges in maintaining social cohesion amid differences. In this context, religiosity plays a crucial role (Alwi, Syukur, & Upe, 2023). However, this role can be ambivalent: on one hand, it has the potential to strengthen unity, but on the other hand, it can exacerbate conflicts if practiced in an exclusive and dogmatic manner. This is why a middle ground approach is needed, where inclusive religious practices can serve as a bridge rather than a dividing wall. The middle ground referred to in this context is not a theological compromise or syncretism that equates all religions, but rather an ethical approach that fosters dialogue, mutual recognition, and openness to differences. Inclusive religiosity does not require everyone to have the same views, but it does require the recognition that every identity has the same right to exist in the public sphere (Tuwo, 2023). This is where religion functions as a mediator of differences, not a trigger for conflict.

Religious practices that take the middle path reject two extremes: religious extremism and radical secularism. Extremism uses religion as an exclusive tool and justification for violence against other groups, while radical secularism tends to isolate religion from the public sphere and impose a neutrality that sometimes ignores the spiritual identity of society. The middle path offers a humanistic alternative where religion remains present in social life but in an open, reflective, and inclusive form. Concrete examples of this middle path can be seen in interfaith dialogue initiatives, interfaith cooperation, and multicultural education rooted in universal spiritual values. Forums such as interfaith councils, interfaith social activities, and character education curricula based on values of compassion and tolerance are concrete examples of religious practices that adopt the middle path (Adjani, Oktaviani, & Ulfa, 2024). In such spaces, religion does not seek to claim sole truth but rather to build an ethics of encounter—where humans are treated as fellow creations of God, regardless of their religious background.

In a society prone to polarization, this middle ground is crucial to ensuring diversity is preserved without losing moral direction. Religion, in this role, serves as an ethical inspiration that

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shapes citizens who are not only spiritually devout but also socially responsible. Religiosity that follows the middle path produces individuals who are not only devout in ritual but also fair in social relations. Therefore, developing a moderate and impactful form of religiosity has become an urgent necessity in the context of a multicultural society. The middle path is not merely a strategic choice but also an ethical path toward creating a more peaceful, just, and humane world.

D. Contextual Study: Indonesia and Impactful Religious Practices

As a country with high religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, Indonesia is a complex social laboratory that is rich in impactful religious practices. Amidst the challenges of polarization and potential identity conflicts, Indonesia demonstrates various concrete ways in which religion can be a constructive and unifying social force. Religious practices in Indonesia are not only manifested in ritual and spiritual aspects but also in tangible contributions to social life, humanity, and education across identities. One notable example is the role of the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB). The FKUB was established as a platform for dialogue and mediation among religious leaders to resolve religious issues at the local level, such as the construction of places of worship, interfaith conflicts, and the formulation of social and religious policies in the region (Idris, Ikrar, & Ikmal, 2013; Khan & Haneef, 2022). Through the FKUB, religious practices are no longer sectarian in nature but have become a tool for facilitating communication and mediation based on equality and mutual understanding. The FKUB does not exist to standardize beliefs but to ensure that religious diversity does not lead to social segregation. In many cases, the FKUB has been able to prevent horizontal conflicts and serve as a bridge for dialogue that strengthens local social cohesion.

Another example of religious practices having an impact in Indonesia is interfaith humanitarian action in situations of natural disaster. When earthquakes, floods, or pandemics strike, interfaith solidarity often emerges spontaneously. Religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, the Indonesian Council of Churches (PGI), and other interfaith communities collaborate in providing humanitarian aid without regard to the victims' religion. This collaboration demonstrates that religious values—such as love, mutual aid, and empathy—can drive concrete cooperation beyond doctrinal boundaries (Clarke & Tittensor, 2016; Shaw, 1964). Such practices show that impactful religiosity is not merely normative discourse but a social reality that strengthens solidarity among groups. Another important aspect is character education based on religious values within the curriculum of multicultural schools.

The Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, has integrated

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character education into the national curriculum. Values such as tolerance, responsibility, honesty, and mutual cooperation are promoted not only as moral teachings but also as part of contextual religious practices (Alwi, Mansur, & Untarti, 2023). In some multicultural schools, teachers consciously link religious values to the social lives of their students, creating an inclusive learning environment that values diversity. Such education fosters a generation of young people who possess both spiritual and social awareness, which is an important foundation for maintaining harmony in a pluralistic society.

From these three examples, it can be concluded that religion in Indonesia can be effective in maintaining harmony, fostering solidarity, and strengthening social integration. Religious practices no longer remain confined to symbolic and private dimensions but have become a concrete and solution-oriented social force. This indicates that Indonesia possesses strong religious social capital to address the challenges of fragmentation and identity polarization. Of course, the sustainability of these practices requires a collective commitment from the state, religious leaders, educational institutions, and civil society to continue fostering reflective, open, and impactful religious practices in communal life.

CONCLUSION

Religiosity, from a sociological perspective, is not merely a personal spiritual expression but also a social capital with the power to foster cohesion in a diverse society. When religious values such as love, justice, and inclusivity are internalized and practiced reflectively, religiosity can become a social force that mitigates conflict, bridges differences, and strengthens solidarity among groups. In the context of a fragmented society, impactful religious practices serve as an effective middle ground—rejecting extremism while avoiding secularism that negates the role of religion. Contextual studies in Indonesia show that through interfaith forums, humanitarian action, and character education based on religious values, religiosity contributes significantly to social peace. Therefore, it is important for the state and civil society to continue promoting moderate, open, and impactful forms of religiosity in order to create a just, peaceful, and inclusive social order.

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