



Bridging Faith and Pandemic Challenges: Examining the Role of Religious Leaders

Confronting the challenges posed by COVID-19 has given rise to a distinctive reality involving religious leaders acting as mediators, bridging the practices of devout followers with religious doctrines and government initiatives. This study explores the approaches adopted by religious leaders affiliated with the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in Medan City to combat COVID-19. Employing a qualitative methodology with *verstehen* theory as the analytical framework, this research reveals that these leaders tackled the threats of COVID-19 by providing assistance and restructuring worship practices. Notably, their actions were guided by a commitment to community safety rather than strict adherence to religious doctrines. The prioritization of humanity over religious interests aligns with the government's efforts to address the pandemic. A noteworthy outcome is observed in communities previously marked by intolerance, as individuals, despite differing beliefs, unite in an everyday movement, fostering a culture of tolerance. Consequently, tolerance emerges as a humanitarian response catalyzed by the pandemic, underscoring its significance as a fundamental aspect of compassionate awareness during these challenging times.

Keywords: Tolerance; Harmony; Covid-19; and Religious leader.

Penanggulangan COVID-19 yang melibatkan tokoh agama sebagai mediator yang menghubungkan tindakan-tindakan para umat beragama dengan doktrin-doktrin keagamaan dan pemerintah menjadi realita unik yang muncul pada masa pandemic. penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menemukan orientasi tindakan-tindakan yang dilakukan oleh para tokoh agama yang tergabung dalam Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) di Kota Medan dalam menanggulangi COVID-19. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan *verstehen* theory sebagai alat analisis data. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa tindakan-tindakan tokoh agama dalam proses penanggulangan bahaya COVID-19 dilakukan melalui tindakan-tindakan pengiriman bantuan dan pengaturan ulang terhadap mekanisme peribadatan. Beragam tindakan yang dilakukan didasarkan pada keselamatan masyarakat lebih utama dibandingkan kepentingan doktrin keagamaan. Pengutamakan kemanusiaan di atas kepentingan keyakinan menyesuaikan dengan tindakan-tindakan pemerintah dalam mengatasi pandemic. Dampak yang signifikan terlihat di masyarakat yang memiliki pengalaman intoleransi. Masyarakat membentuk gerakan yang sama dengan mengabaikan perbedaan-perbedaan keyakinan, sehingga tindakan toleransi terbentuk. Dengan demikian, toleransi merupakan sikap yang muncul dari kesadaran kemanusiaan yang diyakini sebagai komponen utama yang kemunculannya didorong oleh pandemic.

Kata Kunci: Toleransi; Keharmonisan; Covid-19; dan Pemuka agama.

Author:

Arifinsyah

Affiliation:

UIN Sumatera Utara

Corresponding author:

arifinsyah@uinsu.ac.id

Dates:

Received 19 Dec, 2022

Revised 9Jan, 2023

Accepted 01 Mar, 2023

Published 14 Mar, 2023

How to cite this article:

Arifinsyah, Arifinsyah.

"Bridging Faith and

Pandemic Challenges:

Examining the Role of

Religious Leaders".

ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu

Ushuluddin 24 (1),

<https://doi.org/10.14421>

[/esensia.v24i1.4154](https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v24i1.4154)

Copyright:

© 2023. The Authors.

This work is licenced

under the [Creative](#)

[Commons Attribution-](#)

[Non Commercial-](#)

[ShareAlike 4.0](#)

[International.](#)



Read Online:

Scan this QR
code with your
mobile device
or smart phone
to read online





Introduction

Religious leaders in Medan City, who are part of the Forum for Religious Communication (FKUB), approach the challenge of combating COVID-19 with a unique perspective grounded in submission to God. Their involvement stands out as they consistently employ the praxis method, actively participating in the direct distribution of aid across all societal levels without discrimination based on beliefs. This inclusive approach, where congregations of different religions exemplify a shared mechanism, underscores the unity fostered by FKUB members. Despite their primary role in imparting religious doctrines, FKUB members have shifted their collective function to proactively engage in pandemic mitigation efforts, aligning themselves with government policies. Adapting worship practices and congregational activities to virtual platforms reflects a pragmatic response to the prevailing circumstances. This pragmatic approach encourages a shift in public perceptions, fostering a collective commitment to confronting the dangers of the disease together, transcending group and religious affiliations.

The transformation of religious leaders from interpreters of religious texts to catalysts of social movements amid the pandemic has been overlooked by many researchers. Prior studies have concentrated on internal community dynamics in addressing the pandemic, neglecting the pivotal role of religious intermediaries in shaping religious practices in Indonesia.¹ Three research trends shed light on this aspect. Firstly, a sense of national solidarity is identified, with actions reflecting the values of tolerance seen as influenced by the encouragement of national spirit and sensitivity to struggle.² Secondly, a profound grasp of religious doctrines is recognized, with implications for shifting from inclusive to exclusive actions.³ Religious values emphasizing pluralism are considered contributory to the pandemic response.⁴ Thirdly, indigenous traditions are noted, attributing the tolerant attitude towards COVID-19 to community values manifested in original traditions.⁵

This study seeks to address gaps in previous research by examining the role of religious leaders as mediators in influencing the conduct of religious communities in a peaceful and tolerant

¹ Clifford Geertz, "The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (1960): 228–249.

² E. Handayani Tyas and Lamhot Naibaho, "A Harmony Among of Religious Community Is Required Amidts the Covid-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Research - GRANTHAALAYAH* 8, no. 9 (October 14, 2020): 422–428.

³ Muhammad Y Wibisono et al., "Turning Religion from Cause to Reducer of Panic during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021); Imam Subqi, Hasan Maftuh, and M. Mustoliq Alwi, "The Religious Behavior of Rural Communities Is the Challenge in Handling the Covid-19 Pandemic in

Semarang Regency," *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (June 29, 2021): 105–130.

⁴ Siti Mutholingah, "The Strengthening of Religious Tolerance through Islamic Education Learning Based on Nonviolence Culture in Public University," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Education Studies (IJIES)* 4, no. 2 (December 24, 2021): 232–244; As'aril Muhajir, "Inclusion of Pluralism Character Education in the Islamic Modern Boarding Schools during the Pandemic Era," *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 13, no. 2 (2022): 196–220.

⁵ Hans A. Harmakaputra and Luthfi Rahman, "From Toleration to Solidarity: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Muslim World* 111, no. 4 (September 26, 2021): 616–638.





manner during the COVID-19 period. To accomplish this objective, the research is structured into three components. The initial segment outlines the actual tolerance observed in Indonesian society amid COVID-19, showcasing a diverse array of actions inherent to Indonesian culture. The subsequent part delves into the actions orchestrated by religious leaders affiliated with FKUB. The third and final section conducts a thorough analysis, conceptualizing the redefinition of tolerance by these religious leaders as an integral component of efforts to combat and overcome COVID-19 effectively.

This study diverges from the viewpoint that religious teachings, usually under the control of religious leaders, advocate for peace and prosperity. While some elements of doctrinal adherence to servitude persist, COVID-19 has prompted a setting aside of dogmatic barriers between religions in favor of shared humanitarian objectives.⁶ The conflicts arising from the pandemic, which have been persistent in recent decades, can be mitigated through actions that underscore a collective commitment to unity and humanity. In this framework, religious leaders play a crucial role in articulating an interpretation of religion within the context of a pandemic. This understanding is then implemented and disseminated among diverse religious communities.

This study employed qualitative methods to examine the actions of

religious leaders in fostering a tolerant society amid the pandemic. These methods served as a means for researchers to gather religious leaders' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors as they sought to promote peace within their congregations.⁷ The exploration of the diverse actions of religious leaders utilized two techniques—observation and interviews. The data obtained through these techniques underwent a triangulation model analysis to ensure validated results. The collected data from interviews and observations was refined through data reduction techniques to select pertinent information. The refined data was then analyzed using the *Verstehen* theory, which assesses various actions by understanding the orientation that gives rise to those actions.⁸ The identification of the orientation of these actions serves as a foundation for concluding. This research centers on the activities of religious leaders in Medan City, taking into account its designation as a red zone and instances of religious intolerance during the COVID-19 period, such as the destruction of the al-Badar Mosque and the burning of the al-Fuqon Mosque.

An Overview of Tolerance among Religious People during Covid-19

Indonesia is a pluralistic nation consisting of various tribes, tribes, religions, languages, customs, and cultures. Indonesian people are free to choose any religion, such as Islam,

⁶ Yevhen Kharkovshchenko, Olena Predko, and Vitali Turenko, "Pandemic as a Challenge for Future of Humanity: Philosophical and Religious Studies Aspects," *Future Human Image* 14 (2020): 13–20.

⁷ Albine Moser and Irene Korstjens, "Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research,"

European Journal of General Practice 23, no. 1 (October 2, 2017): 271–273.

⁸ Ariane Hanemaayer, "The Ethic of Responsibility: Max Weber's *Verstehen* and Shared Decision-Making in Patient-Centred Care," in *The COVID Pandemic: Essays, Book Reviews, and Poems*, ed. Therese Jones and Kathleen Pachucki (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2022), 179–193.





Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, and Confucianism.⁹ This is by the 1945 Constitution article 29 paragraph (1) "The State is based on the belief in a supreme being", and (2) "The State guarantees every citizen has the freedom of religion and worships according to his or her religion and belief." Based on this understanding, Indonesian people have differences in fulfilling a prosperous life because plurality is used to strengthen unity and develop harmony and tolerance.¹⁰ The word tolerance comes from the Latin *tolerate* which means to be patient with something. It is an attitude or human behavior that is respect for the religion adopted by the community. While the word harmony means the principle, joint, or basis and the subject of peaceful life. In the official Indonesian Dictionary (*KBBI*), compatibility is something that needs to be fulfilled for the validity of a job.¹¹ Meanwhile, according to Sarin, tolerance is the interaction of peaceful and harmonious life among religious communities and is an absolute requirement for development and prosperity.¹²

Tolerance is an attitude, behavior, or tolerance in the form of respecting and allowing an opinion, view, belief, or other that is different from our own opinion. In terminology, tolerance is giving freedom to fellow humans to practice their beliefs or regulate their lives and determine their respective fates, not disturbing order and peace in society.¹³ So, tolerance is an

attitude of mutual respect and respect for one another without distinction of race, ethnicity, religion, or language, and can work together. This attitude of tolerance is very much needed in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic so that the outbreak can be quickly resolved. Another connotation of tolerance is harmony, harmony has always been the center of discussion in inter-religious interactions throughout history. This issue is interesting to discuss because of the rise of conflicts due to misunderstandings among religious people. This misunderstanding is sometimes caused by unnecessary interpretations, responses, and actions by one religion to another, which are considered to have crossed the corridor of sensitive boundaries. Therefore, to minimize the occurrence of inter-religious conflicts, it is necessary to create harmony and tolerance efforts. Although this process is difficult, harmony is achieved through commitment and the right steps taken together, especially during the pandemic.

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic can be prevented by avoiding some factors that can cause infection, such as not traveling, avoiding crowds, using masks when doing activities, regularly washing hands with soap or hand sanitizer, avoiding contact with wild animals, covering nose and mouth when doing activities. coughing and sneezing with disposable tissues. This virus has encouraged everyone to maintain

⁹ Robert Pringle, *Islam Di Tengah Kebhinnekaan: Memahami Islam Dan Politik Di Indonesia*, trans. Tri Wibowo BS (Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group, 2018).

¹⁰ Henry T. Simarmata et al., *Indonesia Zamrud Toleransi* (Jakarta: PSIK-Indonesia, 2017).

¹¹ Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan RI, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1988).

¹² Weinata Sairin, *Kerukunan Umat Beragama Pilar Utama Kerukunan Berbangsa: Butir-Butir Pemikiran* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2011).

¹³ Muawanah, "Pentingnya Pendidikan Untuk Tanamkan Sikap Toleran Di Masyarakat," *Jurnal Vijjacariya* 5, no. 1 (2018): 57–70.





cleanliness, participate in social and physical distancing, and work from home for the safety of all. Muslims in Indonesia as the majority must be able to become role models and the frontline in saving the people because Islam is the religion of *rahmatan li al-Alamin*. Islam is a religion that carries out the mission of peace and rescue because it can display a high attitude of solidarity and implement human values. This creates a dignified society with the ability to build a future civilization together, has a common goal of avoiding the spread of the virus, encourages regular exercise, cooks, and eats healthy food.¹⁴

High tolerance and cooperation regardless of the patient's religion, ethnicity, and beliefs doctors and nurses demonstrate showing that they are trying their best to help ease the symptoms and spread of the virus by providing quarantine rooms in hospitals so that positive patients can be treated and controlled regardless of their religion, ethnicity, age, and social status. Even though the Covid-19 pandemic causes a negative impact, it has some benefits such as the absence of differences among religious people, an increased sense of tolerance, and a stronger nationalism. Other benefits include the elimination of discrimination in helping patients, and the ability of everyone to keep clean and healthy. Muslims and non-Muslim workers who work in government offices work together. Domestic and foreign companies as well as various levels of education can apply for work and study from the home system on an online basis. Several artists and government officers

donated their income to help deal with the pandemic throughout the country regardless of religion, ethnicity, age, and social and economic conditions. This is realistic and phenomenal in Indonesia, especially in the North Sumatra province.

This study is an analogy used in religious life to show humans as the far left and far right poles, with the pendulum swinging constantly in the middle. The pendulum experiences a dynamic when there is a substantive dialogue among religious communities related to religion because the pendulum is a dynamic that occurs in everyday life. Therefore, even though during the pandemic houses of worship are closed and crowds are prohibited, it does not reduce tolerance, but instead, it increases inter-religious togetherness. This pandemic is the right time to realize the importance of knitting togetherness, and tolerance, and helping people of religions and beliefs, without questioning ethnicity and culture. Tolerance is an expression used to describe respect, cooperation, and helping different people unconditionally. This attitude is the essence of the prophetic mission of the universality of Islam to bring salvation and prosperity to all mankind.

Of course, everything did not go smoothly, there were still a few disturbances and the dynamics of social life. Several disturbances of internal and inter-religious harmony occurred in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as violence against Moslem scholars, and the destruction of a mosque in Tangerang City, Banten Province, on September 30, 2020. The destruction of the Nurul Jamik mosque in Dago Bandung on

¹⁴ Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam Dan Keselamatan Pemeluk Agama Lain* (Bandung: Mizan, 2016).





September 23, 2020. The incident of stabbing or planning to kill Sheikh Ali Jaber during his lecture in Lampung. The destruction of the al-Badar Mosque in Gatot Subroto Street, Medan City on April 23, 2021, and the burning of the al-Furqon Mosque in Binjai City on March 9, 2020. Furthermore, there was a suicide bombing in front of the Catholic Church, the Cathedral Church in Makassar on March 28, 2021. However, this incident was handled wisely by the officials and religious leaders without mass conflict. This is the strategic role of religious leaders and the leaders of the country. Schimmel's thesis on religious leaders and doctrine is a movement that functions as a social unifying tool in Indonesia. The two are united in movement, like two sides of the same coin in cohesion and consensus. Therefore, religious missions, when expressed by spiritual demands, bring peace and brotherhood.¹⁵

Establishing peace is a strategy or an effort used to restore the damaged conditions caused by violence that occurred in conflict by creating a communication bridge among the parties concerned. The aim is not only to resolve the conflicts and maintain agreements but also to include the work accomplished during and after the conflict. During the conflict, peace usually focuses on intervention through mediation or facilitation and reconciliation. It is used to manage or localize conflicts so that they do not spread to different parts of the concerned region. According to research conducted by Hans Kung, the values of Pancasila are effectively considered

conflict reduction among religions and ethnicities in Indonesia. The concept of religion is by the spirit of nationalism and national culture, which means that a minimum convention among religious communities is needed to avoid conflict. Pancasila puts human beings in the same position by creating humanity that is equal to the needs of the world's religious parliaments as the most needs because everyone needs to be treated humanely.¹⁶ The values of Pancasila are very relevant to creating inter-religious harmony in Indonesia, as an ideology that glues diversity.

Religious harmony is manifested in everyday life through mutual respect and respect for differences. Inter-religious dialogue to avoid violations is always prioritized. The dialogue will avoid the bad impact and the realization of social harmony. Harmony is a praxis that is also a habit of a person's belief. Tarmizi Taher, a former minister of religion, recommended formulating a "Theological Framework for Religious People" for religious communities in Indonesia.¹⁷ With this theological framework, togetherness will be built in social life, including the prevention of the Covid-19 pandemic. The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has threatened social, economic, cultural, and even religious life regardless of status, location, or even religion. The pandemic in Indonesia, which was first recorded in early March 2020, has changed many socio-religious activities that involve many people. Since its inception, the government has made several efforts supported by religious leaders and

¹⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, "Inklusivitas Kebenaran Agama," in *Atas Nama Agama*, ed. Andito (Jakarta: Pustaka Hidayah, 1998).

¹⁶ Syarif Hidayatullah et al., *Filsafat Dan Kearifan Dalam Agama Dan Budaya Lokal* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2020).

¹⁷ Andreas A. Yewangoe, *Agama Dan Kerukunan* (Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2009).





assemblies to minimize the spread of the pandemic.

When the observations were conducted at the research location in Medan city, the capital of North Sumatra Province, in which one of the provinces that were highly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the government had to set steps and efforts to prevent the spread of the virus continuously by promoting the Social Distancing movement. However, the call for wearing masks and complying with health protocols when doing activities outside the home is still being ignored. Currently, there is an important role related to adherence to health protocols by the whole community to reduce the spread of the virus. Religious leaders are taking more effective steps and increasing collective awareness to fight Covid-19 through a joint appeal, by spreading positive actual information through print media and social media using religious language. This effort needs to be done intensively to increase awareness of religious people regardless of their religious background. The virus becomes a common enemy of the community which has threatened their life. Therefore, they need to do some efforts to prevent its spread irrespectively their religions. Furthermore, religious leaders are required to play an important and strategic role in educating the public as pioneers and role models to break the chain of spreading the virus. They are expected to urge the people to maintain harmony in their religious life and continue to increase faith, considering that the inner atmosphere will be down when a major disaster such as the Covid-19 pandemic strikes them. Awareness of these dangers, interfaith leaders works hard to maintain an attitude of tolerance and socialize it in the community.

According to Ma'ruf Amin, the vice president of Indonesia, the political, juridical, sociological, and theological frameworks need to be strengthened to maintain national harmony. The political framework acts as an agreement or national consensus, while juridical is law enforcement that is used to strengthen regulations that can prevent the destruction of the integrity of the nation. The sociological framework is used to build the comfort and peace of local wisdom, while the theological framework is used to build theology in religious harmony. The National Consensus aims to reach an agreement by acknowledging that Indonesia is a pluralistic country built with various ethnicities, races, languages, and religions.

This statement proves that the theological and sociological framework of the Indonesian people is very supportive to build togetherness and peace. Togetherness and unity are effective ways to prevent the spread of the pandemic so that people are saved. While the juridical framework approach, Indonesia is a state of law, therefore any actions that can damage the harmony both locally and nationally need to be strictly prohibited. In the sociological frame, for example, there are moral messages of culture and customs in maintaining human values that uphold local wisdom in a hereditary manner, such as the culture of *gotong-royong* (cooperation). Besides, in the theological frame, the context is wider in conveying religious messages from leaders to promote peace. Because the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen from 3 perspectives. First, the test is to determine faith. Second, one must realize that God is Almighty, whereas humans are powerless. Third, the existence of a deadly virus can destroy the





structure of human life, togetherness is required to prevent it.

Therefore, the role of inter-religious communities is needed to socialize the dangers of the virus through the right guidance or policies, such as social and physical distancing. Social distancing restrictions create distance between oneself and others to prevent the transmission of certain diseases. This includes restrictions on some activities in an area suspected of being infected to reduce the possibility of the infectious disease spreading. In addition, the physical distancing policy is an effort to slow down the dissemination of the epidemic. Therefore, religious people are reminded to reduce the possibility of physical contact between infected and uninfected people. The Indonesian government carried out the policy as an alternative way to prevent the spread of the virus. However, the policy also reduces and limits the productivity of the people and it causes loss to other benefits related to human interaction to exist and survive.

The Responses of Religious Leaders about Tolerance during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The evolving role of religious leaders as cultural intermediaries tasked with interpreting religious doctrines for the community takes on added significance during the pandemic. Teehan notes that religious figures can offer moral encouragement to their followers, motivating them to undertake actions in line with the given doctrine.¹⁸ The trajectory of these actions, as carried out by

religious adherents, is influenced by the interpretation of religious texts and adherence to state policies by religious leaders. This underscores the role of religious figures as mediators, acting as bridges between religious followers, state policies, and discussions surrounding the disease.¹⁹ The pivotal contribution of religious leaders during the pandemic extends beyond addressing the disease issue. It encompasses shaping social actions as an integral part of cultivating awareness within religious communities in responding to COVID-19, thereby inducing changes across various facets of society.

The multifaceted impacts of COVID-19 carry significant implications for fostering a heightened sense of humanity by dismantling barriers rooted in differences of belief. This realization stems from the collective awareness of members belonging to the Religious Harmony Forum in Medan City, entrusted with nurturing relationships among various religious communities in Indonesia. To mitigate the repercussions of COVID-19, the Forum for Religious Communication (FKUB) prioritizes food distribution activities within the community. Additionally, there is a concerted effort to intensify meetings among religious leaders, focusing on discussions about worship policies that reflect each religion's distinct values and regulations. This forum serves as a recognized platform for forging mutual agreements in support of government regulations concerning religious practices.

The frequency of meetings organized by FKUB, where the impact of the

¹⁸ John Teehan, *In the Name of God: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Ethics and Violence* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 169.

¹⁹ Jumanah Essa-Hadad et al., "The Impact of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders Responding to COVID-19 in Israel," *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022).





pandemic on religious practices is discussed, fosters a shared understanding among religious communities in their response to COVID-19. Martin Manulang directly conveyed that the consensus among religious leaders regarding disseminating pandemic-related information aligns synergistically with the values inherent in each religious belief.²⁰ Adherence to the principles of religious teachings takes a backseat to considerations of aligning worship practices with government regulations. Manulang commends the government's lockdown policy, recognizing it as a logical choice to curb the spread of the pandemic, impacting worship activities.²¹ Indra Wahidin, a Buddhist religious figure, similarly appreciates the policy of psychological distancing as a preventive measure against the virus's transmission. According to Achyar Nasution, the restriction on outdoor activities reflects a policy in line with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in addressing pandemics.

The positive response of religious leaders to government regulations restricting worship activities has led to the adaptation of appropriate worship practices. Communal worship has transitioned from physical gatherings to virtual platforms. Educational activities like lectures are now conducted in the virtual space using various media.²² Buddhists, too, have embraced this shift, viewing it as an opportunity to encourage

the use of technology for worship.²³ As Akhyar Nasution highlights, individual worship can be conducted at home with family, providing a chance for believers to intensify their practice and strengthen familial bonds in the face of the pandemic.²⁴ According to Manulang, the presence of COVID-19 is seen as a situation that does not warrant anxiety among religious individuals. He refers to Philippians 4:6, emphasizing the instruction, "do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."²⁵ This biblical verse underscores the perspective that the pandemic offers an occasion for believers to turn to prayer and maintain a sense of gratitude amid challenging circumstances.

Zulkarnaen, representing the Islamic community within FKUB, observed that the pandemic has heightened the awareness of religious communities to prioritize human values over differences in beliefs and social status when assisting.²⁶ James, a Catholic figure, shared a similar perspective, stating that COVID-19 has fostered a sense of unity among religious communities, thereby mitigating religious conflicts in Medan City. James also noted that the pandemic has boosted the productivity of collaborative activities involving diverse religious groups. This increased concern for others, irrespective of their beliefs, was also acknowledged by Burhanuddin Damanik, an Islamic figure.²⁷

²⁰ Martin Manulang, *Interview*, Medan, March 9, 2021.

²¹ Manulang *Interview*, Medan, March 9, 2021.

²² Akhyar Nasution, *Interview* Medan, March 9, 2021.

²³ Indra Wahidin, *Interview*, Medan, March 18, 2021.

²⁴ Akhyar Nasution, *Interview*, Medan, March 11, 2021.

²⁵ Manulang, *Manulang Interview*, Medan, March 9, 2021.

²⁶ Zulkarnaen, *Interview*, Medan, March 16, 2021.

²⁷ James, *Interview*, Medan, March 15, 2021.





The evident high tolerance and collaboration among religious leaders, irrespective of religious, ethnic, or community differences, underscore prioritizing humanitarian goals over individual beliefs. The pandemic catalyzes instilling human values that foster tolerance and nationalism.²⁸ The collective awareness to aid fellow citizens and alleviate their burdens has emerged as an intrinsic behavior in the Indonesian people. Religious leaders wholeheartedly support the various government-imposed restrictions, viewing them as additional stimuli to enhance mutual solidarity in the face of the pandemic.²⁹ Tolerance, in this context, takes on a unique form. Rather than emphasizing respect for specific beliefs, it centers on a belief in humanity. Religious leaders act as facilitators, exemplifying that humanity is fundamental in building awareness to respect one another, extend assistance, and collaborate harmoniously.

The active role of religious leaders manifested through actions embodying universal human values while disregarding differences in beliefs is an exemplary model for fostering tolerance in Indonesia. Schimmel's perspective aligns with this notion, asserting that religious leaders, guided by their doctrines, can serve as a unifying force for their followers.³⁰ The value system advocated by religious leaders in FKUB, rooted in Pancasila, significantly contributes to establishing religious harmony amid a pandemic. Pancasila places all individuals

on an equal footing, emphasizing the commonality of humanity, a principle vital for addressing the global needs recognized by various religious parliaments.³¹ These shared values reflect the attitudes of religious leaders, demonstrating a commitment to alleviating the societal burdens of the pandemic through peaceful approaches and support for government policies.

An interpretative-legitimate dynamic characterizes the relationship between religious leaders and government policies. Religious leaders play a crucial role in elucidating legal decisions that the community may misinterpret or overlook due to negligence. Taking proactive measures, religious leaders work diligently to enhance collective awareness and foster joint action in combating the spread of COVID-19 in alignment with governmental directives. Individual religious perspectives are harmonized, creating a shared understanding through the guidance of religious leaders in addressing specific issues. The strong connection between the Medan City community and religion serves as an effective avenue for promoting compliance with government regulations. Religious leaders within FKUB leverage this closeness to provide education and appeal to the religious populace, urging them to recognize the dangers of the disease and prioritize humanity in their responses.

²⁸ Lukas J. Wolf et al., "The Importance of (Shared) Human Values for Containing the COVID-19 Pandemic," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59, no. 3 (July 23, 2020): 618–627.

²⁹ Rivi Frei-Landau, "'When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Get—Creative': Israeli Jewish Religious Leaders Find Religiously Innovative Ways to

Preserve Community Members' Sense of Belonging and Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. S1 (August 2020): S258–S260.

³⁰ Schimmel, "Inklusivitas Kebenaran Agama."

³¹ Hidayatullah et al., *Filsafat Dan Kearifan Dalam Agama Dan Budaya Lokal*.





Redefining Religious Tolerance: A Humanitarian Response by Religious Leaders

The unfolding pandemic in Indonesia introduces a novel interpretation of religious tolerance exhibited by members of the Religious Communication Forum (FKUB) in Medan City. Cultivating tolerance, rooted in the concept of humanity, redefines the appreciation for differences in beliefs. The looming threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, which directly jeopardizes human existence, catalyzes religious leaders to address religious disparities in their collective response to the crisis. Actions undertaken are framed in the pursuit of humanity rather than exclusively in the name of God. The distribution of humanitarian aid to pandemic victims transcends religious identities. Religious leaders also underscore the need for adapting religious practices to align with state policies, reshaping the shared awareness of tolerance in the context of addressing the repercussions of the pandemic.

The prevalence of humanitarian values in interpreting tolerance reflects the influence of institutionalized values within Indonesian society, mirroring its rich cultural heritage. The coexistence in a multi-ethnic society with harmonious interfaith relationships significantly contributes to shaping the acts of tolerance led by religious leaders during the pandemic. Additionally, recognizing the imperative to instill humanitarian principles extends beyond the obligation for submission to God and acceptance in the face of disasters, representing a broader perspective within religious

frameworks aimed at averting threats. The collective awareness of the pandemic as a shared adversary is a complementary element in cultivating humanitarian consciousness.

The humanitarian consciousness demonstrated through diverse actions by religious communities in Medan City exemplifies the influence of a tolerant disposition, contributing to the overall harmony of religious life. This harmonization stems from a cognitive framework that allows for open spaces, accommodating various actions and expressions to effectively respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic.³² The collaborative actions foster a sense of togetherness and solidarity among religious communities, playing a crucial role in managing communities affected by disasters. The spirit of togetherness, transcending status barriers between religious leaders and their followers, nurtures a collective resilience in confronting adversities. These cooperative efforts resonate in Indonesian society, underpinned by the profoundly ingrained heritage of togetherness awareness, known as "gotong royong," a fundamental and shared value of the nation.

The core discovery of this research lies in recognizing the humanitarian impulse as the fundamental catalyst for shaping tolerant responses to address COVID-19 in Medan City. This revelation complements a range of prior research findings that underscore religious values and national spirit as pivotal factors driving the formation of tolerance awareness. Tyas and Naibaho, for instance, highlighted the role of national spirit and unity as

³² Ali R. Djalilian, "The Power of Open-Mindedness and Diversity," *The Ocular Surface* 17, no. 2 (April 2019): 173.





motivators for cultivating a spirit of tolerance during the pandemic.³³ Additionally, the humanitarian foundation identified in this study aligns with the insights of Harmakaputra and Rahman, who emphasized the contribution of traditional values in shaping tolerant actions within Indonesian society amidst COVID-19.³⁴ Notably, many findings need to be considered: the substantial contribution of religious leaders who act as bridges, raising awareness of tolerance among religious communities in confronting the challenges of the pandemic.

The interactions among religious communities, as demonstrated by the actions of religious leaders in addressing COVID-19, mirror the role of religion in prioritizing human values. The faith doctrine, which reflects the divine relationship, is viewed as a tool for achieving human well-being. According to Hasan Hanafi, this understanding represents the practical implementation of faith.³⁵ The emphasis on humanity in actions, which emanate tolerance under the guidance of religious leaders, signifies a constructive manifestation of tolerance. In this context, productive tolerance aims to foster equality in a humanitarian framework, safeguarding society, promoting justice, and facilitating mutually beneficial cooperation.

Conclusion

Recognizing the need to combat COVID-19 through tolerance among religious communities, typically driven by

religious and national values, takes on a distinct perspective in this study. The research identifies a spirit of cultivating tolerance grounded in humanitarian values, prioritized above religious values by religious leaders. This emphasis on humanitarian foundations plays a crucial role in inspiring actions aimed at mutual assistance and support across the entire community, irrespective of religious identity. Such endeavors significantly mitigate various forms of intolerance associated with religious practices. Consequently, the paramount humanitarian value in the efforts led by religious leaders to overcome the pandemic fosters a trend toward a tolerant society, culminating in a harmonious community.

This study identifies a predominant focus on religious leaders prioritizing human values over religious doctrines in response to COVID-19, employing the concept of *verstehen*. The driving force behind these actions is the emphasis on human safety, rooted in religious leaders' underlying goals and values. It is crucial to note that the scope of this research is confined to religious leaders associated with the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), whose tendencies align with the spirit of nationhood. Further investigation is warranted to explore a similar reality regarding the orientation of religious leaders committed to da'wah. Examining the orientation of these figures could serve as a valuable exploration in guiding actions for managing COVID-19.

³³ Tyas and Naibaho, "A Harmony Among of Religious Community Is Required Amidts the Covid-19 Pandemic."

³⁴ Harmakaputra and Rahman, "From Toleration to Solidarity: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic."

³⁵ Fadlil M. Manshur, "Hasan Hanafi, New Theology and Cultural Revolution: An Analysis of Cultural Intensification," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021): 115.





Acknowledgements

The authors thankfully acknowledge all contributors for their contributions.

Competing Interests

None of the authors of this study has a financial or personal relationship with other people that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the study.

Author's Contributions

All listed authors contribute to this article.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with all ethical standards and did not involve direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding Information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or notfor-profit sectors.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and assumptions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan RI. *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1988.
- Djalilian, Ali R. "The Power of Open-Mindedness and Diversity." *The Ocular Surface* 17, no. 2 (April 2019): 173.
- Essa-Hadad, Jumanah, Nour Abed Elhadi Shahbari, Daniel Roth, and Anat Gesser-Edelsburg. "The Impact of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders Responding to COVID-19 in Israel." *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022).
- Frei-Landau, Rivi. "'When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Get—Creative': Israeli Jewish Religious Leaders Find Religiously Innovative Ways to Preserve Community Members' Sense of Belonging and Resilience during the

COVID-19 Pandemic." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. S1 (August 2020): S258–S260.

Geertz, Clifford. "The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (1960): 228–249.

Hanemaayer, Ariane. "The Ethic of Responsibility: Max Weber's Verstehen and Shared Decision-Making in Patient-Centred Care." In *The COVID Pandemic: Essays, Book Reviews, and Poems*, edited by Therese Jones and Kathleen Pachucki, 179–193. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2022.

Harmakaputra, Hans A., and Luthfi Rahman. "From Toleration to Solidarity: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *The Muslim World* 111, no. 4 (September 26, 2021): 616–638.

Hidayatullah, Syarif, Abdul Rokhmat Sairah, Jirzanah, Lailiy Muthmainnah, Lasiyo, Reno Wikandaru, Septiana Dwiputri Maharani, and Syafiq Effendhy. *Filsafat Dan Kearifan Dalam Agama Dan Budaya Lokal*. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2020.

Khalil, Mohammad Hassan. *Islam Dan Keselamatan Pemeluk Agama Lain*. Bandung: Mizan, 2016.

Kharkovshchenko, Yevhen, Olena Predko, and Vitali Turenko. "Pandemic as a Challenge for Future of Humanity: Philosophical and Religious Studies Aspects." *Future Human Image* 14 (2020): 13–20.

Manshur, Fadlil M. "Hasan Hanafi, New Theology and Cultural Revolution: An Analysis of Cultural Intensification." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021): 115.

Moser, Albine, and Irene Korstjens. "Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research." *European Journal of General Practice* 23, no. 1 (October 2, 2017): 271–273.

Muawanah. "Pentingnya Pendidikan Untuk Tanamkan Sikap Toleran Di Masyarakat." *Jurnal Vijjacariya* 5, no. 1 (2018): 57–70.

Muhajir, As'aril. "Inclusion of Pluralism Character Education in the Islamic Modern Boarding Schools during the Pandemic Era." *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 13, no. 2 (2022): 196–220.

Mutholingah, Siti. "The Strengthening of Religious Tolerance through Islamic Education Learning Based on Nonviolence Culture in Public University." *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Education Studies (IJIES)* 4, no. 2 (December 24, 2021): 232–244.

Pringle, Robert. *Islam Di Tengah Kebhinnekaan: Memahami Islam Dan Politik Di Indonesia*. Translated by Tri Wibowo BS. Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group, 2018.

Sairin, Weinata. *Kerukunan Umat Beragama Pilar Utama Kerukunan Berbangsa: Butir-Butir Pemikiran*. Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2011.

Schimmel, Annemarie. "Inklusivitas Kebenaran Agama." In *Atas Nama Agama*, edited by Andito. Jakarta: Pustaka Hidayah, 1998.

Sirmarmata, Henry T., Sunaryo, Arif Susanto, Fachrurrozi, and Chandra S. Purnama. *Indonesia Zamrud Toleransi*. Jakarta: PSIK-Indonesia, 2017.

Subqi, Imam, Hasan Maftuh, and M. Mustoliq Alwi. "The Religious Behavior of Rural Communities Is the Challenge in Handling the Covid-19 Pandemic in Semarang Regency." *DINIKA: Academic Journal of Islamic*





Studies 6, no. 1 (June 29, 2021): 105–130.

Teehan, John. *In the Name of God: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Ethics and Violence*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Tyas, E. Handayani, and Lamhot Naibaho. "A Harmony Among of Religious Community Is Required Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic." *International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH* 8, no. 9 (October 14, 2020): 422–428.

Wibisono, Muhammad Y, Dody S Truna, Mohammad T Rahman, and Muhammad Wibisono.

"Turning Religion from Cause to Reducer of Panic during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021).

Wolf, Lukas J., Geoffrey Haddock, Antony S. R. Manstead, and Gregory R. Maio. "The Importance of (Shared) Human Values for Containing the COVID-19 Pandemic." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59, no. 3 (July 23, 2020): 618–627.

Yewangoe, Andreas A. *Agama Dan Kerukunan*. Jakarta: Gunung Mulia, 2009.

