

INTERRELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION FOR BUILDING TOLERANCE BETWEEN MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN BENGKULU

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Abstract

Inter-religious communication is a process of dialogue between religions to find common ground between adherents of these religions, so that an understanding can be created to live in harmony and peace. This study aims to explain the Muslim and Christian communities in viewing differences, as well as the communication process of Muslim and Christian communities, as well as communication barriers that occur between the two. This research uses a qualitative approach to explore data in depth, with a snowball sampling technique in determining the subject, and data collection through interviews, observation, and documentation. The results showed three main findings. First, Muslim and Christian communities uphold tolerance, respect each other in worship, although there are variations in attitudes such as fanaticism among Muslims. Second, interfaith communication begins with dialogue between religious leaders who teach tolerance, followed by community dialogue with open communication, empathy, and respect, including nonverbal messages such as facial expressions and touch. The communication process involves linear, secular, transactional and religious models. Third, communication barriers include attribution error, stereotyping, social prejudice, ethnocentrism, and value differences. This research contributes academically in studying interfaith communication as an effort to build tolerance between Muslim and Christian communities through dialogue and strengthening the value of diversity.

Keywords: *Religion; Communication; Tolerance.*

INTRODUCTION

Human nature and religious life show that religious behaviour is an intrinsic part of human nature. Understanding the role of religion in culture makes it possible to appreciate the complexity and diversity of religious life experiences more deeply and thoroughly (Hamdan, 2019). Religion serves as a forum for expressing beliefs, which are reflected through various religious practices, such as worship rituals, prayers, and other traditions, which describe spiritual values and human relationships with God and others (Rahmatika, 2024).

Views on religion can change over time and social development. In the early 20th century, some people tended to have low religious tolerance, which was influenced by secular ideas and scientific progress (Ujang, 2020). References to conceptions of the origin of human belief in God, such as those expressed by Tylor, Herbert Spencer, and scholars in comparative religion, provide a deeper dimension to this study. They offer a new understanding of how and why humans develop spiritual beliefs and how they evolve over time. Any changes in views on religion can also be influenced by the social, economic and political context of the time (Syihab 2010).

The different cultural and religious backgrounds that are unique to Indonesia cause Christian and Muslim groups to mix and communicate among their adherents (Djollong & Akbar, 2019). However, these differences also have repercussions, such as income inequality, differences in religious rights, and lack of effective co-operation and communication (Rahmadhani, Achdiani, & Arlianty, 2024). Acts of intolerance against other groups caused by differences in religion, ethnicity and culture need to be addressed with a clear mind, especially related to religious symbols (Harahap, 2011). In this case, it is important to prioritise the spirit of nationalism and restrain high emotions, in order to reduce problems that arise in conflict-prone areas. Thus, provocations that have the potential to divide the nation can be avoided.

Christians and Muslims in Indonesia generally live in groups that reflect their respective religious identities, with strong religious symbols as part of their daily lives (Nainggolan & Sihotang, 2021). Despite this separation, Indonesia's culture of diversity and tolerance makes it easier for people to accept the differences that exist. The culture of mutual respect inherent in Indonesian society allows differences in religion, ethnicity and culture not to be a barrier, but rather a strength that strengthens interfaith relations (Ola & Keban, 2023). In many cases, such as in some areas of Bengkulu, despite the existence of clearly defined group life, relations between Muslims and Christians remain harmonious thanks to mutual understanding and respect for diversity (Ismail, 2019).

Interfaith dialogue activities play an important role in building better understanding between religious communities (Sulistiani, 2011). These dialogue meetings provide an opportunity for individuals to share their experiences and understanding of their respective religions. In addition, religious literacy in society can avoid a narrow understanding of a particular religion. Mass media, books and educational programmes play a key role in supporting this effort (Irwansyah 2020).

With the existing religious and ethnic plurality, the potential for conflict is a threat that needs to be addressed immediately. Facts on the ground show that creating harmony and tolerance in the midst of plurality is not an easy thing, mainly due to several factors. Firstly, the aggressive attitude in da'wah shown by some religious adherents (Haryani, 2019). Secondly, many religious organisations focus more on increasing the quantity of members than the quality of teaching (Muiz, Anisah,

Khoiruddin, & Indrioko, 2024). Third, there are differences and contrasts in economic participation between followers of different religions. All of these factors need to be considered in an effort to achieve interfaith peace and harmony (Ghozali 1988).

The importance of this research lies in its attempt to dig deeper into interfaith communication in the context of building tolerance, particularly between the Muslim and Christian communities in Bengkulu. Given the diversity that exists, an understanding of how interfaith dialogue can strengthen relations between religious groups is highly relevant, especially in this modern era. This research provides a clearer insight into the role of communication in reducing misunderstandings and increasing mutual understanding between adherents of different religions. In addition, the research also highlights the importance of building understanding and mitigating potential conflicts arising from differences, by emphasising the importance of mutual respect and openness between communities. The contribution of this research is very useful in strengthening togetherness in diversity and maintaining social harmony. The purpose of this study is to find out and explain the views of Muslim and Christian communities towards differences, the communication process that occurs between them, and the obstacles that arise in the communication.

Research that examines communication and tolerance of beliefs has been popular and widely published Hazan Sazali in his dissertation analysed the role of the Bogor and Yogyakarta City Governments, along with all stakeholders in strengthening religious tolerance (Sazali, 2016). Then Rahmawati and Hariyati analysed multicultural communication in the Interfaith Social Agency (BASOLIA) of Bogor City (Rahmawati & Hariyati, 2024). As well as Fatma Saskia Putri's research in her research on the persuasive communication strategy of the Gusdurian Tangerang community towards interfaith communities as well as the attitude of religious tolerance that is promoted towards interfaith communities in the Greater Tangerang area (Putri, 2021). While the focus of this research is to analyse inter-religious communication in building tolerance between Christian and Muslim communities. This research examines the role of dialogue between religious and community leaders in creating understanding and reducing the potential for conflict due to religious, ethnic and cultural differences. By highlighting the practice of open and empathic communication, this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of tolerance in a pluralistic society.

This research fills the gap in the study of religious tolerance between Christians and Muslims by digging deeper into the dynamics of interfaith communication, which is often overlooked in previous discourses. Through a deeper understanding of how these two communities interact, communicate and build understanding, this research makes a significant contribution in reducing misunderstandings that often arise due to religious, ethnic and cultural differences. The focus of this research on dialogue between religious and community leaders helps to enrich the study of tolerance

practices that are not only theoretical, but also concrete in everyday life. Thus, this research provides a new perspective that strengthens integration and harmony between Christians and Muslims, and enriches the literature on diversity and religious tolerance.

METHOD

The research approach used in this study is a qualitative approach, which aims to understand social phenomena in depth without testing certain theories or hypotheses (Prasetia, 2022). This research is developmental in nature, focusing on the creation and development of a system that can enhance inter-religious social harmony. The research design applied was a case study, in which researchers collected information about the interaction and communication between Muslim and Christian communities in Bengkulu Regency (Sugiarti, Andalas, & Setiawan, 2020). The theoretical framework used refers to the theory of interreligious communication and the theory of social tolerance, which directs the research to understand the relationship between religious groups. The main data sources in this research are informants from religious leaders, traditional leaders, as well as Muslim and Christian communities in the researched area (Prasetia, 2022).

The data collection techniques used included in-depth interviews with relevant informants through snowball sampling, literature study on the Bengkulu City FKUB programme, and direct and remote observation of community social interactions. The data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis techniques, in which the researcher identified the main patterns that emerged from interfaith interactions. Data credibility was maintained through source triangulation, by comparing the results of interviews, observations and documentation. Data validity was obtained using member checking techniques, where research findings were returned to informants for confirmation (Sarosa, 2021). The limitations of this research focus on the Bengkulu Regency area and the social interaction between Muslims and Christians there, so the results of this research only apply to that context and cannot be generalised to other areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Relationship Between Religions

Especially Muslims and Christians, will always be interesting to discuss in various spaces and opportunities, becoming a theme that is difficult to escape in the midst of time. At least two reasons can be put forward to support the above assumption. The first is that both missionary religions have had a big influence on the development of world civilization. secondly, the consequence of the first reason is that the relationship between these two religions is often depicted in a narrative full of competing nuances. This assumption is also not expressed by denying the historical fact that these two religions once lived intimately when the relationship between

Muslim and Christian believers was brought to the fore. The surface depicted is actually a harmonious relationship on one side and a disharmonious relationship on the other side (Kahmad 2006).

The relationship between the two is said to be harmonious not only because this religion is a religion that has a brother-sister relationship in a family, called Arabic religion, but at several stages in their history they have lived side by side peacefully. Unfortunately, the stories that often appear are harmonious stories which suggest that the relationship between the two is often colored by various contradictions and conflicts. The crusades can be considered the darkest history in the relationship between the two religions. The crusades tend to be connoted as a religious war between Islam and Christianity, including Jews. However, writers such as Karen Armstrong try to see it from a different perspective based on tracking historical experts by making connections between more modern conflicts without wanting to conclude that religions are just reasons to justify greater interests.

This definition emphasizes that religious and cultural differences are significant determining factors in the ongoing process of communication between believers. Awareness of these differences is critical to successful interactions. Communication between believers is recognized as a forum that deals with all kinds of problems that arise both in terms of similarities and differences in the cultural characteristics of communicators. It is important to pay primary attention to the communication process, both of individuals and groups within a particular culture, when they attempt to interact with a different culture.

Not to mention Christian pets which are not liked by Muslim communities. Therefore, it is necessary to review the power of cross-cultural communication to build a social paradigm to create tolerance between cultures carried out by Muslim and Christian communities to create a close and unifying relationship and mutual understanding between one culture and another.

Based on the confirmation above, it can be seen that communication between believers plays a very active role as an extrinsic factor in creating religious harmony. Apart from that, communication between believers must be in accordance with the correct work steps to create religious and cultural life between Muslim and Christian communities in Bengkulu. Therefore, the author will direct this research with the title: Communication between believers towards increasing social harmony in Muslim and Christian communities in Bengkulu.

The most important discussion in differentiating interfaith communication studies between communication and other communications is the level of background differences which is very urgent. Exchange of experiences and cultural and religious differences. Religious differences are something that is very relative and influenced by cultural differences. The underlying assumption is that individuals from the same

culture generally have greater similarities in the underlying aspects of their experiences compared to individuals from different cultures.

The human communication process involves inherent problems related to a very relative and diverse nature. Therefore, the study of interfaith communication is a very important expansion in the field of human communication, including in the context of interpersonal communication, organizations and other fields. Communication between believers includes all types of communication and is a critical aspect in the development of human communication. This involves understanding and handling cultural differences during the communication process.

It is important to continue to develop understanding and awareness of the complexity of interfaith communication. This involves an open attitude towards differences, the ability to read cultural contexts, and efforts to build inclusive and respectful relationships amidst diversity. (Daniel Tamburian 2018)

The factors that determine the continuity of the communication process between believers clearly explain that the emphasis on cultural differences is a factor that really determines the continuity of the communication process between believers. Communication between believers acknowledges dealing with all kinds of problems of similarities and differences in the cultural characteristics of communication actors (Dian Pratiwi 2014).

Interfaith communication becomes significant when it occurs between individuals or groups who come from different cultural backgrounds. Several points reflect the meaning and importance of interfaith communication because it involves individuals or groups who have different religious and cultural backgrounds. The emphasis on religious and cultural differences is a key factor in this process.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a structured form of communication that relies on full attention and active listening. The process in which two or more people have a meaningful conversation. Dialogue is also an approach to communication that emphasizes attitudes and behavior of listening, learning and developing mutual understanding. In dialogue the communicator is willing to be present and there for others. Not just bringing physical things but also bringing hearts that speak from the heart to the heart.

One part of religious harmony is that religious dialogue needs to be carried out so that it is communicative and avoids theological debates between believers, so universal messages are the main ingredient for creating harmonious dialogue.

Within the same religion there may be variations in worldview. As an illustration, as a true Muslim truly believes that true happiness is gaining the pleasure of Allah, and that worldly life as hinted at in the Koran is a deceptive pleasure. So he will be careful in living his life, he will try to carry out God's commands and stay away from his prohibitions. On the other hand, a nominal Muslim who does not understand

the teachings of Islam and does not understand the purpose of his life may believe that the source of success in life is wealth and power, even though he believes in the existence of God. So he will try to achieve these two things as hard as he can, regardless of whether the method is evil or haram.

The dialogue above shows the important role in changing the attitudes and actions of the Islamic community, especially in matters of worship of people of other religions. A religious leader should provide the best lessons for the community. Likewise, Christian religious figures also teach social interaction in communication so that tolerance can be established in worship. Congratulating Muslims is a form of peace taught by God to his servants.

Diversity in society can be communicated in realizing tolerance. Researchers took part in this dialogue. It was seen that the participants were very enthusiastic about the discussion forum held between youth, parents and religious leaders. This was proven by the questions asked by participants regarding religious relations, religious conflict, forming harmony.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication is communication that is established linguistically. Muslims can speak directly orally to the person they are speaking to, as well as Catholics who speak directly to Muslims. In this case, the researcher divides verbal communication into two linguistic terms, namely communication between religious believers and communication between religions in discussing people of other religions, both of which are explained as follows.

A communication that takes place between Muslims and Kristen, when communication begins when one of them speaks. The process is: The first time religious people talk to get information, then the second time after they have finished meeting with communicators of different religions (regardless of whether they give or refuse to give information or talk).

Openness between religions can be understood as a form of desire to open oneself in order to interact with other people. The quality of openness will make Islamic and Christian religious communities more able to obtain good communication. This social openness is through face-to-face seeing each other, contact will occur, with face-to-face someone can know the expressions of the person they are talking to and interaction will emerge.

Verbal statements like this are often found by researchers among Muslim and Christian communities in Bengkulu. Verbal communication in communicative words so that closeness or openness appears with Islamic and Christian communities. Likewise, openness is also applied in providing an understanding of the Ramdhan celebration, the value of an honest, tolerant attitude.

In essence, openness brings a sense of mutual respect for each other, there is a message of religious values that we need to be open to each other about problems, especially regarding communication between religious communities and forgive each other if they make mistakes in a peaceful way. With openness between religious communities, relationships become closer and more comfortable when in the environment. This creates close and harmonious relations between religious communities.

People of different religions have great concern for each other. Therefore, religious differences do not constitute a reason for people to communicate verbally with sentences or utterances that are full of great attention and appropriate words. Light and cool words will be able to open hearts and inspire feelings and closeness between religions. So that each communicator and communicant is ready to listen to what he has to say.

Based on researchers' observations, religious communities often spend part of their time working outside the home, so they meet people from other religions during activities outside the home such as social activities, trade, work partners, and on the street. Even though it only takes a little time, people who are Muslim and Christian can provide quality attention by focusing on accompanying each other, such as listening to their stories, joking or joking around, giving advice and bargaining in trade and so on.

Instilling religious values relates to attitudes and actions that should be carried out in interactions. This includes, for example, respect for parents, mutual respect and appreciation for fellow friends, gratitude for what one has, and not giving in to one's desires. Islamic and Catholic communities remind each other about this from a humanitarian perspective. Based on the observations of researchers, Muslim and Christian youth will always give full attention to each other and children, especially regarding social practices and remind them of religion carried out in social activities.

Verbal communication is communication that conveys messages including verbally and in writing, with writing able to provide verbal meaning to convey thoughts or ideas. The article in this research states that people use banners to build tolerance.

As stated by Rini's mother, who is of the Chan tribe. At first the buyer said "hello", then I answered again with "walaikumlah". I asked which college it turned out that Uin's students were then I discussed that, now I want to fast. Come here to break your fast. I sell breaking the fast, I also ask questions about breaking the fast and breaking it.

In line with that, Edo also gave the same opinion, he also found out what activities Catholics carried out during Ramadan with Mrs. Rini. Just asking around, "we don't know what China or the Catholic religion did during Ramadhan". Office hours are usually reduced, "right? It turns out they also perform other forms of worship such as

reading books. At school there will also be an increased religious schedule in the month of Ramadhan."

It is also rare to find through research observations that someone asks for donations, both natural aid from youth, mosque aid and other social aid. By using words verbally in the form of greetings or direct requests. The verbal language spoken as a form of greeting is mostly assalamu'alaikum or permission.

Nonverbal Communication Between Religious People

Kinesthetics are nonverbal movements shown by body movements to show ideas or messages from verbal communication. Kinesthetic refers to a stimulus that functions to remind the interaction through the gesture of raising the hand and giving a thumbs up as a good sign. Based on the researcher's observations, this occurred in inter-religious dialogue, discussion activities about life. At that time, Mr. Dwi as the speaker gave his thumbs up because he had created a generation of young people who cared about religious harmony among the dialogue participants. Apart from that, he also emphasized that there are 3 things that must be maintained by pointing his finger. First is intention, second is tolerance, third is the young man while explaining with his fingers. On occasion, he also explained that his fingers were swinging and tapping as a sign of enthusiasm and to explain his words verbally.

In the first session, the researcher observed, especially in culinary tourism, when a buyer ordered food, he was very enthusiastic about trying grilled corn and *martabak*, his facial expression was smiling happily and excited to eat the food ordered. Not infrequently this happens to buyers who are Christians and sellers who are Muslims, the seller of *ampera* rice smiles and says "*balia a ni?* (what did you buy, sis?). then the second session when someone was behind or unknown to the Christian religion. Like the buyer of corn and *martabak*, when he found out his religion, the buyer's face turned sour and he melted the food.

This is different from young people who understand tolerance, according to researchers' observations, they are happy and laugh out loud, showing faces that are happy to smile when talking. You can also see their faces when helping with the Chinese New Year celebration, putting up lanterns, very happy and carefree.

Touch is a gesture symbolized by touching the body. Touch can be shown by holding each other's hands as a symbol of closeness, touch can also be through shaking hands and embracing each other, touch can also be shown by patting the back. This non-verbal communication is also carried out by Islamic and Christian communities.

Apart from shaking hands, people from Islamic and Catholic religions often embrace each other when telling a story or giving advice. They put their arm around the shoulder of the person they are talking to and then tell the story or send the message they want to convey. Communication becomes more effective with the addition of touch in interactions. This is done for those who have known and are familiar for a long time. Meanwhile, those who have just met are certainly still

awkward when it comes to touching. Men and women also rarely use touch symbols to add impression to the verbal communication they are conveying.

Closeness and space are nonverbal codes for two objects that contain meaning. Edward T Hall differentiates closeness from intimate areas 3-18 inches away, personal areas closeness 18 inches-4 feet, social areas closeness 4 to 12 feet, public areas closeness 4-12 feet or until sound can be heard within 25 feet.

In this research, based on observations of Islamic and Catholic communities, the distance between them is 3 inches. This usually happens to young men and women who both have ideas about the beauty of diversity, so they don't hesitate to get close.

A general closeness of 4-12 feet usually occurs when there are work meetings and discussion forums. In accordance with researchers' observations, this fluctuation occurs in public communication in an area that needs to gather many people. If you personally spoke to the person you were talking to, the researchers did not find a general distance. However, they prefer to remain silent and not speak.

Funerals are also nonverbal messages and nonverbal symbols. There is a special method for funerals or burial procedures for Catholics. Bengkulu has its own cemetery, but Muslims always come to visit if misfortune occurs. There are also several cemeteries that are the same and one place between Muslims and Christians. Differences in cemeteries began to occur a long time ago, but there are several cemeteries that are in the same place as Christians. This indicates the increasingly advanced understanding of tolerance.

Tolerance

Tolerance Every religion seeks to complete mutual understanding and action that encourages collaboration for all religions. In this research, researchers limited communication between Muslims and Christians. Society adheres to an attitude of tolerance that accepts religion and all religious activities. This acceptance is balanced by inter-religious relations.

The above tolerance is based on the Chinese New Year culture of mutual cooperation and mutual respect between religions. This is also done during fasting or other religious celebration days. As is the jargon conveyed by society "brotherhood is not a matter of faith but you can also be through humanity" The freedom seen by researchers is freedom of opinion, thought and freedom in carrying out worship, this is known in dialogue, both Muslim and Christian communities are free to express opinions and express feelings in discussions. Not only that, you can speak up in society, you are also free to dialogue.

Equality, equality and togetherness in social factors are closely related to activities or events in society such as weddings, funerals, independence days and holiday celebrations. Christian communities always attend and participate in activities and events carried out by Muslim communities, of course. Both from an

economic perspective and the life of the Salong community is cloudy and mutually beneficial.

Adaptation to society through mutual respect and respect between neighbors, as long as you are *ketua RT* (Neighborhood Chief) there is no conflict between religions. If there are neighbors who need help regardless of poverty or wealth or religion, the community here helps to create a safe, peaceful and prosperous social life. Tolerance and mutual respect between religious communities. They understand each other's beliefs and beliefs about the religion they adhere to without having to intervene and they live in harmony and harmony.

The observations and interviews above prove that when Muslims and Christians communicate, there are negative thoughts from followers of both religions, which means their interactions are ineffective. Then, if this view is successfully minimized or there are no negative views, dialogue between religions will be established and tolerance will be created, followed by verbal and non-verbal communication.

Religion has a dominant role in creating a cultured society. Religion provides a role for its adherents as an illustration of human values. However, on the contrary, religion can be said to play a negative role if it confines its adherents to narrow thinking which gives rise to religious conflict. Poison in communication between diverse believers, disappointment, insults, mutual hatred can cause conflict in society. Thus, to anticipate the occurrence of conflict between religious communities, all believers should be friends and love each other in order to build a harmonious, harmonious and peaceful society.

There are three principles in the inter-religious communication process model, namely tolerance, opening up, encouraging peace. What Muslims and Catholics do in Pondok Village is as follows. First, tolerance. Every religion tries to fill each other's understanding and activities that encourage cooperation for all religious adherents. In Bengkulu, in this research the researchers were limited to understanding communication between Muslims and Christians.

Tolerance is an attitude towards the Chinese New Year culture of mutual cooperation and mutual respect between religions. This is also done during fasting or other religious celebration days. As is the jargon conveyed by society "brotherhood is not a matter of faith but you can also be through humanity" The impulse from the human heart to depend on each other and need each other is what gives rise to an attitude of tolerance in brotherhood that must avoid ridiculing and insulting each other. Departing from an attitude of tolerance, in this case it is like overcoming the existing economy in Bengkulu, all partnering to cooperate with each other, overcoming a pandemic outbreak, all also working together to obey regulations and maintain each other's cleanliness.

CONCLUSION

This research resulted in three main conclusions. *First*, despite differences in beliefs, such as fanaticism among Muslims, both Muslim and Christian communities demonstrate mutual acceptance and tolerance in their places of worship. *Second*, religious leaders who preach tolerance play an important role in initiating interfaith conversations, which the communities then continue with open communication, empathy and respect, as well as nonverbal cues such as touch and facial expressions. This communication process involves linear, secular, transactional and religious models. *Third*, the communication barriers found include attribution error, stereotyping, social bias, ethnocentrism, and value differences that need to be overcome to enhance interfaith harmony.

The analysis of the research shows that differences in cultural and religious backgrounds do not prevent good cooperation and communication between Muslims and Christians. All this reflects that religious differences do not prevent the establishment of harmonious relationships and mutual respect in their social lives. Recommendations to improve tolerance include strengthening religious education that emphasises tolerance, providing more interfaith dialogue forums, and the active role of the government in supporting diversity policies. Increasing religious literacy is also important to reduce prejudice and misunderstanding between religious communities. The findings only focus on the tolerance aspects of Christianity and Islam in Bengkulu. Suggestions for future research are to broaden the scope of the study by involving other religions in Bengkulu or other regions, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of interfaith tolerance. Research could also explore the social, economic and political factors that influence interfaith tolerance. In addition, research could investigate the impact of government policies on interfaith harmony at different levels of society.

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