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## EPISTEMOLOGY-DIALECTIC BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examines the epistemology dialectic between religion and culture from the perspective of anthropologists using a library research method. It focuses on how anthropological thinkers conceptualize the reciprocal relationship between religious values and cultural practices that continuously transform alongside social dynamics. Drawing on classical and contemporary works by scholars such as Clifford Geertz, Emile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Talal Asad, this study develops a conceptual framework for understanding religion not only as a symbolic system, but also as a cultural force that actively shapes social behavior, norms, and collective identity. The findings demonstrate that the relationship between religion and culture is inherently dialectical, operating through processes of negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation within specific social and historical contexts. This study contributes to existing scholarly debates in the anthropology of religion by offering a synthesized epistemological perspective that moves beyond dichotomous views of religion and culture, emphasizing their dynamic and mutually constitutive interaction. Consequently, the article underscores the relevance of an anthropological approach in reconceptualizing religion as a socially embedded and culturally mediated phenomenon.

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#### Introduction

Humans are God's most perfect creatures because they possess advantages that other creatures do not. This superiority over other creatures is the potential to know God and practice His teachings. Therefore, this gift gives humans a religious instinct that offers the possibility or opportunity for development. However, in addition to this religious instinct, to develop their potential, humans need life experiences (Nasir, 2021).

Thanks to religious instinct and experience, there is something that humans want to achieve that cannot only be achieved by reason but must be accompanied by the soul (Hannan & Umam, 2023). This encourages humans to be religious, so that humans become religious creatures. This religion will bring humans to the Creator. Thus, humans need

guidance to grow and develop properly, so that their potential is on the right track and is blessed by God. This guidance begins from childhood until adulthood (Riyantoro & Setiawan, 2022).

Religious experience is an element of feeling in religious awareness, namely a feeling that leads to belief that is produced by actions (amaliah). Therefore, the psychology of religion does not interfere with any form of problems concerning the main beliefs of a religion, including the truth or falsity or plausibility or falsity of religious beliefs. Because religion involves all functions of the human body and soul, which include the affective, conative, cognitive, and motor aspects (Rizqia et al., 2019). This paper will discuss these aspects related to the experience of divinity (religion), religious feelings, and longing for God. These aspects can influence the achievement of a solid religious awareness. (Tsaniyatus Sa'diyah, 2022).

A spiritual experience is something that a person experiences in his mind that occurs in his subconscious, far from the actual reality and that is a sign that he has now hallucinated perfectly so that the creator made him into someone who deserves to have this experience (Hamjah et al., 2020). A number of spiritual teachers from various faith backgrounds, both in the West and the East, have written about various spiritual phenomena associated with spiritual experiences, often quite astonishing to the layperson.

These include experiences beyond the ordinary, such as foretelling the future, healing illnesses, penetrating the supernatural, out-of-body experiences, and various things that seem miraculous to our common sense. Consider, for example, the works of spiritual teachers such as Madame Blavatsky with her theosophy and the ideas of karma and incarnation, and Krishnamurti with his human mind and concept of daily meditation, which introduced Eastern teachings to the West. Or, conversely, how Greek philosophy influenced Eastern thought (Wendry, 2016).

Furthermore, for example, the controversial teachings of Al Hallaj which contradict the rational teachings of his teacher Junaid (but both understand each other), the teachings of Wali Sanga (the 9 Saints) in Java which are full of miraculous stories, the concept of being one with God (*manunggaling kawulo gusti*) from Syech Siti Jenar, the Hindu-Islamic teachings which are united in the Wayang puppet characters for example in the Dewaruci story. The original teachings of the archipelago are full of stories based on the belief in the existence of an Almighty Power that determines the path of human life. As well as various daily spiritual phenomena around us with the continued practice of shamans, kyai, religious teachers from any religion who carry out spiritual approaches in the midst of society.

In line with the focus of this study, the research is designed to reflect its strong connection with the field of religious anthropology. This study directly aligns with the core concern of anthropology in understanding religion not merely as a theological system, but as a social and cultural phenomenon manifested in everyday practices, symbols, and constructions of meaning. Furthermore, this study explicitly reflects the main theme of the article, namely the dialectical relationship between religion and culture, which is reciprocal, dynamic, and mutually constitutive. By positioning the dialectical framework as the analytical foundation, this study situates itself within anthropological debates that seek to move beyond dichotomous understandings of religion and culture and instead view both as intertwined processes within social, historical, and cultural contexts.

## Method

This study uses a library research method that focuses on collecting, reviewing, and analyzing various academic literature related to the epistemology-dialectic between religion and culture from the perspective of anthropologists (Aminati & Purwoko, 2013). The sources reviewed include books on the anthropology of religion, international journal articles, ethnographic research reports, and classic works by figures such as Clifford Geertz, Talal Asad, and Victor Turner. The collected literature is categorized thematically into key analytical domains, including religious symbolism, cultural practices, social norms, and the construction of collective identity. Through comparative and interpretive reading, this study identifies recurring patterns, conceptual tensions, and dialectical processes that shape the reciprocal relationship between religion and culture. This methodological approach enables a deeper and more critical understanding of religion as both a cultural product and a source of values within dynamic social and historical contexts.

The analytical framework used in this study is interpretive anthropology, which views culture and religion as systems of meaning expressed through symbols, practices, and narratives. Within this framework, religious texts, rituals, and cultural expressions are analyzed as socially embedded phenomena that require contextual interpretation rather than purely positivistic explanation. In addition, elements of qualitative discourse analysis are applied to examine how anthropological scholars conceptualize religion and culture, particularly in relation to power, meaning-making, and social construction.

## **Funding and Discussion**

## Religion and the Socio-Cultural System

From an anthropological perspective, religion cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-cultural system in which it develops and is practiced. Religion is not merely a set of theological doctrines or a system of transcendent beliefs, but also a social institution that functions to regulate patterns of human relationships, shape collective values, and provide a framework of meaning for social life (Hatta, 2023). Therefore, the

relationship between religion and the socio-cultural system is reciprocal and dialectical: religion shapes social and cultural structures while simultaneously being influenced and mediated by those socio-cultural contexts.

Emile Durkheim views religion as a symbolic representation of a society's collective consciousness. Within this framework, religious practices function to strengthen social solidarity and maintain social order through shared symbols, rituals, and norms. Religion thus serves as a means of moral and social legitimation that binds individuals into a broader community (Hasan, 2025). The socio-cultural system provides a space for religion to operate as a mechanism of social integration, while religion confers sacred legitimacy upon prevailing social values and structures.

Clifford Geertz extends this understanding by positioning religion as part of a cultural system that functions to construct and sustain meaning. According to Geertz, religion is a system of symbols that works to establish powerful, pervasive, and enduring moods and motivations in human beings. In this context, the socio-cultural system serves as the medium through which religious symbols are produced, interpreted, and transmitted (Syarifah & Mushthoza, 2022). Religion does not stand outside culture; rather, it is deeply embedded in everyday social practices such as customs, traditions, language, and structures of power.

The relationship between religion and the socio-cultural system is also evident in the process of institutionalizing religious values. Religious norms are often translated into social regulations, customary law, and cultural practices that govern individual and collective behavior. Conversely, the socio-cultural system influences how religious teachings are understood and practiced (Jatmiko, 2020). In the context of plural societies, religion may undergo processes of adaptation and reinterpretation in order to align with local social and cultural conditions. This process demonstrates that religion is dynamic in social practice, even though it is theologically understood as absolute.

Talal Asad critiques universalistic approaches to religion by emphasizing the importance of historical context and power relations in shaping religious practices. According to Asad, religion cannot be defined in a singular and ahistorical manner, as its meanings and expressions are always influenced by specific social, political, and cultural conditions (Muttaqin & Munandar, 2025). Within this framework, the socio-cultural system does not merely serve as a background for religion, but also as an arena in which religious authority, ritual practices, and doctrinal interpretations are continuously negotiated. This indicates that religion functions as part of a living social system that is constantly evolving.

In Muslim societies, the relationship between religion and the socio-cultural system can be observed through the diverse expressions of Islam across different regions. Islam, as a universal religion, manifests itself in a variety of social practices depending on local

cultural contexts. Religious traditions such as rituals, celebrations, and forms of symbolic expression often reflect an ongoing dialogue between the normative teachings of Islam and local cultural values. This phenomenon affirms that the socio-cultural system is not a threat to religion, but rather a creative space for the actualization of religious teachings in social life (Ilyas, 2023).

Religious values can serve as an ethical foundation for evaluating social inequality, injustice, and the abuse of power. In this context, religion does not merely act as a guardian of social stability, but also as a transformative force that promotes social change. The dialectic between religion and the socio-cultural system is therefore not always harmonious, but may also generate productive tensions that contribute to societal dynamics.

Thus, religion and the socio-cultural system constitute two interwoven entities in shaping human life. Religion provides a framework of values and meanings that guide social action, while the socio-cultural system offers a concrete space for the realization and transformation of those values. An anthropological approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of this relationship by positioning religion as a living, contextual social phenomenon that continuously interacts with cultural dynamics and social structures.

# Epistemology-Dialectics Between Religion and Culture: Anthropologists' Perspectives

Cultural analysis is not an experimental science seeking *laws*, but rather an interpretation seeking *meaning*. That's how Clifford Gert put it in his collection of writings, "*The Interpretation of Culture*", which has received a warm welcome among anthropologists and other scholars (Syarifah & Mushthoza, 2022). Dialectics is a method used by Hegel to understand reality as the journey of ideas towards perfection. For him, exploring matter is futile because matter is merely a manifestation of the journey of ideas. With dialectics, understanding ideas as reality becomes possible.

Dialectics can be understood as "The Theory of the Union of Opposites" (the theory of the unity of opposites). There are three elements or concepts in understanding dialectics: first, *thesis*, second, as the opposite of the first, called *antithesis*. From the battle of these two elements, a third element emerges that reconciles the two, called *synthesis*. Thus, dialectics can also be called a total thought process, where each element negates each other (denies and is denied), contradicts each other (resists and is resisted), and mediates each other (mediates and is mediated).

This dialectic stems from Hegel's idea that the family is the first stage in the emergence of objective will. Objective will in the family arises because love successfully unites wills. Consequently, goods or possessions that originally belonged to each

individual become shared property. However, the family contains an antithesis: when individuals (children) within the family grow up, they begin to leave the family and join a broader group of individuals called civil society. Individuals in this civil society seek their own livelihoods and pursue their own goals. The state, as the highest institution, unites the objective family and the subjective civil society (Walijah, 2023).

Hegel's thought is inextricably linked to the dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In his book, "Philosophy of Right," the state and civil society are placed within this dialectical framework: the family as the thesis, civil society as the antithesis, and the state as the synthesis. Although Hegel's logic appears linear, this is not the intention. Hegel intended the dialectic to be intertwined. Within this dialectical theoretical framework, Hegel positions civil society between the family and the state. In other words, civil society is separate from the family and the state (Ma'ruf, 2016).

Culture is substantially essential to the life of a society. Every society, no matter how simple, still possesses culture as a result of their work, creativity, and feelings. Culture contains the values, norms, and outlook on life of a nation, the abilities and habits acquired or learned by humans as members of society. Culture is a blueprint that has become a compass in the journey of human life, it becomes a guideline for behavior. Such a view requires tracing the continuity of culture in the symbolic expressions of individuals and groups, especially in examining the process of inheritance of values that occurs because culture is a pattern of understanding and meaning that is woven comprehensively in symbols and transmitted historically. This reality also contributes to Culture is something complex that morals, laws, customs and other abilities.

James Frazer says in his book: Is the power that controls this world a "consciousness" and personal, or is it neither a consciousness nor a personal? Religion, as a pacifier of human power, has chosen the first answer. An answer that is very much at odds with *magic and science*, on which natural processes depend. Nature works not depending on the will or thoughts of a single individual, but nature will forever be governed by the mechanical laws of nature.

Religion here should not be viewed or understood as a dogma or moral system per se, but rather as a phenomenon of human life. This is because religion, in essence, is not a set of values intended for itself, but rather instills social values in humans. Therefore, religion is one of the elements that form a cultural value system and can make a real contribution to the formation of a society's moral system and social norms. For Tylor, the relationship between the rational basis of thought and social evolution can be seen in every aspect of human culture, provided we are willing to take the time to observe it closely (Grant Weinandy & Grubbs, 2021).

However, using sharp arguments, Geertz stated that human cultural activity is something special and different from others. Humans live within a truly complex system of

meaning, which anthropologists call "culture." If we want to understand cultural activity, one of its most important elements being "religion," then we have no choice but to find appropriate methods. And those methods are "interpretations." Religion, as an abstract system of knowledge, is rooted in texts (believed in by adherents of that religion) and several interpretations of those texts (mufassir), which produce human values and moral ideas that humans then implement in their daily lives (Grant Weinandy & Grubbs, 2021).

It's understandable that religion and culture have their own symbols and teachings, although there are also differences. Religion is understood as something final, universal, and absolute, while culture is understood as something particular, relative, and tentative. Religion (Islam) and culture are inseparable; they complement each other. When discussing religion and culture, we can see their functional applications in the form of cultural systems and also in the form of ritual traditions or religious ceremonies, which can clearly contain both religious and cultural values.

In the dialectic between culture and religion, a process of identity reconstruction has occurred, both in religious and cultural life. In line with this, there is a process of adaptation of immigrant cultures to local cultures, involving the adaptation of values and general life practices. Local culture can be a new force, introducing values to the immigrant culture. However, the reproduction of local culture, where each culture asserts its existence as the center of a society's value orientation, can influence the mode of expression of each emerging culture.

Asep Permana Bahtiar views the dialectic of religion and culture as falling within the category of understanding culture as a verb, because in this dialectical process, cultural work or a creative process of culture within religious communities has essentially occurred. The result of this dialectic is a religion with a cultural perspective. Furthermore, Bahtiar states that if culture is understood as a noun, the dialectic of religion and culture can produce a cultural synthesis with a religious perspective. This dialectical model is commonly applied to local cultures.

The dialectic of religion and culture in the eyes of the Muslim community in general often gives rise to *subjective-pejorative assessments*. Some are eager to sterilize religion from the possibility of acculturation of local culture, while others are busy and focused on building a dialectical pattern between the two. Regardless of the state of faith of each understanding. In fact, the portrait of religiosity increasingly shows the proliferation of acculturation patterns. Even interfaith syncretism.

Indications of the dialectic process between religion and culture in Islam are seen in the phenomenon of changes in patterns of religious understanding and religious behavior from pure Islamic traditions, for example, giving birth to various local forms of Islam, including Sunni Islam, Shi'i Islam, Mu'tazili Islam, and Khawariji Islam. From Sunni Islam in the Indonesian style, Sunni Islam Muhammadiyah, Sunni Islam Nahdlatul Ulama, Sunni

Islam Persis, and Sunni Islam al-Washliyah emerged. Even narrower still, Sunni-NU-Santri Islam, Sunni Islam-NU-Priyayi Islam, Sunni Islam-NU-Abangan Islam. It is possible that various new forms of religious belief will emerge, namely orthodox Islam, moderate Islam and liberal Islam (AS, 2013).

Religion (Islam) and culture are certainly a fascinating topic. Islam, as a universal religion, is a blessing for the universe. In its presence on earth, Islam blends with local culture (Arabic culture) within a society. Therefore, Islam and local culture cannot be separated; instead, they are mutually supportive and complementary (Hambali, 2023). Nurcholish Madjid further stated that Islamic teachings are intended for all humanity, because the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was God's messenger for all mankind. This means that Islamic teachings apply to all people on earth, not just Arabs, but to all nations on an equal level.

However, it is clear that Islamic teachings never dichotomize rituals or cultural and religious symbols. Therefore, Islam highly appreciates and supports the achievement or actualization of the Islamic mission, namely *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, and in accordance with the familiar adage to the ears of Muslims, namely shalih likulli zaman wa makan. And so it is with the ideas of Muslim scholars who are very well known today, namely Ali Asghaz enginer with his Theology of Liberation, Farid Esack with his Interpretation of Acceptance, Abdullah Ahmed Na'im with Dynamic (Islamic) Law not Static, and other Muslim figures.

Therefore, religion is often considered by Muslim scholars based on anthropology as part of a cultural system (cognitive system). Furthermore, religion is also considered a source of values (a value system) whose authenticity must be maintained. On the one hand, religion, from this perspective, is understood as the result of human action, both in the form of culture and civilization. On the other hand, religion appears as a source of values that guides human behavior. Hans Khün and Ignas Kleden also share a similar perspective on what religion means. Both conclude that religion depends on the decisions of those who live it. These decisions are, of course, decisions that result from a dialectical process between religion as a source of values and religion as a result of human experience.

The characteristics of Islam can be seen in the various concepts it brings, namely: First, the concept of Islamic theology is based on the principle of tawhid, the highest level of monotheism. This concept of tawhid gives rise to insights into moral unity, social unity, ritual unity, and even a unified cultural identity. Second, the concept of human status, in relation to God (hablumminallah), his relationship with other humans (hablumminannas), even with other creatures, and his relationship with the universe. These relationships exist within the network of worship and the caliphate, namely the function of worship and the function of the caliphate. Third, the concept of knowledge as an integrative part of human life. The first revelation of the Qur'an, in addition to declaring "khalaqal insan" (He created

humans), also declared " *alamal insan*" (He teaches humans). Humans, besides being created by God, were also given scientific intelligence. This concept is related to God's promise that "whatever is in the heavens and on earth is intended for humans". *Fourth*, the concept of worship in Islam. Besides touching on ritual aspects, it also touches on social and cultural aspects.

Based on these various concepts, Harun Nasution believes that religion (Islam) essentially contains two groups of teachings. The first group believes that revelation from God is absolute, eternal, unchanging, and unchangeable. The second group believes that revelation from God requires an explanation of its meaning and implementation. Therefore, this explanation is not absolute; it is relative, relative, and subject to change according to changing times and cultures.

In this regard, Nurcholish Madjid, one of Indonesia's leading Muslim intellectuals, stated that religion (Islam) and culture are two distinct but inseparable areas. Religion is absolute, unchanging over time and place. However, culture, even though based on religion, can change over time and place. Most cultures are based on religion, but the reverse is never true; religion is based on culture. Therefore, religion is primary, and culture is secondary. Culture can be an expression of religious life, as it is *subordinate* to religion.

The culture that accompanies the growth and spread of Islam to various corners of the world, with its own characteristics, unique geographical conditions, social order and interaction with existing cultures, has given rise to a number of definitions of culture or culture itself. Religion does not encourage us to rely solely on religious texts or holy books for guidance. Rather, it commands us to act proportionally, think professionally, and realize the potential of humanity, nature, and Islamic moral ideas.

### **Conclusions**

In the dialectic between culture and religion, a process of identity reconstruction has occurred, both in religious and cultural life. In line with this, there is a process of adaptation of immigrant cultures to local cultures, involving the adaptation of values and general life practices. This study concludes that the relationship between religion and culture is fundamentally dialectical, characterized by continuous processes of negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation within specific social and historical contexts. Religion and culture are not static or mutually exclusive domains, but rather dynamic and interrelated systems that shape collective identity, social norms, and patterns of religious practice. From an anthropological perspective, religion functions simultaneously as a cultural product shaped by human experience and as a source of values that guide social life.

The findings of this study contribute to the anthropology of religion by reinforcing interpretive and critical approaches that move beyond essentialist and dichotomous frameworks. By emphasizing the dialectical interaction between religion and culture, this

study supports the view that religious phenomena must be analyzed within their broader cultural, symbolic, and power-laden contexts. It highlights the importance of interpretive anthropology and discourse-oriented analysis in understanding how religious meanings are produced, negotiated, and transformed across time and space.

For the study of Islam and local culture, this research underscores the necessity of viewing Islam not only as a universal normative system, but also as a lived religious tradition that interacts dynamically with local cultural expressions. The dialectical perspective offered in this study helps explain the emergence of diverse local forms of Islamic practice, demonstrating that cultural adaptation does not diminish religious authenticity but rather constitutes an integral part of religious expression. This approach provides a conceptual foundation for understanding Islam as both universal in its core teachings and contextual in its social and cultural manifestations.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The manuscript author has absolutely no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

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