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Religion and the Development of a More Contextually Responsive Discipline: The Case of Indonesian Psychology

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Above: Hindu temple in Bali, Indonesia. Getty Images

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C

ompared to other social sciences in Indonesia, the development of psychology as a formal discipline is relatively recent. The first department of psychology was established in 1960 at the University of Indonesia (Sarwono, 2004). At that time Indonesia was a young postcolonial nation (declared independent in 1945) struggling with a prolonged political and

economic crisis. Therefore, in its early years, the country's psychological research was primarily focused on fostering practical applications that could address the need for better healthcare and education systems (Sarwono, 2004). Discussions about developing Indonesian psychology as a science emerged later, as academics voiced concerns about westernized trends in which Indonesian research was mainly replicating studies produced in WEIRD [Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic] regions. These trends could be found in various study topics, ranging from individual and micro factors such as [personality](#) and parenting, to social factors such as [intergroup relations](#). In response, senior scholars started to call for more locally situated psychological theories and methodologies (Dahlan et al., 2007).

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Discussions of Asian psychology's contextual features often cite religions and religiosity as a central element ([Yeh, 2018](#)). Similarly, an orientation toward religions and religiosity has been generally portrayed as a key feature of Asian epistemologies and ways of being ([Wong & Chai, 2010](#)). Indonesian psychological research has also emphasized the role of religions and religiosity, ranging from exploring contemporary developments in Indonesian indigenous belief systems to addressing the rise of religious fundamentalism and its societal impacts ([Muluk et al., 2018](#)). These studies have supported a greater contextual understanding of the role of religions and religiosity in Indonesian society. For example, in their series of studies on religious fundamentalism in Indonesia, [Muluk et al. \(2020\)](#) were able to explicate the phenomenon of religious-based terrorism through a complex lens intertwining Indonesian cultural factors and the role of cosmopolitan determinants in shaping the ways Indonesian terrorist groups operate. Contrary to previous literature on this topic, they found that relational factors tended to have more influence on the operations of Indonesian terrorist networks than ideological factors, reflecting the communal orientation of Indonesian culture and society.

Although recent studies on [religions](#) and religiosity in Indonesia (such as those conducted by [Muluk et al.](#)) have made profound contributions to advancing Indonesian psychological science, research on this topic may continue to generate further contextual knowledge of psychology and religions in Indonesian society. One possibility is to explore the role of religions and religiosity as a liberating theology that promotes social transformations, decolonization, and self-determination. The evolution of global religions in Indonesia cannot be separated from the nation's colonial history. Indonesia's birth as an independent nation was the result of a national movement powered, in part, by people's determination to resist the colonizers' imposed belief systems ([Fogg, 2016](#)). This



Ganesha is one of the best-known deities in Hinduism. Indonesia has the fourth-largest population of Hindus in the world. Image: Getty

historical trajectory illustrates how religions and religiosity can function as a liberating root upon which collective acts and solidarities against injustice and oppression develop.

Exploring the role of religions and religiosity in fostering social transformation has great potential and is reflected in the emerging interest among Indonesian scholars to explore and reignite indigenous belief systems, including in the field

of psychology. For example, psychology researchers at Gadjah Mada University (the second oldest psychology faculty in Indonesia) have led initiatives to develop academic programs (e.g., [June 2022](#)) and research (e.g., [Kholik & Himam, 2015](#)) specifically dedicated to study and disseminate the teachings of Suryomentaram, an indigenous philosopher who based his teachings on the Javanese belief system popularly known as *Kejawen*. During the colonization period, Suryomentaram's teachings became a source of inspiration for Javanese people to support independence movements, as he advocated for Javanese ethics and philosophies that resisted the colonizers' ways of being. For example, drawing on Javanese philosophy about social respect and responsibility, Suryomentaram developed his teachings on *Pembangunan Djiwa Warga Negara* (developing the soul of a nation), which was a call for fighting against colonialism ([Bonneff & Crosley, 1993](#)).

Another recent example of studies that illustrate the transformative role of religion and religiosity in Indonesian society is Madyaningrum et al.'s study on disability activism in Javanese culture ([Madyaningrum et al., 2022](#)), which was aimed at investigating the sociopsychological mechanisms through which people's participation in disability organizations could facilitate personal and collective empowerment. Conducted in a rural Javanese context, this study suggested that Javanese religious teachings played a central role in shaping the ways participants described and manifested their meanings of being empowered, both as individuals and community members.

This growing interest in studying the transformative aspects of local religions and religiosity is not only important for the development of psychological science in Indonesia but also sociologically meaningful. Historically, the marginalization

of indigenous belief systems in Indonesia was caused both by colonization and by traumatic events that



marked the modern

Gadjah Mada University has the second oldest psychology faculty in Indonesia. Image: Risanprasetyo/Feбри Ady Prasetyo, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

era of Indonesia. For example, in the mid-1960s, when Indonesia was a very young nation, a political tragedy known as the [Indonesian Communist Purge](#) cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Most were affiliated or accused of affiliation with the Indonesian Communist Party, which at that time was one of the largest political parties in the country. After the purge, it became mandatory for every citizen to adopt one of the five formal religions acknowledged by the government (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Protestantism, or Catholicism). Those who did not comply were at risk of being accused of supporting communist ideology and thereby subject to prosecution. Since then, the existence of indigenous belief systems as local religions has significantly diminished ([Beatty, 1999](#)). Strong state control over religion is also reflected in a national regulation obliging all citizens to state their religion on their national identity card. Given this political context, the emergence of scholarly initiatives that examine alternative epistemes rooted in Indonesian indigenous belief systems may have meaningful implications for restoring people's understanding of and connections with their ancestors' spiritualities.

This complex intertwining of religions and the country's political contexts suggests the need for more nuanced studies of the role of religiosity in understanding Indonesian people's personal and collective psyches. Recent studies on this topic also indicate that religion and religiosity should not be portrayed as static signifiers because they are continuously evolving with the country's sociohistorical and political landscapes. Therefore, it is crucial to

situate psychological studies on religions and religiosity in Indonesia within its past and current history.

The emphasis on the roles of religion and religiosity in studies of Indonesian people's personal and collective psyches is also reflected in the establishment of religious-based psychological associations. These include the Islamic Psychology Association (API) and the Christian Psychology Association (APK), which were formed in 2002 (API) and 2017 (APK) as special-interest psychology associations under the parent organization of the Indonesian Psychological Association. (Note: the organizations' Indonesian names are *Asosiasi Psikologi Islami* and *Asosiasi Psikologi Kristiani*, meaning "relating to" Islam/Christian.) Notably, three years after the establishment of the Islamic Psychological Association, one of its founders wrote in *Reposition of Islamic Psychology*:

"To position Islamic Psychology today as a part of psychology with a religious perspective, or a form of indigenous psychology, will be more easily accepted by non-Muslims and secularists." (Subandi, 2005, page 13)

His counterpart in the Christian Psychological Association wrote in a letter:

"This association ... is open to members of the Indonesian Psychological Association who have an interest in studies on issues related to Psychology and Christianity [to] be able to glorify God and improve the welfare of fellow human beings through the development of this Association in Indonesia." (Pali, 2017)

Both suggest that there is a desire (a) for both Islamic psychology and Christian psychology in Indonesia to be open to and accepted by people outside their own religion, (b) not to see humans partially, but rather to understand and solve human problems holistically by considering their religious and spiritual dimensions, and (c) to remain relevant and rooted in the indigenous context. Again, it appears that the intersections between psychology and different religions aim not to narrow psychology but to share universal human values that are transcendental in nature and can broaden the empirical spectrum of psychology.

Since the establishment of the API and APK, higher education institutions in Indonesia have also developed specific study programs in Islamic and Christian psychology, joining earlier Islamic psychology courses in general psychology study programs at religion-based universities under Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (the two largest religious organizations in Indonesia).

The sectarian nature of the societies and programs in Indonesia contrasts with Division 36 of the American Psychological Association, namely the Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, which is an umbrella organization for members from more than one religion. A positive interpretation of this difference is that it reveals a need among the Indonesian people for specialized psychology pertaining to particular religions. For example, recent discourse within the API has involved establishing a certification of psychological counseling competence for Indonesians planning to perform the Hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca). This confirms that Indonesia's psychology of religion has its own artfulness distinct from other fields of psychology (clinical, forensic, industrial/organizational, educational, and so on).

In other words, Islamic and Christian psychology have an opportunity to lead the field of psychology in Indonesia, rather than letting it be led by WEIRD research. This may also undermine the perception of psychology as inferior in Indonesia. Compared with other disciplines such as medicine and sociology, psychology is less recognized at the national level. Consider the National Movement of the Mental Revolution, an Indonesian social movement—a topic of national interest to a 2014 Indonesian presidential candidate—that is attributed to a sociologist ([Wirutomo, 2015](#)), not a psychologist. Another example is the high status of medicine in Indonesia: Medicine often plays the “commander in chief” to psychology’s “foot soldier.” Mental health tests for presidential and vice-presidential as well as regional gubernatorial and vice-gubernatorial candidates, for example, are usually led by a medical doctor rather than a psychologist—psychologists can collaborate with the doctor. This is not surprising because the study of psychology in Indonesia was initially established as part of the department of medicine and only later became an independent department.

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Nevertheless, others see the establishment of the API and APK as a potentially problematic development in Indonesian psychology because they could strengthen sectarianism and identity politics. In the last several years, Indonesia has faced the rising of religious intolerance and discriminations against religious minorities ([Halili &](#)

The first vice president of Indonesia is featured in the 100,000 rupiah banknote, the Indonesian currency. Image: [Getty Naipospos, 2015](#)). The infamous case of Ahok's blasphemy trial in 2016 was

one among recent incidents that have raised concerns about religious-based sectarianism. Ahok, or Basuki Tjahaya Purnama, was Jakarta's governor who was imprisoned for two years on a blasphemy charge following his controversial statement regarding a Qur'anic verse during the campaign for his second term candidacy ([Mietzner, 2019](#)). During the trial for this case, public discourse was heated by provocative opinions that pushed forward exclusivist politics based on majority-minority religious divide ([Alam, 2017](#)). This exclusivist political atmosphere intensified during the 2019 presidential election as religious sentiments were exploited for political gain. It is such a political context that has raised concerns about the development of religious-based psychological associations. This development seems contradictory to the urgency of promoting inclusive politics and culture in Indonesia. Such concerns are becoming stronger, especially since the API changed its name to a more primordial one, namely the *Islam* Psychological Association (no longer the *Islamic* Psychological Association), on the grounds that "the term Islam is a genuine term and was made by Allah swt" ([Munawwir, 2016](#)). Of course, this interpretation requires further scrutiny.

Another important marker of awareness about the central role of religion in Indonesian's psychology was religious leaders' [October 2022](#) signing of the Lombok Declaration, which states, "religion has an important role in the prevention, treatment, and recovery of mental health problems ... that neglect and discrimination against people with mental health problems is acts that are not justified by religion and belief." The declaration is a follow-up to a preliminary report:

"Suicide [in Indonesia] is commonly classified as *aib*, which is a shame so deep, such that there is no English equivalent for the term ... due to religion-based moralisation of suicide given that suicide is considered a deadly sin, and religion holding a central role in Indonesia's society." ([Onie et al., 2022](#), p. 3)

Despite the promising role of religion in developing and liberating psychology, the scientific study of the psychology of religion in Indonesia is not yet well developed. This is evident in the dearth of scientific publications—for example, the APK does not publish any scientific journals, and the API experiences delays in publishing (the latest full publication was [in 2021](#)). These realities align with a statement by the University of Indonesia's dean of faculty of psychology that

and expand its application.” He stated that the problem with psychology in Indonesia is linked to the incorrect inquiries into human nature (lack of in-depth study of the phenomena) rather than methodological problems (inability to answer the right questions). It is alleged that Indonesian psychology researchers examine only human phenomena that are limited to their exteriority, tending to hurry to determine the boundaries of the phenomena and even formulate variables. This has further resulted in the absence of well-known scientific journals in the field of religion psychology in Indonesia, while there are already quite a number (more than 10) journals of Islamic studies, including general and nonpsychological journals, which have achieved [the highest national accreditation](#). Religion has the opportunity to collaborate with psychology in Indonesia (and Asia) and contribute to truly understanding the psychological interiority of the societies (Takwin as cited in [Fakultas Psikologi UI, 2022](#); minutes 21:00-42:00) that the world deserves to know.

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