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Cultural construction of religious tolerance in urban socio-cultural change: Evidence from Salatiga, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines how religious tolerance is culturally constructed amid ongoing socio-cultural changes in Salatiga, Indonesia. Existing academic studies on pluralism in Indonesia generally emphasize theological discourse and institutional dialogue, resulting in limited empirical attention to the everyday cultural processes that support interreligious harmony. Using a qualitative interpretive design, data from in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis involving seven interreligious informants were analyzed through interpretive thematic analysis. Findings indicate that tolerance is produced through routine social interactions, shared communal practices, and Islamic ethical values embedded in culture, while globalization, urbanization, and the circulation of digital religion generate new symbolic tensions that require ongoing negotiation. This study demonstrates that religious tolerance operates as an adaptive cultural process that connects ethical religion, lived social practices, and socio-cultural transformation, offering a contextual theoretical model of culturally rooted plural coexistence in late modern urban societies.

Kata Kunci:

etika Islam;
kerukunan
antaragama;
masyarakat plural;
perubahan sosial-
budaya; praktik
keagamaan; toleransi
agama

Abstrak

Konstruksi budaya toleransi beragama dalam perubahan sosial-budaya perkotaan: Bukti dari Salatiga, Indonesia

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana toleransi agama dibangun secara budaya dalam perubahan sosio-budaya yang sedang berlangsung di Salatiga, Indonesia. Kajian akademik yang ada tentang pluralisme di Indonesia umumnya menekankan pada diskursus teologis dan dialog institusional, sehingga perhatian empiris terhadap proses budaya sehari-hari yang mendukung kerukunan antaragama menjadi terbatas. Menggunakan desain interpretatif kualitatif, data dari wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan tujuh informan antaragama dianalisis melalui analisis tematik interpretatif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa toleransi diproduksi melalui interaksi sosial rutin, praktik komunal bersama, dan nilai-nilai etis Islam yang tertanam dalam budaya, sementara globalisasi, urbanisasi, dan sirkulasi agama digital menghasilkan ketegangan simbolik baru yang memerlukan negosiasi berkelanjutan. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa toleransi agama beroperasi sebagai proses budaya adaptif yang menghubungkan agama etis, praktik sosial yang dijalani, dan transformasi sosio-budaya, menawarkan model teoretis kontekstual tentang koeksistensi plural yang berakar pada budaya dalam masyarakat urban modern akhir.

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1 Introduction

Socio-cultural change is a defining condition of contemporary society, reshaping identities, value systems, and patterns of social interaction (Sztompka, 1994; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Within this transformation, religion functions not merely as a normative belief system but as a social framework through which communities interpret and negotiate change (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Berger, 2014). Classical sociology highlighted religion's role in structuring social meaning (Weber, 1978; Geertz, 1973), while later scholarship emphasized reflexive identity formation under modernity and globalization (Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 2001; Casanova, 2020). In plural societies, religious coexistence is increasingly understood as a dynamic social process shaped by interaction and cultural negotiation rather than static doctrinal difference (Kymlicka, 2012; Parekh, 2000). Over the past two decades, attention has shifted toward everyday religious practice as a key analytical entry point (McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2005; Ammerman, 2021), showing that tolerance and cohesion often emerge through repeated interaction, shared social spaces, and negotiated boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Mac Ginty, 2021; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). At the same time, globalization and digitalization have intensified the circulation of transnational religious narratives, simultaneously facilitated interfaith engagement, and reinforced symbolic polarization (Castells, 2010; Campbell, 2013, 2021; Hjarvard, 2011; Wilkins-laflamme & Thiessen, 2020).

Despite these advances, a critical theoretical and empirical gap persists. Existing scholarship tends to treat tolerance either as the outcome of institutional design and theological moderation, or as an attitudinal disposition shaped by macro-political structures. Even studies of lived religion, particularly those associated with Nancy T. Ammerman and Meredith B. McGuire, while illuminating everyday meaning-making, do not fully theorize how routine religious practice stabilizes interreligious relations under conditions of socio-cultural transformation. Similarly, the concept of everyday peace developed by Roger Mac Ginty foregrounds ordinary interaction in mitigating division, yet it does not systematically integrate religious ethical interpretation as an internal moral resource shaping those interactions, nor does it sufficiently account for digital religious circulation. Classical social constructionism, as formulated by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, explains how social reality is maintained through routinization, but presumes the need for relatively coherent symbolic universes, an assumption increasingly challenged by late-modern fragmentation. Consequently, what remains underexplored is how Islamic ethical values, everyday religious practices, and contemporary socio-cultural transformations interact to produce and sustain tolerance in plural urban contexts without relying on unified moral canopies or strong institutional control.

This gap is particularly evident in the Indonesian context. Although Indonesia has become central to global discussions on Islam and pluralism (Hefner, 2011, 2019; Azra, 2010), empirical studies often prioritize theological discourse, legal frameworks, or elite interfaith initiatives (An-Na'im, 2010; Preda, 2024; Weller, 2020). Comparative reviews further indicate that tolerance is rarely examined as a culturally embedded, everyday social process (Dupi & Husaen, 2025; Petrov & Croitoru, 2022). The city of Salatiga, frequently portrayed as a model of interreligious harmony, offers an important empirical site to address this limitation. While interfaith coexistence is often attributed to inclusive institutions or theological moderation, field observations indicate that harmony is largely sustained through routine social interaction, shared cultural practices, and locally interpreted Islamic ethical values (Rahmawati & Haryanto, 2020). Yet this tolerance is neither static nor guaranteed; it is continuously negotiated amid digital religious influence, urban mobility, and global moral narratives (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Zhakin, 2025; Beckford, 2019).

Responding to these limitations, this study proposes a cultural construction model of practiced religious tolerance that integrates social constructionism, lived religion, and everyday peace while revising key assumptions within each. It argues that tolerance does not depend primarily on doctrinal



consensus or institutional engineering, nor is it merely an outcome of pragmatic conflict avoidance. Instead, tolerance emerges as an adaptive cultural process in which Islamic ethical values such as rahmah, al-'adl, and ukhuwah insaniyyah are contextually interpreted and enacted through routine interreligious interaction. In contrast to descriptive lived religion approaches, this model conceptualizes everyday practice as a stabilizing social mechanism, and beyond everyday peace theory, it foregrounds ethical mediation as a constitutive element of coexistence. By linking macro-level socio-cultural transformation with meso-level cultural mediation and micro-level embodied interaction, the study advances a contextually grounded theoretical contribution to debates on religion, pluralism, and social cohesion in late modern societies.

2 Methods

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach to examine how religious tolerance is culturally constructed through everyday Islamic practices amid socio-cultural transformation in Salatiga. A qualitative design was chosen to explore meanings, lived experiences, and social practices embedded in specific contexts that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Grounded in an interpretive paradigm, social reality, including religious tolerance, is understood as intersubjectively produced and reproduced through interaction, interpretation, and routinized practice within particular socio-cultural settings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The unit of analysis, therefore focuses not on individual attitudes but on religious social practices, interactional patterns, narratives, and symbolic actions as elements of lived social processes (Schatzki, 2002).

Fieldwork was conducted over four months (March–June 2025). Seven participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) active involvement in interfaith life, (2) sustained engagement in neighborhood-level interaction, and (3) a minimum of five years of residence in Salatiga to ensure familiarity with local socio-cultural dynamics. This sampling strategy aligns with qualitative research, emphasizing depth of meaning rather than statistical representation (Guest et al., 2006). Participants include Muslim religious leaders, non-Muslim religious figures, minority representatives, and lay community members to ensure variation in perspective across majority–minority positions.

To increase transparency, Table 1 summarizes anonymized demographic and social profiles.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Religious Affiliation	Role/Position	Gender	Age Range	Years in Salatiga	Interfaith Engagement
Ust. AR	Muslim	Mosque Imam	Male	45–55	20+	Local interfaith forum
KH. MA	Muslim	Pesantren Leader	Male	50–60	25+	Interreligious dialogue
Bp. HS	Muslim	Community Resident	Male	40–50	30+	Mutual aid activities
Pdt. MS	Protestant	Church Leader	Male	45–55	15+	Cross-religious events
Romo JP	Catholic	Parish Priest	Male	50–60	10+	Neighborhood visits
Tn. LH	Confucian	Community Representative	Male	40–50	20+	Minority civic forums
Ibu LM	Christian	Community Member	Female	35–45	18+	Women-led community groups

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes each), participatory observation in the neighborhood and interfaith activities, and document analysis of local interfaith reports and community records. Interviews explored interpretations of Islamic ethical values, experiences of interreligious interaction, perceptions of digital religious influence, and views on socio-cultural change. Observations focused on embodied practices such as communal cooperation, joint celebrations, and informal neighborhood gatherings, allowing tolerance to be examined as an enacted social practice rather than a declared principle.

Although the number of participants was limited, data saturation was determined analytically rather than numerically. Following the logic of qualitative saturation (Guest et al., 2006), saturation was considered achieved when (1) no substantially new codes emerged in the final two interviews, (2) core categories, routine interaction, ethical mediation, relational trust, and digital tension recurred consistently across religious backgrounds, and (3) observational data confirmed patterns identified in interviews. Coding memos documented that redundancy began to appear after the fifth interview, while the sixth and seventh interviews functioned to confirm and refine rather than expand thematic categories.

Data analysis followed iterative thematic procedures (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021). The process involved repeated reading of transcripts (data familiarization), open coding, constant comparison across cases, categorical clustering, and interpretive theme development. To illustrate the analytical progression, the following example demonstrates how raw excerpts were abstracted into themes:

Table 2: Illustration of Analytical Progression from Excerpts to Themes

Interview Excerpt	Initial Code	Category	Theme
“We help each other during religious celebrations.”	Mutual assistance	Routine cooperation	Everyday Interreligious Interaction
“Islam teaches mercy for all humans.”	Ethical compassion	Islamic value translation	Ethical Mediation
“Online messages sometimes create suspicion.”	Digital influence	External narrative tension	Negotiated Tolerance
“Regular visits prevent misunderstanding.”	Face-to-face trust	Relational familiarity	Relational Stabilization

This progression shows how descriptive statements were systematically interpreted into higher-level analytical constructs connecting Islamic ethics, everyday practice, and socio-cultural transformation.

Trustworthiness was ensured through operational procedures consistent with credibility criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). First, data triangulation compared accounts across Muslim and non-Muslim participants to identify convergences and divergences. Second, the method of triangulation integrated interview, observation, and document data. Third, member reflection was conducted by sharing thematic summaries with two participants to verify interpretive accuracy. Fourth, an audit trail was maintained through coding memos, thematic diagrams, and reflexive notes documenting analytical decisions. Prolonged engagement in the field (four months) further strengthened contextual credibility.

The researcher's reflexivity was explicitly acknowledged. The principal researcher is affiliated with an Islamic higher education institution and has prior scholarly engagement with Islamic ethics and pluralism. While this positionality provided cultural familiarity and linguistic fluency, it also risked normative assumptions regarding harmonious Islamic values. To mitigate potential bias, reflexive memos were written after each interview to distinguish participant narratives from the



researcher interpretation. Inclusion of minority informants functioned as a counter-perspective mechanism, and coding categories were repeatedly revisited to ensure themes emerged inductively rather than from prior theoretical commitments.

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines. All participants provided informed consent, confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

3 Findings

3.1 Culturally Embedded Everyday Tolerance in Interreligious Social Life

The data indicate that religious tolerance in Salatiga is not primarily articulated through theological consensus or institutional regulation, but enacted through embodied, routine interaction embedded in neighborhood life. Rather than describing tolerance as a normative commitment, participants narrated it as something that “happens” through repeated coexistence. Daily encounters during communal work (*kerja bakti*), participation in life-cycle celebrations, and informal visits across religious boundaries created what one mosque imam described as “a rhythm of familiarity where difference becomes ordinary.” He elaborated that theological disagreement rarely surfaced in everyday settings because “we meet first as neighbours, not as debaters of doctrine” (Interview, Mosque Imam).

This recurring pattern suggests that tolerance operates as a habituated social competence. Through repeated micro-interactions, religious difference is domesticated into shared social normalcy. A pesantren caregiver explained that Islamic teachings on *rahmah* were interpreted locally as “ensuring that our presence does not disturb others but benefits them,” indicating that ethical doctrine was translated into situational conduct. Rather than invoking abstract dogma, participants framed religious responsibility in relational terms, protecting neighbourly harmony, avoiding offense, and participating in shared obligations.

Non-Muslim participants provided complementary accounts that deepen this interpretation. A Protestant leader described how mutual assistance during funerals and communal festivals generated “emotional memory,” meaning that solidarity accumulated through shared experiences over time. A Catholic priest reflected that “trust grows when people repeatedly witness each other’s consistency,” pointing to the temporal dimension of tolerance. From the Confucian minority perspective, civic inclusion was not described abstractly but experientially: “When we are invited, when our children play together, we feel recognized.”

Table 3. Emergent Dimensions of Everyday Lived Tolerance

Interpretive Theme	Social Mechanism	Thick Empirical Illustration
Habituated Coexistence	Repetition of neighbourhood interaction normalizes difference	<i>“We meet in community work and family events so often that religion is no longer a barrier.”</i>
Ethical Translation	Islamic values enacted contextually as relational responsibility	<i>“Mercy means ensuring others feel safe around us.”</i>
Relational Trust	Emotional memory formed through consistent cooperation	<i>“Trust grows because we keep seeing each other help.”</i>
Civic Recognition	Equal participation generates minority security	<i>“Being included makes us feel respected.”</i>

These narratives reveal tolerance as a layered social process: habituation (routine contact), ethical mediation (contextual interpretation of Islamic values), relational trust (emotional familiarity), and civic inclusion (recognition in shared spaces). Importantly, participants did not portray harmony as

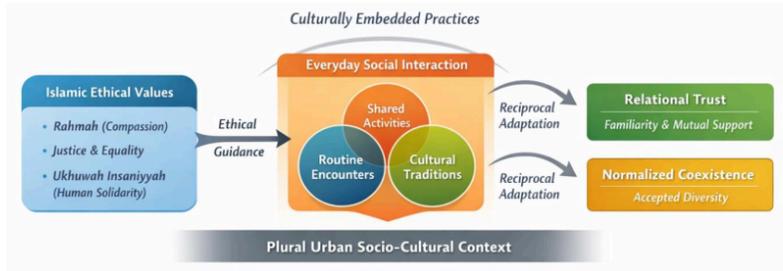


conflict-free; rather, minor misunderstandings were absorbed through ongoing interaction. Tolerance therefore, appears less as ideological agreement and more as a culturally sustained pattern of negotiated coexistence.

To synthesize these dimensions without duplicating descriptive categories, Table 3 consolidates the interpretive themes emerging inductively from interview coding.

These themes emerged through iterative coding (e.g., helping neighbours, routine meetings, mercy as action, feeling secure) that were progressively grouped into relational and ethical categories before being synthesized into broader interpretive constructs.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Lived Religious Tolerance



The model conceptualizes religious tolerance as a culturally constructed process emerging from the interaction between Islamic ethical interpretation and everyday social practice. Ethical values (*rahmah*, justice, human solidarity) are enacted through routine interreligious interaction and communal cultural activities, generating relational trust and normalized coexistence. These processes are embedded within plural urban socio-cultural structures, forming a dynamic and adaptive foundation for sustainable interreligious tolerance.

3.2 Negotiated Tolerance amid Socio-Cultural Transformation

While everyday habituation stabilized coexistence, participants simultaneously described new pressures linked to digital religious circulation and broader socio-cultural transformation. Rather than portraying digital influence as deterministically polarizing, informants described a tension between mediated narratives and embodied familiarity.

A Muslim religious leader noted that sermons accessed through social media sometimes introduced “*stricter interpretations that do not fully consider our local context.*” However, he emphasized that community discussions often followed such exposure, indicating reflexive filtering rather than passive acceptance. Similarly, a Protestant pastor recounted instances where online misinformation briefly generated suspicion, yet “*after meeting face to face, misunderstandings usually dissolve.*”

These accounts suggest that digital discourse functions as a symbolic disturbance, but not necessarily as a structural rupture. A Muslim resident reflected that divisive messages lose persuasive force when contradicted by lived experience: “*It is difficult to hate someone you just worked with yesterday.*” This statement encapsulates the mediating role of embodied interaction in buffering abstract polarization.

From a minority perspective, tolerance was also linked to institutional recognition. A Confucian representative explained that formal interfaith forums and equal administrative treatment reinforced a sense of security, particularly when external narratives questioned minority belonging. Thus, tolerance appears negotiated across three interacting layers: digital-symbolic discourse, local relational practice, and institutional mediation.

Rather than emerging from a pre-imposed theoretical template, the conceptual model presented in Figure 1 was constructed inductively through cross-case comparison of these layered interactions. Initial codes such as external teachings, misunderstanding, face-to-face clarification, and equal treatment were grouped into categories of symbolic tension, relational buffering, and civic mediation. The model therefore visualizes an empirically grounded process in which global religious flows are locally interpreted, moderated through relational trust, and stabilized through inclusive civic structures.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that tolerance in Salatiga is neither static harmony nor latent conflict, but an adaptive equilibrium continuously reproduced through habituated interaction, ethical translation, relational trust, and institutional inclusion under conditions of socio-cultural change.

4 Discussion

The findings indicate that religious tolerance in Salatiga is more accurately understood as a culturally embedded and continuously negotiated social process than as a fixed doctrinal consensus or purely institutional achievement. This interpretation refines, rather than overturns, classical social constructionism as developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. While social construction theory emphasizes the role of shared meaning in stabilizing social reality, the Salatiga case illustrates how routinized interaction and embodied practice contribute to maintaining plural coexistence even in the absence of complete moral consensus. In contrast to Berger (2014), concern that pluralism fragments a shared moral canopy, the present findings suggest that fragmentation does not automatically lead to disintegration; under certain socio-cultural conditions, everyday coordination may provide sufficient stability for managing difference. This does not negate Berger's thesis but indicates that its outcomes may vary across contexts.

From the perspective of lived religion (Ammerman, 2016; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2005), the findings affirm that religion operates substantially at the level of practice. Everyday encounters, habitual cooperation, and neighborhood interaction serve as primary arenas in which religious difference is negotiated and normalized. However, this study extends lived religion scholarship by highlighting the regulatory dimension of practice. In Salatiga, everyday religious enactment not only expresses personal meaning but also contributes to relational trust and social coordination. Tolerance thus appears less as an individual attitude and more as a socially learned competence sustained through repeated interaction. Rather than redefining lived religion theory, the findings suggest a complementary emphasis on its integrative social function in plural environments.

The results also nuance modernization perspectives that associate pluralism primarily with polarization or privatization. Although reflexive modernization and digital mediation introduce new symbolic tensions (Beck et al., 1994; Castells, 2010), these influences did not displace everyday coexistence in this case. Instead, global religious narratives were filtered through local networks of familiarity and civic participation. This observation does not invalidate concerns about polarization but indicates that its intensity and social consequences are context-dependent. In Salatiga, face-to-face interaction and long-term social embeddedness appear to moderate the potentially divisive effects of mediated discourse.

Within an Islamic intellectual framework, Islamic ethical values such as *rahmah* and *ukhuwah insaniyyah* functioned less as boundary markers and more as moral resources supporting coexistence. These values were translated into concrete norms of assistance, respect, and civic participation. This finding aligns with maqāṣid-oriented approaches (Auda, 2008), suggesting that Islamic normativity can operate in socially integrative ways when interpreted contextually. At the same time, this conclusion should not be generalized uncritically; ethical interpretation remains contingent upon local religious authority, historical experience, and socio-political configuration.

Sociologically, the persistence of tolerance through familiarity and trust resonates with relational and boundary-based theories of cohesion (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Putnam, 2007). It also overlaps with Roger Mac Ginty's concept of "everyday peace," insofar as harmony emerges from ordinary interaction rather than elite political design. However, unlike post-conflict contexts often examined in everyday peace studies, Salatiga represents a setting of routine plural coexistence rather than recent violent division. Moreover, ethical interpretation plays a more explicit role here as an internal motivator of practice. The comparison therefore suggests partial convergence rather than theoretical replacement.

Taken together, the case invites a more processual conceptualization of tolerance. Instead of viewing tolerance solely as a normative ideal, legal arrangement, or measurable attitude, it may be approached as an adaptive cultural process enacted and reproduced through daily practice. This formulation links micro-level interaction, meso-level cultural mediation, and macro-level socio-cultural transformation without presuming that one level fully determines the others. However, the explanatory scope of this model remains context-bound and should be interpreted as analytically suggestive rather than universally prescriptive.

5 Conclusion

This study has shown that religious tolerance in Salatiga operates as an interactional and culturally mediated process rather than as a fixed doctrinal agreement or purely institutional arrangement. Plural coexistence is sustained through routinized neighborhood encounters, shared civic participation, and contextually interpreted Islamic ethical values that translate abstract norms into everyday conduct. While digital religious circulation and global narratives introduce new symbolic tensions, these pressures are moderated through embodied familiarity, local trust networks, and ongoing dialogue. The contribution of this study lies in clarifying how social constructionist insights and lived religion perspectives intersect in plural urban contexts. The findings indicate that tolerance can function as a socially learned competence reproduced through repeated interaction and ethical mediation, even where comprehensive moral consensus is absent. Rather than advancing a universal model, this analysis offers a contextually grounded refinement that invites comparative investigation across diverse socio-religious environments.

Practically, the results suggest that initiatives to strengthen interreligious harmony should prioritize sustained face-to-face engagement at the community level, integrate ethical translation within religious education and leadership training, and support inclusive civic platforms that counterbalance digital polarization. Formal legal and institutional frameworks remain important, but their effectiveness appears closely linked to the density and continuity of everyday social interaction. By conceptualizing tolerance as an adaptive cultural process, this study provides an empirically grounded framework for examining how plural societies negotiate religious difference under conditions of socio-cultural transformation.

Disclosure Statement

The authors claim there is no conflict of interest.



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