



Framing the Religious Dialogue Space: Learning from the Experience in North Sumatra

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the perspective of non-Muslim communities towards Muslim religious practices in North Sumatra. This study uses a qualitative approach with a letiratur study method with a phenomenological approach. The results of the study show that non-Muslim communities generally have different views on Muslim religious practices, ranging from tolerance to skepticism. It is hoped that this research will provide deeper insights into the dynamics of interfaith relations and encourage constructive dialogue between various communities in North Sumatra. Thus, the perception of non-Muslim communities towards Muslim religious practices reflects the diversity of views influenced by the local social and cultural context. So research can show that while many non-Muslims value and respect Muslim worship practices, there are also misconceptions and rejections of certain aspects that can and should not be upheld in the public sphere.

Keywords: *Religious Dialogue; Experience; North Sumatra*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi perspektif masyarakat non-muslim terhadap praktik keagamaan muslim di Sumatera Utara. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi letiratur dengan pendekatan fenomenologi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat non-muslim umumnya memiliki pandangan yang berbeda terhadap praktik keagamaan Muslim, mulai dari toleransi hingga skeptisisme. Diharapkan penelitian ini akan memberikan wawasan yang lebih dalam tentang dinamika hubungan antaragama dan mendorong dialog konstruktif antara berbagai komunitas di Sumatera Utara. Sehingga persepsi masyarakat non-Muslim terhadap praktik keagamaan Muslim mencerminkan keragaman pandangan yang dipengaruhi oleh konteks sosial dan budaya lokal. Jadi penelitian dapat menunjukkan bahwa meskipun banyak orang non-Muslim menghargai dan menghormati praktik ibadah Muslim, ada juga kesalahpahaman dan penolakan terhadap aspek-aspek tertentu yang boleh dan tidak boleh ditegakkan di ruang publik.

Kata Kunci: *Dialog Agama; Pengalaman; Sumatera Utara*

INTRODUCTION

North Sumatra is one of the provinces in Indonesia that is known for its cultural and religious diversity. The province is inhabited by various ethnic groups, such as Batak, Malay, and Nias, and has a population consisting of followers of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and local beliefs. In this context,

interfaith interactions are very important to understand, especially in terms of non-Muslim people's perception of Muslim religious practices. This study aims to explore how non-Muslim communities in North Sumatra view religious practices carried out by Muslims. (Nirwana & Rais, 2019)

In North Sumatra, where the majority of the population is Muslim, the existence of non-Muslim communities often faces challenges in understanding and accepting different religious practices. This creates complex social dynamics that need to be further researched. History records that Islam entered North Sumatra around the 19th century through traders and religious spreaders from Minangkabau. The acculturation process between Islamic teachings and local culture has resulted in a variety of unique religious practices. However, despite a long history of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, there are still misconceptions and stereotypes that can affect interfaith relations. In the context of this diversity, it is important to understand how non-Muslim societies view Muslim religious practices in their daily lives. For example, worship practices such as prayers, Ramadan fasting, and Eid celebrations are often in the spotlight for non-Muslim communities. (S. M. Harahap et al., 2022)

In addition, social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims in the context of education, work, and social activities also plays an important role in shaping their perception of each other. Non-Muslims who have Muslim friends or co-workers may have a more positive outlook compared to those who do not have direct experience interacting with Muslims. Therefore, this study will delve deeper into how these social experiences affect non-Muslim people's perceptions of Muslim religious practices. In order to achieve the objectives of this research, a qualitative approach will be used to explore the views and experiences of non-Muslim communities through in-depth interviews and participatory observations. (Atthahar, 2020)

By understanding the perspective of non-Muslim communities towards Muslim religious practices, it is hoped that this research can contribute to the development of constructive interfaith dialogue and increase understanding and tolerance among various religious groups in North Sumatra. In addition, the results of this research can also be a reference for the government and related institutions in formulating policies that support harmony between religious communities and create a harmonious social environment. Overall, this study aims to answer key questions about how non-Muslims view Muslim religious practices in North Sumatra and what factors influence these perceptions. (Shalihin et al., 2021)

METHOD

This research method uses a literature study with a phenomenological approach to understand the experience of religious dialogue in North Sumatra. The focus of the research is to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of non-Muslim communities towards Muslim religious practices

in the region. Through literature analysis, this study collects various documents, such as mass media articles, official government records, and related academic materials. The phenomenological approach is described with a narrative referring to the theory of social construction, analysis includes the stages of data interpretation, data reduction, data presentation and conclusion drawing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiculturalism and Social Conflict in North Sumatra

Talking about relations between religious people, especially in Indonesia is one of the countries that adheres to multicultural culture, which is one of the topics that is always interesting and very common in discussion, because the pattern of relations between religious people is decisive for the creation of balance and harmony between religious people. In a multicultural culture, it is very natural for pros and cons between one belief and another, but what is very unnatural is that if the pros and cons continue and reap new problems, it can even trigger prolonged conflicts, which are sometimes only caused by the cross-opinion of religious people. (Desa et al., 2024) In Indonesia, conflicts between religious communities have also been inked in black, that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims has a lot of conflicts in the name of religion. Among them is the Poso conflict, the first social conflict in Poso occurred on December 24, 1998, solely due to clashes between youths of different religions.

This event gave rise to a fairly strong religious sentiment among Muslims and Christians, because this event coincided with the dynamics of Christmas celebrations and the fasting month, and at the same time the political atmosphere that was heating up regarding the issue of the regent election in Poso. This is also a major issue for both parties in strengthening their respective structures inside and outside the group through mobilizing the masses based on religious identity. (Sunday & Purba, 2023). Then the problem in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra, in July 2016. This conflict is one of the forms of crackdown that many residents have taken against ethnic minorities, namely the Chinese population. In terms of such violent actions such as non-physical threats and places of worship being burned. The Chinese population faces indirect pressure for them to comply with the rules set by the majority members. 11 monasteries and 2 foundations were destroyed by residents and several buildings around Buddhist places of worship were burned. This conflict originated from the lack of knowledge of the local community, which caused social jealousy among the Buddhists of Tanjung Balai. (Ismiati & Fedryansyah, 2017)

In this discussion, it can be clarified that religious rituals are a series of actions, speeches, or practices that are often carried out by individuals or groups as part of the expression of their religious beliefs. These rituals often have a deep symbolic meaning and serve to connect people with their spiritual aspects, traditions, or communities. Basically, religious rituals usually have a clear structure and established ordinances, often passed down from generation to generation. This ordinance can be in the form of a sequence of actions, prayers, songs, or even certain readings. (Suryono, 2020) For example, candles in the Christian tradition are often considered a symbol of light and hope. Rituals can be carried out communally, for example, Hari Raya

celebrations, worship in mosques, churches, or temples or privately, for example, private prayer or meditation. In religious practice, rituals are considered very sacred, so they are carried out with respect and seriousness. Some rituals may involve the use of sacred objects or specific locations. Then in religious rituals are often repeated periodically, such as daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly, which helps to strengthen the identity and beliefs of a religious community. (Alganih, 2016) Affirming Community Identity Through rituals, individuals feel part of a group or community that shares common beliefs and values, which helps to reinforce a sense of identity and community. Many rituals are designed to mark important events in an individual's life, such as birth, marriage, or death. It helps people in dealing with change, loss, or transition. (Fitriana, 2020) In the practice of rituals many people find calm and hope, which can help reduce stress or anxiety, especially in difficult situations. Religious perception and identity are two important aspects in understanding social dynamics and interreligious relations in society. Religious perception refers to the way in which individuals or groups interpret and understand religion, including religious beliefs, values, and practices. Religious identity, on the other hand, is how individuals or groups identify themselves (North & Both, n.d.)

North Sumatra is a microcosm of diversity that exists in Indonesia, where many have various ethnicities and religions, in which they coexist with each other. As can be seen, the Batak, Malay, and other tribes have their own traditions and ways of life that affect the way they view other religions. Social tensions and interreligious relations are often influenced by historical, political, and economic aspects. (Sunday & Purba, 2023) Muslim communities in North Sumatra carry out various religious practices that reflect their faith and traditions. Activities such as congregational prayers, recitations, and celebrations of Islamic holidays are an integral part of daily life. For many non-Muslims, this practice can be interesting, as it shows a high level of dedication and discipline. However, there are also those who feel isolated or lack understanding the meaning behind the practices that exist in the religion. So in this case (Husna & Sari, 2023).

Religious Dialogue of Muslim and Non-Muslim Communities

Positive stories from personal experiences dissolve many existing stigmas. On the other hand, there is also a more skeptical view, some non-Muslims feel that certain practices, such as the call to prayer heard throughout the city or countryside, can interfere with their comfort. So that in that case it can cause a sense of intolerance towards Islam. The stereotype that Islam is rigid or exclusive so that it is likely to arise from a lack of understanding. In addition, in this global era, we will definitely be faced with the existence of social media that often contains news about tensions between existing religions so that conflicts can aggravate and muddy the atmosphere and will cause negative views for the community. (I. Harahap et al., 2023) Social media is so very influential if the news presented is not in accordance with the news in the field, then social media often creates an "echo chamber" where people are only exposed to views that are in line with their own beliefs. This can result in a lack of understanding and tolerance for different religious practices, and can reinforce intolerance towards Muslims. (Marbun & Nurabni, 2023) In this case, radicalization may occur, in some cases, such as individuals who are

exposed to extremist or provocative content on social media can experience a radicalization process, which in turn can trigger intolerant or aggressive actions against the Muslim community and other religions where there is a difference of understanding due to an alienation.(Aswad, 2023)

This reduces the space for empathy, understanding, and clarification of actual religious practices, making interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims increasingly difficult, and the lack of positive cultural exchange, so that social media has the potential to stop positive cultural exchanges between communities, when too much focus is on differences and conflicts, opportunities to share experiences and understand a religious practice in a broader context are neglected and ignored. Because the existence of conflicts in religious practices can have an effect to the younger generation, Young people who are exposed to negative content about Islam can internalize these stereotypes, which has an impact on the way they view their Muslim friends or neighbors, when social media is the main source of information, can reduce the importance of multicultural education that introduces a deeper understanding of different religious practices. Although in this case the main cause of the conflict is not also due to religious beliefs, but when it later becomes a riot involving different religious groups, the incident occurs because of extreme religious methods. There is no religion that teaches violence, but often the way of religion that views adherents of other religions in an unfriendly way creates a lot of vulnerabilities. (S. M. Harahap et al., 2022).

The perspective of non-Muslim communities towards Muslim religious practices in North Sumatra can be manifested in several forms, such as tolerance and harmony, where people of different religions can live in harmony and peace in the environment they live in. For example, when a non-Muslim neighbor holds a death ceremony, the Muslim neighbor whose house is adjacent will give up his house to use. In this case, there is also the development of halal tourism so that the research shows that non-Muslims who work as businessmen are more supportive of halal tourism, while academics need studies and other professions strongly refuse. Halal tourism is a tool for businessmen to reap all the profits from Muslim tourists, considering that Muslim tourists are people who spend their money to get satisfaction anywhere. Non-Muslims in the majority areas are not used as a place for population strength, but more than that, developed communities must think about how to improve the economy through the concept of tourism for development and welfare. (Marbun & Nurabni, 2023) To Muslim tourists, it means that the concept of halal tourism does not destroy the existence of the haram.

There are several points that are questioned to the informants related to tourism and halal tourism, namely the initials with the surname which states that the informants are Batak and 2 Buddhists. Batak respondents are Christians (Catholic and Protestant). Which areas they visit during their travels, how many trips they make in a year, and how much money they spend on traveling. Of course, it can be concluded that traveling is something that must be done by humans without looking at the religious background, that religious commandments. Because tourism is a demand of life to find and see new things, then the road, the road, the culinary, the scenery, seeing the scenery will certainly feel enjoyment by visitors.

There was no debate at the time of the interview related to halal tourism, but internally, the issue of Islamization or the spread of religion through tourism called halal tourism became their discussion and even strong rejection. However, not a few of the respondents support halal culinary which is part of the halal tourism variable, especially from the MSME profession that sells snacks. The existence of Halal labeling from the MUI (Indonesian Ulema Council), makes Dame Manurung's MSME products widely sold, because they are consumed by the Muslim community who still see halal from institutions trusted by the community and the government. Maybe for Mrs.

Hetti Panggabean, there is no problem with halal tourism, because it is related to the market or profits needed by the community, especially Muslims, so that the funds they have can be channeled through halal tourism. However, the researcher assesses that the respondents' literacy understanding related to halal tourism has not understood the basic concept of halal tourism formation. For researchers, the rejection of halal tourism in North Sumatra is a natural thing, because halal tourism products are products of Muslims because until now Christianization is still a movement to save people according to the view of Christianity, even besides that Islamization is also a movement to save people. This was conveyed by Alexander R. Arifianto in the title of his article *Explaining the Cause of Muslim-Christian Conflicts in Indonesia: Tracing the Origins of Christianization and Islamization*. (Salman Nasution, Indah Lestari Oct 22, 2024)

A religious practice also applies the Implementation of Islamic Sharia as in Aceh, especially in the city of Banda Aceh, which we often see related to the way of applying Islamic Sharia which tends to be practiced in ways with violent nuances by communities in various villages in the city of Banda Aceh, such as examples of cases that often occur when the punishment of violence is adultery (perverted), which is practiced by local communities. However, the implementation of Islamic Sharia seems to be powerless in preventing acts of violence that are often experienced by these violators, such as receiving inhumane treatment and persecution from the community, such as being bathed in sewer water, paraded by naked mobs, and even sexual harassment committed by residents. (Halal & Sumatra, 2024).

Changing the community's paradigama towards Islamic Sharia is certainly not complete in just one socialization of qanun (regional regulations) through the media or seminars, but requires greater energy in the long term, requires other persuasive approaches that are then able to realize public understanding of the application of Islamic Sharia itself. Islam is very polite and respects human rights, every violation has respectable ways of resolving through the law, both the laws that apply in this country and the Islamic law itself. The current implementation of Islamic Sharia in Aceh must receive an in-depth review from all parties, so that Islam in Aceh does not appear to be a radical Islam that legalizes violent methods, but becomes an authoritative, unpretentious and rahmatan lil'alam in Islam.

Fearing the consequences in the future, the community will be afraid of the implementation of Islamic Sharia in Aceh. However, it is not the fear of Allah's punishment, but the fear of receiving treatment that degrades the dignity of human beings themselves. Implementers or policy holders should be able to provide moral awareness to the community through the application of Islamic Sharia to achieve the pleasure of Allah Subhanahu wata'ala in the

long term. (*Muhammad Iqbal Maulana & Syahuri Arsyi, 2021*) Some of them (non-Muslims) have the view that the qanuns in the implementation of Islamic Sharia have elements of prevention against criminal acts/vices, so that they can create an atmosphere of life in an area to be safe, peaceful, peaceful and prosperous. This is because Islamic Sharia does not apply to non-Muslims but non-Muslims must respect and appreciate the rules of Islam, and if non-Muslims violate Islamic Sharia law, they are not punished like Muslims but they punish by paying fines or imprisonment according to national law, all this has been taught in Islam, that Islam must respect all kinds of religious differences. Those who are non-Muslims who live side by side with other Muslims must be protected and given their rights. (F Rijal · 2020) (Shalihin et al., 2021).

Collective Awareness in Maintaining Interreligious Harmony

To encourage better understanding, sustained efforts are needed in creating dialogue, education, and social initiatives that involve all elements of society. Thus, the hope of creating a harmonious society in the midst of differences can be realized, making North Sumatra a real example of tolerance and harmony between religious communities. The biggest challenge in establishing a positive perspective of non-Muslim communities towards Muslim religious practices is overcoming the fear of difference. In an effort to promote tolerance, it is important to develop a constructive and respectful dialogue. Initiatives involving interfaith cooperation in the fields of education, social, and culture are expected to reduce tensions and create mutual trust (Suryono, 2020)

In North Sumatra, many community activities involve various religious denominations, such as New Year's celebrations, cultural festivals, and humanitarian events, which are places where adherents of different religions meet. In this context, non-Muslim societies often recognize the beauty of the sense of community that arises from differences, which reinforces the values of tolerance and mutual respect. And non-Muslim communities should pay close attention to the religious obligations and rituals carried out by Muslims, including prayer, zakat, fasting, and hajj. Many of them consider the ritual to be an integral part of Muslim identity that is not only related to spiritual, but also social. For example, the practice of zakat carried out by Muslims is often responded positively by non-Muslim communities, because it is considered a form of social concern that is able to help the wider community, regardless of religious background. Many non-Muslim societies recognize the human values and virtues contained in Muslim religious practices, such as the stories in the Qur'an that promote peace and mutual respect. (Desa et al., 2024)

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that in general, non-Muslim communities in North Sumatra have a positive and tolerant view of the religious practices of Muslims. This is reflected in several aspects, the first is that there is mutual respect between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in carrying out their respective worships. Non-Muslim communities can understand and appreciate Muslim religious practices such as prayers, fasting, and celebrations of Islamic holidays, second, harmonious social interaction has

been built for a long time, where Muslim and non-Muslim communities can coexist peacefully and help each other in various community activities, and third, there is awareness of the importance of maintaining harmony between religious communities as a cultural heritage that has taken root in society. North Sumatra., the fourth is the existence of Muslim religious practices that are seen as part of local wisdom that also enriches the cultural treasures of North Sumatra. So in this case, despite differences in beliefs, non-Muslim communities show appreciation for the universal values contained in Muslim religious practices such as peace, compassion, and mutual cooperation. So that in this conclusion it shows that religious diversity in North Sumatra is actually a strength in building social harmony and tolerance between religious communities, where Muslim religious practices can be well accepted by non-Muslim communities as part of the dynamics of social life.

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