

Religion and Social Order: An Interfaith Exploration of Values, Norms, and Control Mechanisms in Indonesia

¹Yudi Apriansyah, ²Rany Claudia

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Bengkulu, Bengkulu, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Religion serves not only as a spiritual guide but also as a powerful mechanism of social control, shaping behavior and fostering social cohesion through internalized values and norms. In highly pluralistic societies such as Indonesia, understanding how diverse religious traditions shape social regulation is critical. However, comparative interfaith analyses remain scarce. This qualitative descriptive study investigates the role of religion as a tool of social control from an interfaith perspective in Bengkulu City, Indonesia. Ten religious leaders representing Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism were selected through snowball sampling. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model, within the framework of Kelman's Social Influence Theory. The findings indicate that all five religions promote core values—discipline, compassion, justice, and respect—that function as mechanisms of social regulation. Three key themes emerged: (1) moral discipline and self-regulation, (2) love and social harmony, and (3) ethical control and communal cohesion. These values are internalized through stages of compliance, identification, and internalization. While methods differ—from karmic beliefs in Hinduism to communal rituals in Islam—all traditions foster moral accountability and contribute to societal stability. Religion operates both vertically (between adherents and the divine) and horizontally (among community members), embedding both formal and informal social sanctions. Despite theological differences, shared moral imperatives strengthen interfaith

Correspondence:

yapriansyah@unib.ac.id

understanding and reinforce social order. This study affirms the enduring relevance of religion in shaping ethical behavior in multicultural societies and calls for further exploration of its evolving role amid changing socio-political landscapes.



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INTRODUCTION

Religion is a complex social phenomenon that has been defined and analysed from various perspectives in recent scientific studies. Today, religion is defined as a socially constructed system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred or transcendent, which influences individual behaviour and societal structures. (Davie 2023; Smith 2021). Sociologists such as Berger (1967) conceptualized religion as a "sacred canopy" that provides meaning and order to human experience, while Durkheim (1912) highlighted its role in social cohesion and collective consciousness. Stark and Finke (2000) further argue that religion functions as a form of social organization that shapes individual and collective identity through shared beliefs and rituals (Ritzer and Goodman 2011). Therefore, religion plays a multidimensional role across societies and cultural contexts.

Social control refers to the mechanisms, processes, and strategies that societies use to regulate behaviour, ensure conformity to established norms, and maintain social order (Black 2020; Cullen and Agnew 2022). From a theoretical perspective, social control is manifested through formal laws, informal norms, sanctions, and socialisation practices (Gibbs 2021). Religion uniquely functions as a powerful agent of social control by instilling ethical imperatives and moral obligations that are internalised by adherents and reinforced through communal practices (Hwang 2014).

Although research on religion and social control has been extensive, there remains a significant gap in comparative analyses of religious traditions operating in highly religious and pluralistic societies, such as Bengkulu City, Indonesia (Wibisono and Lee 2022; Yuliani 2024). Most of the existing literature examines a single religious tradition or secular context, leaving a limited understanding of how

diverse religions collectively shape social norms and behavioural regulation. Furthermore, recent shifts in global religiosity and the rise of religious nationalism (Silver et al. 2025) call for updated studies that reflect the contemporary socio-religious landscape.

The urgency of research on religion and social control is crucial for several reasons. First, it reveals the different and shared ways in which other faiths contribute to moral guidance, social cohesion, and conflict resolution. Second, in a multicultural society such as Indonesia, which is among the most religious countries in the world (Silver et al., 2025), exploring interfaith perspectives can enhance social harmony and tolerance. It informs policy Development (Hefner 2018). Third, comparative studies expand the theoretical framework by explaining how religious social control mechanisms operate across different traditions and cultural settings (Durkheim n.d.; Stark and Finke 2000)

In response to these gaps and imperatives, this study aims to examine, from an interfaith perspective, the implications of religious values and norms as instruments of social control in Indonesian society. The specific objectives are: (1) to identify and compare core values and norms across five major religions in Bengkulu City; (2) to analyse the function of these religious principles as mechanisms of social control; and (3) to examine the process of internalisation of religious social control by their adherents. These objectives align with research questions that examine how religion shapes social behaviour and maintains social order in a highly religious, pluralistic context.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design to explore complex, context-bound phenomena in depth and to investigate the lived experiences and interpretations of religious leaders regarding the role of religion in shaping values and norms as a means of social control (Elia and Dkk 2023). A descriptive strategy is used to systematically document and interpret how religious values and teachings

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are implemented in real-world social contexts, particularly in multi-religious environments at Bengkulu City, Indonesia (Arianto and Rani 2024).

This study used snowball sampling, a non-probability technique well-suited to identifying informants with specific characteristics, in this case, individuals recognised by their communities as religious leaders. A total of ten informants were selected, representing the five major religions in Indonesia: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. All participants resided in Bengkulu City. The criteria for selecting religious leaders were based on their Leadership experience, active involvement in religious education, and influence within their respective religious communities. On average, the informants had over 20 years of experience as religious leaders. Some had more than 30 years of experience as religious leaders. This sampling approach provided access to in-depth, internal perspectives that might otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Data collection technique

Data were collected through structured, in-depth interviews conducted in June 2025. A pre-developed interview guide ensured consistency while allowing for elaboration and clarification. Questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives of informants' experiences, interpretations, and practices regarding religion's role in shaping social norms and moral regulation. Interviews were conducted in person, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis process followed the interactive model proposed by (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, irrelevant information was filtered out, and key themes were coded and categorised. These categories were then organised into coherent presentations to facilitate straightforward interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn through a constant process of comparing the initial data with emerging patterns.

To strengthen the theoretical foundation, the data were analysed using Herbert Kelman's Social Influence Theory, which posits that social control is internalised through mechanisms of compliance, identification, and internalisation (Hwang 2014). This framework offers a perspective on how religious norms are adopted, practised, and maintained within communities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Religious Values and Norms in an Interfaith Context

Religious values such as faith, justice, compassion, and discipline serve as a fundamental moral compass for their adherents (Mukhlisin 2012). Religious norms, derived from sacred texts and spiritual traditions, serve not only as guidelines for personal behaviour but also as mechanisms of social control. This study categorises the cross-religious findings into three core value groups for clarity of analysis:

1. Moral Discipline and Self-Regulation

The Islamic perspective emphasizes discipline and sportsmanship, particularly in the practice of praying at prescribed times, managing study time, and participating in religious rituals such as Yasinan and Friday night sermons. These practices instil moral discipline and structure in daily life (Informants N and AS). According to Kelman, "Initially, believers follow these practices because of social and religious expectations (e.g., prayer times, societal norms). Over time, individuals participate not only out of obligation but also as part of their spiritual identity and emotional attachment to the ummah (community).

The Hindu perspective embraces the Trikaya Parisudha values of good thinking, good speaking, and good deeds, a triadic framework that guides moral action. These norms are reinforced by the concept of karma, which holds that good or bad actions produce corresponding consequences in this life and the next (as reported by PAS and PKD informants). According to Kelman, obedience begins with fear of negative karma or social disapproval. Internalized by religious leaders who strongly believe in karmic causality, these values are adopted as a self-regulating moral framework. Compared with Islam, Hinduism integrates rituals and

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routines as disciplinary structures, whereas Islam emphasises temporal discipline (prayer schedules and communal rituals). Hinduism, by contrast, emphasises moral purity and karma. This supports Berger's (1990) assertion that religion provides a sacred canopy that organises experience through cosmological narratives and ritual arrangements.

2. Compassion, Love, and Social Harmony

Protestant school leaders cite values of honesty, justice, cooperation, and peacebuilding, grounded in biblical passages such as Romans 12:17-19 and Galatians 5:22-23. These teachings emphasise the behavioural manifestations of theological virtues such as love, patience, and self-control. The values are fully integrated into the believer's self-concept, transcending external enforcement. This echoes Stark and Finke's (argument that religious commitment drives behavioral transformation when internal beliefs align with organizational teachings. The Catholic perspective emphasizes universal love, justice, and respect for others' rights. Catholic teachings encourage "small acts done with great love," demonstrating a practical theology that prioritises lived ethics over doctrinal rigidity (as reported by RPS and FGR informants). According to Kelman, many followers imitate priests or saints, motivated by affiliation and role models. In cases where the teachings are deeply ingrained (e.g., charity toward all neighbors), internalization becomes evident. Compared with Protestantism, Catholicism emphasises communal solidarity and social responsibility, while Protestantism emphasises individual moral accountability. This finding reinforces (Durkheim n.d.) View of religion as a source of "moral community" that defines acceptable behavior and strengthens group cohesion.

3. Ethical Control and Communal Harmony

The Buddhist perspective emphasizes the Five Precepts, prohibiting killing, stealing, adultery, lying, or consuming alcohol, as essential for social harmony. These teachings foster tolerance, respect, and nonviolence in interpersonal and interfaith interactions (Informant S and RPST). Buddhists often adopt these values independently of social coercion, based on the principle of dhamma. (Malhotra and

Galletta 2021). Identification is also evident in laypeople's devotion to priests and community elders who model ethical behaviour. Buddhism exemplifies what Malhotra & Galletta (2021) call volitional social influence, in which obedience stems not from fear of sanctions but from moral clarity and compassionate reasoning. These findings also mirror those of Parboteeah, who found that Buddhism is strongly correlated with ethical decision-making due to its internalized moral compass.

Function from Values and Norms as Equipment from Social Control

Religious values and norms play a vital role in guiding individual and collective behaviour within religious communities. These values and norms serve as mechanisms of social control, fostering moral awareness, social harmony, and personal accountability. This study identifies five religious traditions: Hinduism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Islam, and examines how their values and norms operate both similarly and differently in regulating social behaviour. These functions are analysed through the lens of (Hwang 2014) Social Influence Theory, which explains how individuals adopt and internalise values through the stages of adherence, identification, and internalisation.

1. Moral Accountability and Social Control through Religious Values

Hinduism emphasises the value of *tri karya parisudha* —think good, speak good, and do good—which encapsulates the moral distinction between good and bad actions. Belief in karma serves as a powerful normative mechanism: good actions produce positive consequences, and evil actions have social and cosmic repercussions. This belief system motivates adherents to regulate their behaviour, not only out of fear of punishment but also out of a desire to promote good behaviour within the community. Transgressions give rise to religious norms that guide corrective advice and require accountability to the laws of the afterlife.

Initially, Hindus adhered to rules due to cultural and social expectations (obedience). Over time, the belief in karma became internalised, making ethical behaviour a deeply held belief that shaped personal identity and social interactions

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(internalisation). This aligns with C. Smith & Denton's (2005) Analysis of Hindu ethics, in which the belief in karma serves as both a personal moral compass and a communal mechanism of social control. This also aligns with findings on the role of religion in encouraging prosocial behaviour through accountability mechanisms (Rani & Prakash, 2020).

2. Love as a Regulator of Social Behavior in the Christian Tradition

Both Protestantism and Catholicism prominently feature love as a central ethical value, serving as a dynamic mechanism of social control. Protestantism portrays love as manifesting as honesty, mutual respect, and peace, thereby fostering social cohesion in diverse societies. Informants report that engagement with Scripture (e.g., regular study of God's Word) fosters self-control, whereas neglect leads to moral decline. Catholicism portrays love as expressed through wholehearted devotion and concrete acts of kindness toward others, even strangers. This value promotes social care and justice, transcending religious boundaries.

In Protestantism, the internalisation of love as a core principle profoundly influences thought and behaviour, consistent with Kelman's stage of internalisation, in which values are integrated with personal beliefs. Catholicism fosters identification with community role models (e.g., priests or saints), motivating behavior that conforms to group ideals. These findings echo (Stark and Finke 2000) the theory of religious commitment, which emphasises the internalisation of values through religious participation. These findings also extend Durkheim's notion of religion as a social glue, binding communities together through shared moral commitment.

3. Ethical Control and Compassion in Buddhism

The Five Precepts of Buddhism (no killing, stealing, adultery, lying, and drunkenness) are fundamental ethical guidelines that promote peace, harmony, and mutual respect. The teaching of *metta* (loving-kindness) underpins a culture of tolerance and compassionate action, as evidenced by support for all people, regardless of religion or ethnicity, particularly in times of crisis. Buddhists internalise these ethical principles as personal commitments, grounded in rational

and compassionate understanding rather than external coercion. This is consistent with Malhotra & Galletta's (2021) concept of "intentional social influence" in Buddhism and with research on Buddhist ethical decision-making (Parboteeah, 2008) that is driven by internalized values rather than social pressure.

4. Discipline, Cooperation, and Respect in Islam

Islamic values such as discipline (e.g., timely prayer, study routines) and sportsmanship (cooperation, mutual assistance) play a crucial role in social control. The Qur'anic principle that diversity is a form of divine wisdom fosters tolerance and mutual respect. This creates a flexible yet robust social framework in which religious norms adapt to the community's readiness and situational context. The practice of prayer and religious obligations often begins as adherence to established standards, reinforced by identification with the Muslim community (ummah). This social identity motivates adherence beyond mere obligation.

This finding is in line with (Esposito and DeLong-Bas 2001) analysis of Islam's balance between individual discipline and communal solidarity, as well as the (Silver et al. 2025) report that highlights the role of religion in fostering social cohesion in pluralistic societies.

5. Interfaith Reflections: Convergence and Divergence

Among these religious traditions, several intersecting functions of values and norms emerge, including Social Control and Moral Awareness. All religions employ values and standards to maintain order and encourage moral behavior. Community Solidarity and Social Harmony: Values such as love, compassion, and respect help maintain peaceful co-existence in diverse societies. Personal Transformation and Accountability: Beliefs in the consequences of an afterlife or spiritual benefits encourage self-regulation and ethical behavior. The differences lie primarily in their mechanisms and emphases: Hinduism's karmic accountability contrasts with Christianity's emphasis on love and internal moral transformation, Buddhism's compassionate renunciation contrasts with Islam's ritual discipline and communal identity.

Implementation of Religious Values and Norms as a Tool of Social Control

Religion plays a crucial role in human life, not only as a spiritual guide but also as a source of fundamental values and norms that govern social behavior. These religious values and norms shape individual character and social interactions and serve as mechanisms of social control to maintain order and harmony. This study reveals that religion influences social control both vertically (between individuals and divine authority) and horizontally (between members of society), fostering social solidarity while suppressing deviance.

1. Religion as a Guide to Morality and Ethics

Religious teachings provide moral and ethical guidelines that shape behavior from an early age. Common values emphasized across religions include honesty, nonviolence, cooperation, humility, and respect for others. For example, informant ST highlighted Protestant Christian teachings emphasizing the two commandments of love: love for God and love for neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39). This foundation fosters honesty, loyalty, forgiveness, and humility, which contribute to peaceful co-existence and social harmony.

At this stage, adherents have fully internalized these values as part of their core belief system, in which ethical behavior is driven by sincere personal conviction rather than external coercion. This aligns (Hwang 2014) assertion that internalization reflects profound and lasting changes rooted in an individual's beliefs. Similar findings were reported. (Stark and Finke 2000), who argued that internalized religious values significantly influence prosocial behavior and social cohesion. (Berger 1990) also emphasized the role of religion as a moral compass that shapes individual and communal life.

2. Religion as a Mechanism of Social Control

Religious values and norms serve as powerful social controls by deterring deviant behavior through threats of sin, divine punishment, karma, or afterlife consequences. Informant N emphasized that religious norms, when based on authoritative sources such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and jurisprudence (Ijma', Qiyas), have a significant influence on societal behavior and prevent moral violations.

Informant PAS highlighted informal social sanctions—reprimands, ostracism, and societal pressure—that uphold religious norms and emphasize accountability in both this world and the afterlife.

At this level, individuals comply with religious rules primarily to avoid social sanctions or to receive social rewards. This behavior is motivated by external factors; individuals comply with rules to avoid ostracism or punishment. (Malhotra and Galletta 2021). This is consistent with findings that many religious adherents initially comply with norms to avoid negative social consequences (Parboteeah, 2008) and with Malhotra and Galletta, who described compliance as an important mechanism of social control in religious communities.

3. Religion as a Source of Informal Social Sanctions

Beyond formalized religious commands, religion enforces informal social sanctions that regulate behavior within communities. PAS informants noted that failure to consider religious law in social actions invites social sanctions and risks divine retribution, reinforcing societal conformity through informal mechanisms such as social pressure and communal judgment.

Individuals at this stage adopt religious norms because they identify with their religious community or respected figures within it. This identification fosters lasting behavioral changes motivated by emotional attachment and a desire for social belonging (Hwang 2014). Found that identification with a religious group strengthens adherence to norms beyond fear of sanctions, highlighting social identity as a crucial factor in religious conformity (Derung et al. 2022).

4. Interreligious Analysis: Converging Themes in Social Control

Despite theological differences within Hinduism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Islam, religion universally acts as a mechanism of social control through: Moral guidance that encourages virtues such as love, honesty, compassion, and discipline; Social sanctions that deter deviance through formal and informal punishment; Community cohesion through shared values that encourage identification and internalization. These functions collectively contribute to social stability, as echoed in research on the role of religion in youth socialization (Smith

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and Denton 2005) and research on religion and prosocial behavior (Rani and Prakash 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pivotal role of religion as a multidimensional instrument of social control in Indonesia's pluralistic society. Through a comparative analysis of five major religious traditions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, this research reveals that spiritual values and norms function not only as ethical guidelines but also as powerful mechanisms regulating behavior, fostering moral accountability, and maintaining social harmony. Grounded in Kelman's Social Influence Theory, the findings illustrate how religious teachings are adopted through stages of compliance, identification, and internalisation, shaping both individual conduct and collective norms.

Despite theological divergences, all traditions examined promote shared moral values such as compassion, honesty, discipline, and respect, which serve to deter deviance and strengthen communal solidarity. Religion operates vertically between adherents and divine authority and horizontally among community members, reinforcing formal and informal systems of control. These insights affirm the relevance of religion as both a cultural and institutional force in sustaining societal order, especially in highly religious, multi-faith contexts. Future research should expand on this interfaith approach to further explore the dynamic interplay between religious influence and evolving socio-political landscapes.

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