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Hybridity In Eschatological Belief Among Indonesian (Javanese) Catholics

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Abstract

Indonesia, with its vast religious and cultural diversity, presents a unique religious dynamic, especially for Catholics in Java. The influence of local traditions and interfaith interactions often lead to multiple religious belonging, where Catholic believers integrate local spiritual elements into their eschatological beliefs. This hybridity manifests in practices such as ancestral rituals, the adaptation of Javanese symbols, and the blending of indigenous eschatological concepts with Catholic doctrine. This paper explores how the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging influences the eschatological understanding of Javanese Catholics and how hybridity facilitates dialogue between faith and local traditions. The study also examines the theological implications of this hybridity, assessing its impact on Catholic doctrinal integrity and its potential to enrich spiritual practices. Ultimately, this research aims to provide insights for the Catholic Church in guiding its followers through cultural and religious pluralism.

Keywords:

Hybridity, Multiple Religious Belonging, Catholicism, Eschatology, Javanese Traditions, Religious Pluralism, Cultural Integration, Interfaith Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with a very high level of religious and traditional diversity. Among the religious communities that live side by side, Catholics face unique socio-religious dynamics, especially in Java. Local religious traditions and local cultures have a very strong influence. The presence of Catholics in the midst of a Muslim majority society, as well as Hindu-Buddhist traditions rooted in Javanese culture, creates complex cross-religious and cross-cultural interactions. In this context, a person's religious identity is often not exclusive, but rather reflects the integration of the Catholic faith and local traditions.

This phenomenon, known as multiple religious belonging, is a reality for Catholics in Java. As a group living in the midst of cultural plurality, they often adopt

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elements of local belief traditions in their faith practices. For example, traditional beliefs about the relationship between humans and nature, rituals for the deceased, and Javanese spiritual symbols are often integrated into their religious lives. This shows that the beliefs of Catholics, including in the eschatological dimension, are inseparable from the influence of the surrounding culture and religion.

Eschatology in the Catholic tradition, which includes teachings about the end of the world, resurrection, and life after death, often becomes a space for dialogue between the official doctrine of the Church and the influence of Javanese tradition. Catholic eschatology among the Javanese is not only a doctrinal framework, but also reflects the practical application of local traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. This challenges the Church to remain relevant in guiding the people, while maintaining harmony between the teachings of the faith and the local traditions that influence them.

This phenomenon not only shows the spiritual richness that emerges from cross-traditional interactions, but also raises important theological questions. To what extent does this dialogue between the Catholic faith and local traditions enrich the religious practices of the people, and to what extent can it influence the Church's doctrinal understanding? This challenge raises the need to understand how the Catholic Church can accompany people living in the midst of cultural complexity, without losing the core of the Christian faith.

This article aims to explore the influence of multiple religious belonging on the eschatological understanding of Catholics in Java. This study will also highlight how the hybrid element in Catholic teachings allows for a dynamic dialogue between faith and local traditions. Ultimately, this study is expected to provide insight for the Church to accompany Catholics in Java in facing the reality of cultural and religious pluralism.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The following are some theoretical reviews in this article, namely the concept of multiple religious belonging, eschatology in the Catholic tradition, and pluralism and local traditions in Indonesia.

The Concept of Multiple Religious Belonging

The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging reflects the fact that a person can have strong roots in one religious tradition but simultaneously integrate elements

from other religious traditions to enrich their spiritual practice. This is inseparable from the human need to respond to the complexity of the reality of their lives which are often influenced by more than one religious or cultural tradition. In the context of Indonesia, which is known for its diversity of religions and cultural traditions, this phenomenon is very relevant. The interaction between *samawi*[1] religions such as Catholicism and Islam with *ardhi* religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and local Kejawen beliefs produces hybrid religious practices. For example, Catholics in Java often integrate Javanese prayer traditions and rituals into their faith life, creating harmony between local values and universal Catholic teachings.

At the global level, similar phenomena are also occurring in various regions. In Brazil, for example, Catholicism is mixed with Afro-Brazilian traditions such as Umbanda, which combines elements of Catholicism with local ancestral beliefs.[2] Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the Cao Dai tradition blends elements of Catholicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism to create a holistic spiritual system.[3] In India, Maria Velankanni, often referred to as the "Lourdes of the East," is a living proof of how Catholic Marian devotion interacts with Hindu traditions in India. The pilgrimage site of Maria Velankanni is not only a place of worship for Catholics but also attracts Hindus, creating a space for inclusive and meaningful spiritual dialogue.[4]

Viewed from the perspective of hybrid figures, Raimundo Panikkar, a cross-cultural theologian and philosopher, shows how dialogue between the heavenly (*samawi*) and earthly (*ardhi*) religions can broaden the understanding of faith. Through his work, Panikkar shows that elements from Hinduism and Christianity, such as the concept of divine unity and mystical experience, can complement each other.[5] Later, Louis Massignon, an Islamologist and Catholic mystic, offered another

[1] The distinction between celestial (heavenly, *samawi*) and terrestrial (earthly, *ardhi*) religions follows the morphological categorization of religions by Ahmad Abdullah al-Masdoosi, an Indian-Pakistani sociologist. See Ahmad Abdullah Al-Masdoosi, *Living Religions of the World: A Socio-Political Study* (Korochi: Aisha Bawany Wakf, 1962).

[2] Diana De G. Brown and Mario Bick, "Religion, Class, and Context: Continuities and Discontinuities in Brazilian Umbanda," *American Ethnologist* 14, no. 1 (February 1987): 73–93, https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1987.14.1.02a00050.

[3] Janet Hoskins, *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 1–28.

[4] Margaret Meibohm, "Past Selves and Present Others: The Ritual Construction of Identity at a Catholic Festival in India," in *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines*, ed. Corinne G. Dempsey and Selva J. Raj (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 61–84.

[5] Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), chap. 3.

example of religious hybridity. With a deep dedication to the study of Islam, especially through the figure of Al-Hallaj, Massignon showed how a deep understanding of the Islamic tradition can enrich Catholic theology and spiritual practice. Massignon even developed the concept of "mystical friendship" between religions as a path to universal harmony.[6] Similarly, Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan theologian, emphasizes the importance of dialogue between Christianity and ardhi traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, especially in the aspects of asceticism and practical spirituality. He integrates local elements into Asian liberation theology, making hybridity a way to fight for social justice and solidarity with the poor. Pieris believes that interfaith dialogue can enrich the understanding of the Christian faith without losing its identity.[7]

In Indonesia, one prominent example is the Sacred Heart Church in Ganjuran in Yogyakarta, which combines Hindu-Javanese art, architecture and rituals into an expression of the Catholic faith.[8] This integration not only strengthens the acceptance of the Catholic faith in local communities but also serves as concrete evidence of the Church's flexibility in dialogue between faith and culture.

The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging places the Catholic Church in a unique position to bridge differences in religious traditions. By respecting the positive elements of local traditions, the Catholic Church can broaden its understanding of universal values, such as love, justice, and hope, found in other religions and be enriched by them.[9] This hybridity also provides richer insights into how the Catholic faith can be relevant amid religious pluralism without losing its identity.

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[6] Sidney H. Griffith, "Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990): 154–59.

[7] Devaka Premawardhana, "The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 1 (2011): 76–101.

[8] Albertus Bagus Laksana, *Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations through Java* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), bab. 5.

[9] Dokumen Konsili Vatikan II, *Lumen Gentium: Terang Bangsa-Bangsa*, trans. R. Hardawiryana, 2nd edition (Jakarta: Departemen Dokumentasi dan Penerangan Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, 2010), art. 8; Dennis M. Doyle, "The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism: A Theological Consideration," *US Catholic Historian* 30, no. 1 (2012): 8.

Eschatology in the Catholic Tradition

Eschatology is one of the core teachings of the Catholic faith that discusses the end times and the afterlife. The basic concepts of Catholic eschatology include the understanding of heaven, hell, purgatory, and final judgment. Heaven is understood as eternal communion with God, hell as eternal separation from Him, while purgatory is a process of purification for souls who have died in a state of grace but still need to be purified before entering heaven.[10] Final judgment involves God's decision to determine people's fate based on their life on earth, although salvation is ultimately a gift of God's grace.

The inculturation process carried out by the Church allows local traditions to be accommodated without changing the core of Catholic teachings. In this context, local symbolism and rituals are often used to convey the message of faith. For example, in Java, the symbol of traditional clothing is used in the representation of Jesus and Mary, as seen in Ganjuran.[11] Liturgical traditions that use local languages and elements reflect the inclusive nature of the Church in dialogue between faith and culture.[12] These practices not only strengthen the Church's acceptance in local communities but also create new ways of understanding and living eschatology in a more relevant context.

Pluralism and Local Traditions in Indonesia

Religious pluralism in Indonesia provides ample space for interaction between the Catholic tradition and the majority religion such as Islam and the *ardhi* religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. As one of the religions that lives in a very diverse society, the Catholic Church in Indonesia faces challenges as well as opportunities to establish close relationships with local cultures. Local traditions and beliefs in

[10] "Katekismus Gereja Katolik," online version, 1992, nos. 1031, 1472, https://www.imankatolik.or.id/katekismus.php; Paul J. Griffiths, "Purgatory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls, PDF version (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 590–91; P.J. Toner, "Eschatology," Catholic Answers, accessed October 10, 2024, https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/eschatology.

[11] Albertus Bagus Laksana, "Multiple Religious Belonging or Complex Identity? An Asian Way of Being Religious," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 499–500.

[12] Emanuel Martasudjita, "Inkulturasi Gereja Katolik di Indonesia: Problematik, Pengertian dan Teologi Inkulturasi," *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 5, no. 2 (October 2005): 127–45.

Indonesia, especially in Java, have shaped the cultural landscape that influences how Catholics practice their faith.

This interaction not only creates new forms of expression of faith but also enriches the spiritual life of Catholics. In this context, the Catholic Church acts as a mediator between local traditions and the universal doctrine taught by the Church. The inculturation process carried out by the Church allows people to understand their faith through symbols, rites, and expressions that are in accordance with the local culture. For example, in Catholic communities in Java, elements of art and culture such as gamelan or traditional clothing are often used in liturgies and religious celebrations.[13]

However, this pluralism also brings its own challenges, especially in maintaining harmony between Church doctrine and practices inspired by local traditions. In many cases, local cultural traditions can bring elements that are not entirely in harmony with Catholic teaching. This requires the pastoral wisdom of the Church to accompany the people in a way that is sensitive to local cultures without compromising the core of Catholic theology.

This approach provides an opportunity for the Church to expand interreligious dialogue and create space for social harmony. By respecting local traditions and integrating them into the life of faith, the Church can act as a bridge between the various religious traditions in Indonesia. This not only helps enrich the faith of Catholics but also strengthens tolerance and cooperation in a diverse society.

CASE STUDIES

The concept of *karma* in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition teaches that every human action, good or bad, has consequences that will be felt in the future, both in this life and in the next. In Christian teachings, including Catholicism, salvation is not determined by human actions, but is a gift from God through faith in Christ. Good deeds are a consequence of this salvation, as an expression of gratitude and loyalty to God. However, in the context of Javanese culture, some Catholics often associate the concept of *karma* with rewards and sins, understanding that good or bad actions have significant moral and spiritual impacts.

[13] Emanuel Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi: Perayaan Injil Yesus Kristus di Bumi Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: PT Kanisius, 2021), 219, 235, 263.

This phenomenon can be observed in everyday conversations with Catholics in Java, who sometimes indirectly combine the Catholic view with the concept of *karma* from the Hindu-Buddhist tradition. They believe that good actions will bring good consequences in the future, while bad actions will produce bad fruits for them.[14] Although this understanding does not fully conform to Catholic doctrine, it reflects the theological hybridity that occurs as a result of interactions across traditions.

The next case concerns the concept of merit. In Catholic teaching, good works are not the cause of salvation, but rather the fruit of salvation received through faith in Christ. Good works are the calling of every believer to live according to God's will. Only through God's grace can one be saved, and good works are the people's response to God's love. This is in contrast to some traditions, such as mainstream Islam, which emphasize that good works play a role in determining one's place in the afterlife.

In Indonesia, Catholics often integrate this understanding with the majority view, such as the Islamic concept of good deeds, thus creating a hybrid form of faith. Some believe that their good deeds have a direct impact on their position in heaven, without deeply understanding that salvation is a gift.[15] This challenges the Church to explain the doctrine of the Catholic faith more clearly, especially in the context of a culture that values action and ritual.

The next case is the tradition of selamatan arwah in Java, which involves prayers and feasts for the souls of the deceased on certain days such as the third, seventh, fortieth, and thousandth is a very popular practice. This tradition is believed to help the soul's journey to a better resting place. Although this tradition does not originate from Catholic teachings, Catholics in Java often practice it as a form of respect for their ancestors as well as a prayer for their souls.

Selamatan in Javanese tradition is often considered to be on par with prayers for souls in purgatory, although Catholic theology does not teach the direct influence of such rituals on the fate of souls. The similarity of purpose between selamatan and

[14] A Catholic politician put it this way when expressing his frustration with a figure he considered to have betrayed him, "...(H)e who holds back the wind will reap the whirlwind." See Nicholas Ryan Aditya and Diamanty Meiliana, "Jokowi, Gibran, dan Bobby Nasution Bukan PDI-P Lagi," KOMPAS.com, December 4, 2024, https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/12/04/18062551/jokowi-gibran-dan-bobby-nasution-bukan-pdi-p-lagi.

[15] For example, the author once heard a priest say in a homily at a Catholic Church mass for the dead, "May the good deeds of our deceased brothers and sisters be rewarded by God."

purgatory—namely, supporting the souls of the deceased—creates space for syncretism[16], namely the adaptation of local traditions into religious practices.

In addition, Javanese traditions that emphasize the continued support of the living family for the soul of the deceased often clash with the Catholic view of final judgment. In the Catholic faith, the fate of the soul is entirely in the hands of God based on faith and grace. However, for many Javanese Catholics, there is still a belief that prayers and rituals from the family are more important in supporting the soul of the deceased.[17] This highlights the need for the Church to provide pastoral care that is sensitive to local cultures while remaining faithful to the doctrine of the faith.

DISCUSSIONS AND ANALYSIS

Hybridity in Catholic teaching is not something new, but rather an inherent part of the Church's long history. In Christian teaching, there are elements such as merit, prayers for the departed, and even similarities to the concept of "*karma*" in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition. The concept of *karma* in Christian teaching, for example, can be found in Paul's Letter to the Galatians 6:7-9 about the "law of sowing and reaping." Paul's Letter to the Corinthians can be considered to complement the Galatians passage by presenting the concept of "rewards" that God will give in heaven based on the faithfulness of the believer in serving Him (2 Cor 5:10).

These elements show that organically, the Catholic faith has elements that allow dialogue with other traditions. However, the uniqueness of Christian teaching remains intact, especially in the belief that salvation is a gift from God, not the result of human effort alone. This fundamental difference distinguishes Christian teaching from other religions, although there is room for enriching interaction.

The *ardhi* religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, tend to place greater emphasis on human actions in the here and now (*hic et nunc*). The concept of *karma*, for example, teaches that a person's future life, both in this life and in future lives, is determined by their present actions. This focus can be a critique of Christian teachings that sometimes rely too heavily on God's retribution in the afterlife. The law of *karma* has the potential to enrich Christian teachings by instilling greater moral

[16] Syncretism as a term often has negative connotations. However, the term should be restored to a more positive or at least neutral reputation. See Paolo Dall'Oglio, "In Praise of Syncretism," trans. Thomas Michel, دير مار موسى الحبشي Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi, February 12, 2011, https://www.deirmarmusa.org/it/node/68.

[17] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 293.

responsibility for one's actions, so that one does not simply rely on God's grace but also strives to live ethically.

However, the *ardhi* religious approach can also be said to have limitations. When one faces the harsh realities of life, focusing on *karma* can raise existential questions: where should a believer turn to gain spiritual stamina? If everything depends on *karma*, what about those who feel trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of suffering? In this case, Christianity offers hope through divine intervention that is beyond human ability. The Christian teachings of God's grace and salvation provide comfort and strength in facing difficult situations.

In contrast, the *samawi* religions, including Christianity, place more emphasis on the role of the other party—God—and the "later" aspect. This teaching places hope in God's final judgment and just retribution. However, this approach can fall into a "humpbacked" or fatalistic attitude, where people give up on their circumstances and lose their will to act. Karl Marx's critique that "religion is the opium of the people" is often directed at this view, as religion can be seen as making people neglect their responsibilities in the world today.

The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging (MRB) is also an important part of this hybrid dynamic. MRB allows individuals to practice elements from various religious traditions at once. In the view of theologians such as Peter C. Phan, religious pluralism can be seen as an opportunity to enrich theological understanding of the presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions. This perspective paves the way for the Church to integrate universal values from various traditions into Catholic theology, while still maintaining doctrinal harmony.[18]

If so, the Hindu-Buddhist concept of *karma* law in the author's view has the potential to enrich Christian teachings so that they do not rely too much on God's retribution in the future. By understanding that human actions have direct consequences in this world, Christians can be more responsible for their actions and not only rely on divine grace. Likewise, the author argues that the concept of reward from the Islamic tradition can encourage Catholic Christians to be more active in doing good, not to gain salvation, but as a form of gratitude for God's grace. This

[18] Peter C. Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 495–519.

concept can also be a reminder of the Christian admonition that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

The belief in ancestral spirits that are commemorated on certain days in Javanese tradition according to the author can also provide its own enrichment for Catholic teachings. This tradition can be a means to strengthen the bonds of brotherhood in families and communities. By remembering the values, goodness, and examples of the ancestors, Catholics can deepen their respect for the history of their own faith, especially through prayers for the souls in purgatory. This shows that local traditions are not only culturally relevant but also have spiritual meanings that are in line with Catholic teachings.

While hybridity brings many opportunities, the theological challenges it presents cannot be ignored. One major challenge is the potential conflict between pure Catholic doctrine and practices influenced by local traditions. Tensions also arise between puritan groups who seek to maintain the exclusivity of Catholic doctrine and groups who support cultural accommodation.[19] In the Catholic community in Indonesia, this dynamic is complex because the Church must maintain a balance between respecting local traditions and preserving its theological teachings. On the one hand, the Church wants to respect local wisdom. However, on the other hand, there is a risk that local practices can obscure or even reduce the core teachings of the faith.[20] In addition, pastoral challenges also arise in accompanying people who are accustomed to local beliefs. Some people prioritize local traditions over official Church teachings, especially in eschatological rituals. For example, belief in special days such as the third, seventh, and fortieth after someone's death is often seen as more important than the doctrine of purgatory. This shows the urgent need for a more inclusive and contextual pastoral approach.[21]

Thus, hybridity in Catholic teaching actually reflects a complex dynamic between challenges and opportunities. With a wise pastoral approach, the Church can accompany the people in facing cultural pluralism without losing its identity. This also opens up space for the enrichment of theology and strengthening the role of the Church in creating an inclusive and loving society.

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[19] Catherine Cornille, "Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (43-49): 45–46; Karla Suomala, "Complex Religious Identity in the Context of Interfaith Dialogue," *CrossCurrents* 62, no. 3 (September 2012): 366.

[20] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 235.

[21] Martasudjita, 318–23.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging among Indonesian Catholics reflects the rich dynamics between the Catholic faith and the influence of local traditions. In Indonesia's pluralistic society, especially in Java, Catholics often practice their faith by adopting elements from other traditions, such as the Hindu-Buddhist concept of *karma* or the Javanese tradition of selamatan. This close interaction shows that the Catholic faith does not stand alone, but develops in a dynamic dialogue with the local cultural and religious context.

The hybrid element in Catholic teachings inherently allows this phenomenon to occur. Through the inculturation approach, the Church opens up space to accept local cultural elements without losing its doctrinal core. However, this phenomenon also reveals theological challenges, especially related to the potential for syncretism that can blur the boundaries between the Catholic faith and non-Catholic traditions. Nevertheless, the Church is still able to maintain its teachings through relevant and contextual pastoral care.

Therefore, the Indonesian Catholic Church needs to strengthen its pastoral approach to accompany people who experience multiple religious belonging. This assistance can be done by providing a deeper understanding of Catholic doctrine, while still respecting local traditions that are part of the cultural identity of the people. An inclusive and dialogical approach will help the Church maintain harmony between faith and culture, so that people can practice their faith more authentically in a pluralistic society.

In addition, it is important to conduct further research on religious hybridity and its socio-theological implications. This research will help the Church better understand the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging and provide direction to overcome challenges and take advantage of emerging opportunities. Thus, the Church can continue to be relevant and present as a light for its people amidst the complexity of culture and religion in Indonesia.

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