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RELIGION WITHOUT SACRALITY: PRACTICE, POWER, AND NEGOTIATION OF MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary religious life increasingly demonstrates practices that are not exclusively grounded in metaphysical sacrality. Religious symbols, rituals, and identities are frequently mobilized as social resources, moral references, and instruments of legitimacy, even when sacred claims are contested or selectively suspended. This article aims to analyze religion as a social practice without positioning sacrality as its primary analytical assumption. The study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive-critical orientation, drawing on Émile Durkheim's conception of the sacred as a socially constructed source of collective solidarity, Max Weber's perspectives on rationalization and religious authority, Michel Foucault's analysis of power relations and discourse, and Talal Asad's understanding of religion as a discursive tradition shaped by historical and social conditions. Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and examined through iterative thematic-critical analysis. The findings reveal that contemporary religious practices may function as pragmatic social actions oriented toward social cohesion, moral legitimation, and access to symbolic resources, even when metaphysical sacrality is not the primary motivation of participants. Sacrality emerges not as an inherently fixed essence but as a contingent outcome of social production, negotiation, and contestation among actors, institutions, and power structures. Claims of sacredness are strategically employed to authorize meanings, regulate behavior, and constrain criticism, although their effectiveness increasingly depends on fragmented social recognition. Religious authority is consequently no longer monopolized by formal institutions but is dispersed across everyday practices, public discourse, charismatic figures, and digital platforms. By integrating the analysis of religious practice, symbolic power, and the negotiation of meaning, this study proposes an analytical framework that repositions sacrality as a variable social outcome rather than an ontological prerequisite for understanding religion. The framework contributes to critical sociology and anthropology of religion by explaining how religious practices, authority, and legitimacy are continuously reconstructed within contemporary social life.

KEYWORDS: Religion Without Sacrality, Religious Practice, Symbolic Power, Negotiation of Meaning, Contemporary Society, Sociology of Religion.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, religious studies have undergone a significant epistemological shift, from an approach that positions religion as a stable sacred belief system toward an understanding of religion as a dynamic, negotiated social practice laden with power relations. This change cannot be detached from global social transformations marked by late modernity, globalization, pluralization of identities, and the increasing mediation of religion through public spaces, politics, and technology. In this context, religion no longer appears solely as a source of transcendental meaning, but also as a social arena where various actors negotiate authority, legitimacy, and interests. Recent studies indicate that religious practices are increasingly separated from metaphysical claims of sacrality and more understood as functional, strategic, and contextual social actions (Ali, 2022; Alkawy, 2019; Tijani, 2019). This shift challenges classical assumptions in religious studies that implicitly associate religion with sanctity, separation from the profane, and normative obedience to religious institutions. This phenomenon signals a redefinition of religious identity and individual spirituality in contemporary society, where religious practices tend to be reinterpreted and adapted to the increasingly secular and consumerist contexts of everyday life (Mu'asyara et al., 2024).

Contemporary sociology and anthropology of religion literature also affirms that the process of secularization does not simply eliminate religion, but rather transforms the way religion is practiced and interpreted in social life. Religion actually demonstrates high adaptability by entering the realms of economy, identity politics, media, and popular culture. Studies on post-secular society, lived religion, and public religion highlight how religion operates as a symbolic source and social capital in plural societies (Arnel et al., 2024; Hasan, 2025; Mujibuddin & Zuliana, 2019). Nevertheless, most of these studies still retain implicit assumptions regarding the existence of sacrality as the core of religion, although its forms and expressions change. This gap opens space for critical questions: what if religion is understood without making sacrality the main analytical foundation? How do religious practices function when sacred claims no longer serve as the center of social legitimation?

The main research problem arising from this context is the tendency in religious studies to continue reproducing the sacred–profane dichotomy as the dominant analytical framework, even though empirical realities show the blurring of these boundaries in contemporary social practices. Many studies still position sacrality as an initial assumption, rather than as a variable that is socially produced, negotiated, and contested. As a result, power relations, material interests, and strategies of religious actors are often reduced or viewed as deviations from the "essence" of religion. Such approaches hinder a critical understanding of religious phenomena that operate pragmatically, performatively, and politically, especially in societies characterized by value pluralism and fragmentation of authority.

As a general solution, a number of scholars propose shifting the focus from religion as a belief system to religion as a social and discursive practice. This approach emphasizes the importance of analyzing what people do with religion, rather than what they should believe. By placing practices, social relations, and historical contexts at the center of analysis, religion can be understood as a social field open to contestation of meaning. This perspective aligns with anthropological critiques of the essentialization of religion and opens space for reading religion as a historical construction that is always in the process of becoming (Chairi, 2019; Hasan, 2025; Khasri, 2021). However, this general solution often stops at describing practices without explicitly dismantling how sacrality itself is produced, negotiated, or even suspended in those practices.

Classical literature in the sociology of religion, particularly the work of Émile Durkheim, has long emphasized sacrality as a fundamental category that distinguishes religion from other forms of social practice. For Durkheim (1995), the sacred constitutes a collective representation through which communities establish moral boundaries and sustain social solidarity (McBride, 2015). Max Weber (1978), meanwhile, examined religion through the lenses of rationalization, authority, and social change, demonstrating how religious meanings and forms of authority are transformed alongside broader structural developments (Dedu et al., 2025). Although these classical frameworks provide a strong theoretical foundation, contemporary scholarship suggests that religious practices cannot always be adequately explained through institutional affiliation, formal doctrine, or established boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Studies of lived religion, for example, emphasize how individuals enact, interpret, and negotiate religion through everyday practices and social relationships (Kim, 2025), while research in the sociology of religion highlights the importance of cultural contexts and changing patterns of religious identification (Ammerman, 2014). These developments also invite critical examination of market religion, in which religious beliefs, symbols, experiences, and services become increasingly influenced by market mechanisms, consumer preferences, and competition among religious providers. Stark and Bainbridge (1987) and Stark and Finke (2000) offer an influential religious-economy perspective that explains religious participation and organizational vitality in relation to religious demand, institutional competition, and the availability of religious alternatives (Lemos, 2024; Liu, 2018). From this perspective, market competition does not necessarily undermine religion; under certain conditions, it may encourage organizational adaptation and strengthen religious participation. Nevertheless, the application of market-oriented explanations to religious life requires critical scrutiny because religious commitments cannot always be reduced to rational choice, consumer preferences, or calculations of individual benefit. A complementary sociological critique emerges from Bourdieu's (1991) analysis of symbolic power, which demonstrates how authority and legitimacy are produced and reproduced through struggles over the power to define socially recognized meanings (Pernicka et al., 2021; Sending, 2017). Carrette and King (2005) further criticize the commodification of spirituality, arguing that spiritual ideas and practices may be appropriated and repackaged within commercial and consumer cultures (Carrette & King, 2005). From a theological and ethical perspective, Miller similarly examines how consumer culture can reshape Christian faith and practice by encouraging the incorporation of religious commitments into the logic of consumption (Miller, 2000). These critiques raise concerns about the transformation of religious symbols, rituals, and spiritual experiences into commodities, particularly when commercial interests displace or marginalize their spiritual, communal, and ethical significance. However, the relationship between religion and markets should not be understood as uniformly antagonistic: market mechanisms may support religious dissemination and institutional sustainability, while also creating tensions concerning authenticity, authority, and spiritual purpose. Accordingly, contemporary religion cannot be adequately understood either as an expression of enduring sacred structures or as a product of market exchange alone. Rather, religious practices should be examined as complex social processes in which sacrality, institutional authority, market forces, symbolic power, and the negotiation of meaning intersect and are continually reconfigured.

In subsequent developments, critical approaches influenced by Michel Foucault's thought shifted attention to power relations and the production of knowledge in religion. These studies highlight how religious discourse shapes subjects, regulates bodies, and legitimizes certain

social practices (Abubakirova et al., 2024). Research on governmentality, ritual performativity, and religious identity politics demonstrates that religion functions as an effective social technology in regulating behavior and building compliance, even when claims of sacrality are no longer universally accepted. However, this literature is often fragmented and has not yet systematically integrated analyses of practices, power, and negotiation of meaning into a coherent conceptual framework.

A literature overview reveals that although there are efforts to interpret religion in a non-essentialist manner, significant research gaps remain regarding understanding religion without assuming sacrality as the analytical starting point. Most studies still focus on how sacrality changes or is maintained, rather than on how religion operates when sacrality is negotiated, debated, or even discarded in everyday social practices. This gap is increasingly relevant in contemporary societies where individuals engage in rituals without deep belief, use religious symbols for social or political purposes, and negotiate religious identities situationally.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze religion as a social practice without positioning sacrality as the primary analytical assumption. By integrating anthropological and critical sociological perspectives, the research seeks to explain how religious practices function as arenas of power and negotiation of meaning in contemporary social life. The novelty of this study lies in its formulation of an analytical framework that views sacrality not as the essence of religion, but as the outcome of contingent social processes that can be contested. The research scope focuses on religious practices in pluralistic societies, highlighting relations between actors, institutions, and social structures that shape how religion is practiced, interpreted, and debated in daily life. Thus, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of religious and societal studies, while offering a critical perspective relevant for interpreting religion in the contemporary era.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretive-critical orientation to examine religion as a social practice shaped by power relations and the negotiation of meaning in contemporary society. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring how individuals interpret experiences, construct meanings, and engage with social practices within specific cultural and institutional contexts (Phillips, 2023; Sawalhi & Arar, 2026). The interpretive-critical orientation further enables the study to investigate how meanings, authority, and legitimacy are constructed and contested within broader social relations. The research is exploratory and analytical, treating religious practices as the main unit of analysis, including rituals, symbolic actions, discourses, spatial practices, and social strategies involving religious references.

Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis. These methods facilitate an examination of social practices from multiple perspectives and enable the researcher to connect participants' accounts with observed interactions and documentary representations (Chand, 2025; Gluch, 2009). Participatory observation focused on interactions, symbols, practices, and social contexts, allowing religious practices to be examined as they occurred in everyday settings (Harvey, 2021; Kyyrö & Mantsinen, 2022). Semi-structured in-depth interviews explored participants' perceptions of religious meaning, sacrality, authority, and the use of religious symbols. This interview format provided sufficient structure to address the research objectives while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and interpretations (Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2020; Moore & Grandy, 2016).

Participants were purposively selected based on their involvement, social positions, religious roles, and experiences related to the practices under study. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research when participants are selected because their knowledge and experiences are relevant to the research questions (Pyo et al., 2023). Documents, including institutional statements, religious publications, media content, and policy texts, were analyzed to examine how religious meanings and discourses are represented, constructed, and legitimized in public spaces. Document analysis provides a systematic means of evaluating documentary materials as sources of evidence within their social and institutional contexts (Dalglish et al., 2020). Where relevant, attention was also given to the relationship between discourse, representation, and power in the construction of religious legitimacy (Abubakirova & Dilbarkhanova, 2022; Murphy et al., 1998).

Data were analyzed iteratively through thematic-critical analysis. The analytical process began with open coding to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and significant meanings in the data, followed by the development and refinement of broader themes concerning meaning negotiation, symbolic power, authority, and social legitimation. Thematic analysis provides a flexible yet systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Qaissi, 2024; Sandhiya & Bhuvaneswari, 2024). The critical dimension of the analysis involved examining how these patterns were related to power relations, institutional positions, and the legitimation or contestation of religious discourse (Aryasatya et al., 2025; Biygautane et al., 2020). Interpretation proceeded iteratively, with emerging themes examined in relation to the research questions and evidence obtained from different data sources.

Data credibility was strengthened through triangulation across observations, interviews, and documents, allowing interpretations to be examined against different forms of evidence. Triangulation and systematic documentation of the research process can strengthen the credibility and dependability of qualitative findings (Ahmed, 2024). Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to critically consider how the researcher's assumptions, position, and interpretive decisions might influence the production of knowledge (Windrim et al., 2024). Ethical principles were maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, anonymization, and respect for participants' rights. Overall, this methodology enables a critical and contextual understanding of religion as a dynamic social practice without assuming sacrality as a predetermined analytical category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Practices as Non-Sacred Social Actions

The research findings indicate that religious practices in contemporary social contexts are increasingly rarely understood by actors as actions fully grounded in metaphysical sacrality. Instead, these practices are carried out as part of social routines, relational strategies, and adaptation mechanisms to social environmental demands. Field observations reveal that individual involvement in rituals, symbols, and religious activities is often driven by pragmatic considerations such as social cohesion, moral legitimation, and access to social networks, rather than theological compliance or profound transcendental experiences. These findings align with studies on lived religion, which emphasize religion as fluid and contextual everyday practices (Soehadha, 2017; Zayadi, 2023).

The in-depth interviews are intended to explore how participants understand the sacred significance of religion while navigating the practical and social dimensions of religious practice. The analysis focuses on three interconnected themes: the relationship between sacrality and

everyday action, the social functions of religious participation, and the negotiation of religious meaning and authority.

The first theme concerns the relationship between metaphysical sacrality and practical considerations. An illustrative statement that could represent this theme, if supported by the actual interview data, is:

> *"Saya tetap percaya bahwa agama memiliki makna sakral. Namun, dalam menjalankan kegiatan keagamaan, saya juga mempertimbangkan keadaan dan tanggung jawab sehari-hari. Bagi saya, keyakinan tetap penting, tetapi cara menjalankannya perlu disesuaikan dengan situasi yang dihadapi."*
>
> *— Informant 01 (I-01), in-depth interview, [14/02/2026].*

This statement illustrates the possibility that recognizing the sacred significance of religion does not necessarily mean treating sacrality as the sole basis for every religious action. Religious belief may coexist with practical considerations, personal responsibilities, and situational demands. This interpretation does not imply the abandonment of spiritual conviction; rather, it highlights the need to examine how religious meanings are translated into everyday practices.

The second theme concerns the social functions of religious participation. Religious activities may provide opportunities to maintain relationships, fulfill communal responsibilities, and reinforce a sense of belonging. An illustrative statement for this theme is:

> *"Ketika mengikuti kegiatan keagamaan, saya tidak hanya memikirkan kewajiban secara spiritual, tetapi juga hubungan dengan keluarga dan masyarakat. Kegiatan tersebut menjadi kesempatan untuk berkumpul, menjaga kebersamaan, dan menghormati tradisi yang sudah dijalankan bersama."*
>
> *— Informant 02 (I-02), in-depth interview, [17/03/2026].*

If supported by the actual interview, this account could indicate that religious participation operates through the interaction of spiritual motivations and social relationships. The practice would therefore be difficult to explain exclusively as an expression of personal belief or as a means of maintaining social cohesion. Instead, its significance would emerge from the ways participants connect religious commitments with collective expectations and community life.

The third theme concerns the negotiation of religious meanings and authority. Religious practices are interpreted within relationships involving family members, community leaders, religious authorities, and changing social circumstances. An illustrative statement that could be used to explore this theme is:

> *"Menurut saya, ajaran agama tetap menjadi pedoman, tetapi dalam pelaksanaannya kita juga perlu memahami konteks dan keadaan. Saya berusaha menghormati tradisi dan pandangan orang yang lebih memahami agama, tetapi saya juga ingin mengetahui makna dari praktik yang saya jalankan agar tidak sekadar mengikuti kebiasaan."*
>
> *— Informant 03 (I-03), in-depth interview, [11/04/2026].*

If corroborated by the interview data, this statement could illustrate how religious meanings are negotiated rather than merely inherited or reproduced without reflection. It may point to an interaction between established religious authority, personal interpretation, and contextual adaptation. Nevertheless, the extent to which such negotiation involves continuity, accommodation, or contestation must be established through the informant's actual account and its surrounding context.

Taken together, these three themes provide an analytical framework for investigating contemporary religion through the interaction of metaphysical sacrality, social functions, and

relations and social contexts. The findings may demonstrate that sacred meanings remain significant while their practical expression varies across situations; that religious practices can sustain both spiritual commitments and social relationships; and that religious authority is interpreted through particular social and cultural circumstances.

This interpretation is consistent with critiques of essentialist approaches that treat sacrality as the fixed and universal core of religion (Gilhus, 2022; Jafari & Süerdem, 2012; Kaunda, 2020). However, the analysis should not assume that participants have abandoned metaphysical beliefs. Instead, it should investigate empirically how participants articulate sacred meanings, relate them to everyday decisions, and negotiate their significance within specific social contexts.

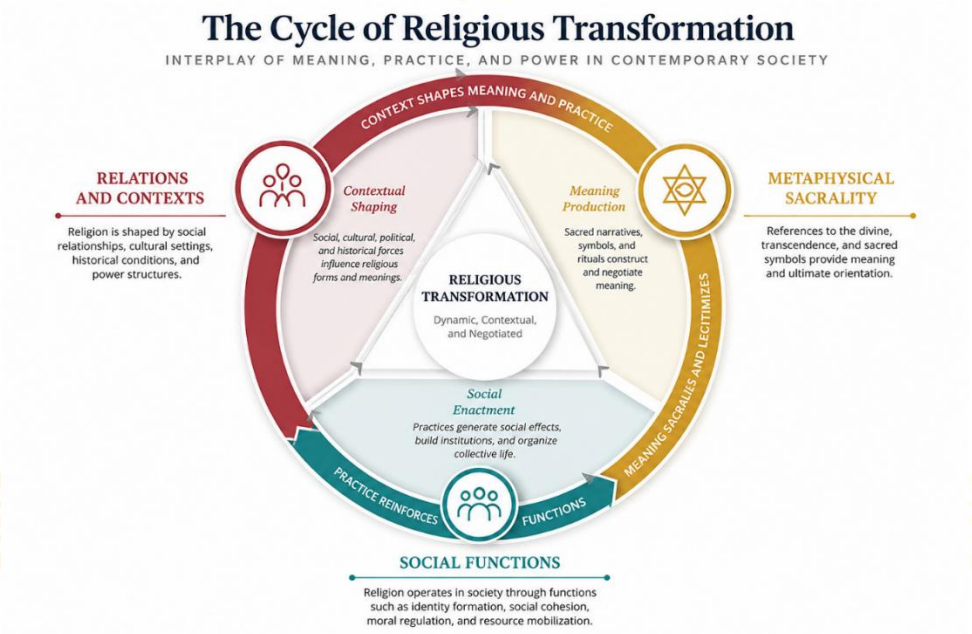


Figure 1. Schema of Transformation in Contemporary Religious Practices
Source: Developed by the authors based on the synthesis of qualitative research findings and theoretical perspectives from Durkheim (1912), Weber (1978), Foucault (1980), Asad (1993), and Bourdieu (1991).

Production and Negotiation of Sacrality Meanings

The analysis results show that sacrality does not exist as an inherent quality in religious practices, but rather as the outcome of a social production process involving actors, institutions, and power structures. Sacrality is produced through language, selective ritualization, and authority claims, but these claims are not always universally accepted. In many cases, sacred meanings are negotiated, debated, and even rejected by other actors involved in the same practices. This phenomenon indicates that sacrality functions as a contingent source of symbolic legitimation.

These findings reveal that religious authority no longer holds a monopoly in defining what is sacred. Individuals and social groups demonstrate agency in interpreting, modifying, or ignoring institutional sacred claims. This situation reflects the fragmentation of authority that has been widely discussed in contemporary sociology of religion (Beliveau, 2021; Illman, 2019). Sacrality becomes an arena of contestation, not an unquestionable shared foundation.

Table 1. Patterns of Negotiating the Meaning of Sacredness in Religious Practices

Type of Actor	Social Position & Source of Authority	Symbolic Strategies Employed	Form of Sacredness Claim	Arena of Negotiation	Dominant Social Response	Implications for the Meaning of Sacredness
Religious individuals (personal practitioners)	Authority derived from subjective experience, personal spirituality, and self-narratives	Personalization of symbols (private prayers, selective rituals, hybrid spirituality), reinterpretation of texts	Sacredness understood as inner experience and personal authenticity	Private spaces, social media, informal communities	Ambivalent: acceptance among peers, skepticism from formal institutions	Sacredness shifts from institutional-normative categories to existential and reflexive meanings
Non-formal religious leaders / charismatic figures	Personal charisma, popularity, and non-bureaucratic symbolic authority	Simplification of symbols, popular moral narratives, religious performativity	Sacredness attached to the figure and universal moral messages	Public spaces, digital media, popular preaching forums	Broad support alongside criticism for banalizing the sacred	Sacredness undergoes popularization and reduction of theological complexity
Formal religious institutions	Structural authority, doctrinal legitimacy, and normative control	Standardization of rituals, codification of symbols, reinforcement of orthodoxy	Sacredness positioned as absolute and stable truth	Religious institutions, internal regulations, legal frameworks	Normative compliance accompanied by latent resistance	Sacredness is normatively maintained but vulnerable to delegitimization
State and political actors	Legal-formal power, regulation, and administrative authority	Instrumentalization of religious symbols, ritualization of policy	Sacredness used as a source of political legitimacy	Public policy, law, state ceremonies	Polarization: legitimation on one side, rejection on the other	Sacredness becomes politicized and loses symbolic autonomy
Local religious communities	Social solidarity, collective traditions, and cultural memory	Symbolic adaptation, syncretization, contextual rituals	Sacredness as situational and community-based consensus	Communal spaces, local traditions, everyday practices	Strong internal acceptance, limited external recognition	Sacredness is fluid and negotiable
Media and digital platforms	Algorithmic authority, visibility, and market logic	Visualisation of symbols, commodification of rituals, viral narratives	Sacredness represented as content and experience	Social media, digital platforms	Mass consumption and critique of commercialization	Sacredness is reduced to representation and performance
Critical groups / academics	Epistemic authority and scholarly legitimacy	Deconstruction of symbols, historical–sociological analysis	Sacredness understood as a social construction	Academic discourse, intellectual public sphere	Resistance from normative actors, critical appreciation	Sacredness is redefined as a product of power relations and social context

Source: Developed by the author based on Durkheim (1912), Weber (1978), Foucault (1980), Asad (1993), and Bourdieu (1991)

This table demonstrates that sacrality does not appear as a single and static entity, but rather as the result of ongoing negotiation between actors, symbols, and social structures. Variations in symbolic strategies and social responses affirm that sacrality claims are always in a tug-of-war between legitimation, power, and historical-cultural contexts. Thus, sacrality in contemporary society is more appropriately understood as a dynamic social process, not as an autonomous metaphysical substance.

Religion as an Arena of Symbolic Power

The research findings also reveal that religious practices function as an arena of symbolic power where various actors seek to build legitimation and social influence. Power in this context is not always repressive or hierarchical, but operates through normalization, internalization of values, and production of moral discourse. Religion provides effective symbolic resources to frame social interests as moral obligations or unquestionable traditions.

Data analysis shows that sacrality claims are often used strategically to close off space for criticism or negotiation, especially in contexts of conflicting interests. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is increasingly limited due to rising critical awareness and value pluralism in society. This situation reflects relational power dynamics as explained in Michel Foucault's thought, where power operates through networks of practices and discourses, not merely through formal institutions (Hannan & Abdillah, 2019; Syahputra, 2017).

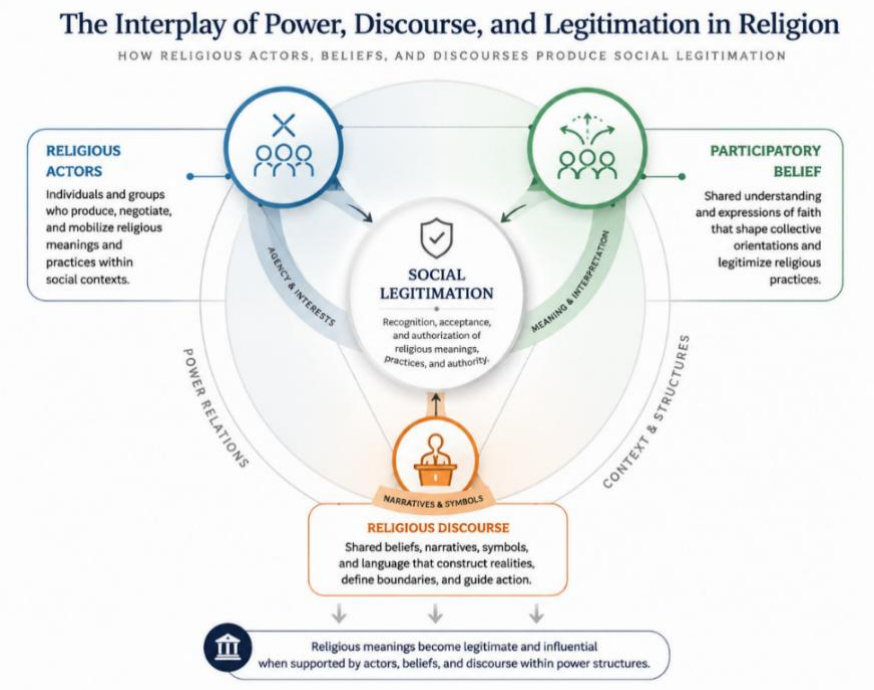


Figure 2. Diagram of Power Relations in Religious Practices

Source: Developed by the authors based on the analysis of qualitative research findings and the theoretical synthesis of Foucault (1980), Bourdieu (1991), and Asad (1993).

Disjunction between Belief, Practice, and Compliance

Another important finding is the increasingly clear disjunction between personal belief, religious practice, and compliance with institutional authority. Individuals can actively engage

in religious practices without fully internalizing doctrines, or even without acknowledging sacred religious experiences. This disjunction demonstrates that religion functions as a social device that can be operated partially and selectively.

This phenomenon reinforces the argument that religion can no longer be understood as an integrated system uniting belief, ritual, and authority structures. Instead, religion appears as a collection of practices and symbols that can be reassembled according to social needs. This finding provides empirical grounding for reading religion without sacrality as the primary analytical assumption. Therefore, this approach enables a more nuanced exploration of religious phenomena, transcending traditional sacred-profane dichotomies and highlighting the role of actors' agency in shaping religious meanings (Khasri, 2021). This approach also accommodates the understanding that secularization and post-secularism do not always fundamentally erode religious meaning, but rather transform it into more fluid forms integrated into contemporary social life (Arnel et al., 2024; Mu'asyara et al., 2024). This shift challenges old assumptions about modernity and secularization, showing that religion's role in shaping political, social, and cultural transformations remains significant (Arnel et al., 2024; Jong, 2025).

Rereading Religion Beyond the Sacred–Profane Dichotomy

The findings of this research challenge the sacred–profane dichotomy that has long served as a theoretical foundation in religious studies, particularly within the classical sociological tradition. Émile Durkheim viewed sacrality as a unifying element that distinguishes religion from other social practices. However, the results of this study show that, in contemporary social practices, the boundary between the sacred and the profane is increasingly blurred and is not always perceived as relevant by social actors. Sacrality no longer functions solely as a stable ontological category but also operates as a symbolic resource that can be activated, interpreted, and negotiated in particular social contexts (Belaj, 2021).

To understand this transformation, the comparison between the sacred and the profane can be approached through the dimensions of place, time, and social space in which their distinctions are established and maintained. These dimensions provide an analytical framework for examining how the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are constructed, experienced, and negotiated in everyday life. In terms of place, locations traditionally regarded as sacred may accommodate non-religious activities, while spaces not originally designated for religious purposes may acquire sacred significance through particular practices and collective interpretations. In terms of time, moments conventionally associated with religious observance may become more flexible and adaptable to contemporary lifestyles. In terms of social space, religious practices increasingly extend beyond traditional institutional settings into commercial venues, public spaces, and digital environments. Accordingly, the distinction between the sacred and the profane cannot be understood exclusively as a fixed separation between two contrasting categories; rather, it must also be examined as a contextual and socially negotiated boundary that may shift in response to changing practices, relationships, and interpretations.

Contemporary religious practices frequently demonstrate the permeability of these boundaries, as rituals and places considered sacred can become integrated with non-religious or even secular activities (Belaj, 2021). This is reflected in the adaptation of religious practices into more flexible, temporary, and informal formats in urban spaces, such as Bible study groups held in restaurants or megachurches renting commercial theaters on Sundays (Mulya & Schäfer, 2023). These examples illustrate how the relationship between sacrality and place is not necessarily determined by the physical characteristics or original functions of a location but may

also emerge through the activities and meanings attributed to it by religious communities. Similarly, the temporal organization of religious activities can be adjusted to accommodate contemporary social rhythms, demonstrating that religious practice is not always confined to established institutional schedules.

This phenomenon is also evident in the adaptation of Christianity to digital technology, through which worship services can be accessed online, blurring the boundaries between physical sacred spaces and virtual environments (Bryson et al., 2020; Chryssides, 2024). From this perspective, digital religious practices raise questions about how sacred space is experienced and how religious participation is constituted when physical co-presence is no longer a necessary condition. The sacred may be experienced through digital mediation, while the distinction between religious and non-religious activities becomes increasingly dependent on context, intention, and interpretation. This approach opens up analytical space for examining how individuals construct religious meanings beyond traditional institutional frameworks, while acknowledging the flexibility and adaptability of religion in responding to the challenges of modernity (Kaden, 2025).

A similar transformation can be observed in contemporary Muslim identities in urban contexts. Rather than disappearing, these identities may develop into hybrid forms that combine Islamic ethics with modern practices, including digital zakat and halal lifestyles (Luhuringbudi et al., 2025). Such developments illustrate how religious values can be maintained while their modes of expression are adapted to changing social environments. The relationship between the sacred and the profane, therefore, is not necessarily characterized by the disappearance of religious distinctions but may instead involve the reinterpretation of those distinctions within new spatial, temporal, and social configurations. These adjustments indicate that religion not only adapts to social change but can also become a source of cultural innovation and societal resilience amid the pressures of urbanization and globalization.

Thus, this research strengthens the critique of essentialist understandings of religion and supports an approach that views religion as a historical and context-dependent social practice. This perspective aligns with Talal Asad's conception of religion as a discursive tradition shaped by power relations and specific social conditions (Fadil, 2017; Lukens-Bull, 2025). However, this study extends that perspective by demonstrating that sacrality itself can be understood as an outcome of discursive and social processes rather than as a pre-existing foundation. The distinctions between the sacred and the profane are consequently not merely given categories but are continually reproduced, interpreted, and negotiated through religious practices, social relationships, and changing contexts. By examining the dimensions of place, time, and social space, this research highlights how sacrality is constituted and transformed in contemporary life, while showing that religious continuity may coexist with changes in the forms, settings, and meanings of religious practice.

Religion, Power, and the Production of Social Compliance

This discussion of the research findings affirms that religion functions as a power mechanism that operates through symbols, morality, and the normalization of behavior. Sacrality claims are used to frame certain social interests as moral obligations, thereby reducing space for resistance. However, the effectiveness of this mechanism depends on increasingly uneven social acceptance. In pluralistic and reflective societies, sacrality claims are often questioned and negotiated. This phenomenon leads to the emergence of more fluid and personal forms of religiosity, where individuals actively reshape their religious subjectivity

outside institutional frameworks (Mulya & Schäfer, 2023). This aligns with the trend of Islamic disruption in Indonesia, where contemporary Muslim society demonstrates high dependence on digital technology and information media, shifting patterns of worship and religious learning from traditional rituals to more modern and personal forms (Syarif & Hannan, 2022). This adaptation reflects how Muslim communities negotiate their religious practices, spatial ownership, and socio-cultural values amid cities increasingly shaped by market logic, consumerism, and global cultural flows (Luhuringbudi et al., 2025). This change is also evident in the emergence of new religious authority figures who leverage digital platforms to disseminate teachings and influence religious practices, often transcending traditional geographical and institutional boundaries (Millie & Baulch, 2024). This underscores the shift in religious authority from formal institutions to charismatic individuals or social media influences, where discursive morality must be upheld to maintain faith in divine authority (Hanif & Rahman, 2023).

These findings enrich the discussion on the relationship between religion and power by emphasizing the micro dimensions of everyday practices, rather than merely macro relations between religion and the state. This approach expands understanding of how religious power operates subtly and fragmentedly, as described in modern theories of power.

Table 2. Comparison of Classical and Contemporary Religious Power

Analytical Dimension	Classical Religious Power (Institution-Based)	Contemporary Religious Power (Practice- and Discourse-Based)
Source of Authority	Doctrinal legitimacy, institutional hierarchy, canonical tradition	Performative legitimacy, religious experience, and social recognition
Dominant Actors	Formal religious institutions and official religious leaders	Religious individuals, charismatic figures, communities of practice, discourse producers
Power Base	Organizational structures, normative regulation, ritual control	Everyday practices, symbolic narratives, and meaning production
Mode of Operation	Top-down: instructions, decrees, and the establishment of orthodoxy	Bottom-up and lateral: persuasion, resonance, and virality
Primary Media	Pulpits, sacred texts, religious educational institutions	Digital media, public spaces, popular culture
Form of Regulation	Normative–formal, rule-based, and sanction-oriented	Discursive and affective, based on opinion and affiliation
Relationship with Believers	Hierarchical relationship and normative obedience	Participatory relationship and negotiated meanings
Production of Sacredness	Sacredness positioned as absolute, stable, and separated from the profane	Sacredness produced contextually, fluidly, and situationally
Legitimation Strategies	Claims of singular truth and continuity of tradition	Claims of relevance, authenticity, and social usefulness
Operational Spaces	Institutional settings and formal ritual arenas	Everyday social spaces, online communities, and cross-arena practices
Relation to Political Power	Symbiotic or competitive within institutional frameworks	Flexible, opportunistic, and issue-based
Response to Social Change	Tendentially defensive and conservative	Adaptive, experimental, and responsive
Mechanisms of Social Control	Normative discipline and formal moral sanctions	Discursive normalization and symbolic pressure

Analytical Dimension	Classical Religious Power (Institution-Based)	Contemporary Religious Power (Practice- and Discourse-Based)
Vulnerability of Power	Delegitimization due to rigidity and crisis of trust	Fragmentation of meaning and volatility of authority
Long-Term Implications	Symbolic stability with the risk of stagnation	Innovative dynamics with the risk of banalization of the sacred

Source: Developed by the author based on Durkheim (1912), Weber (1978), Foucault (1980), Asad (1993), and Bourdieu (1991)

This comparison shows that religious power does not experience erasure but rather a transformation in its mode of operation. If in the classical configuration power works through institutionalization and homogenization of meaning, then in the contemporary context it operates through social practices, circulation of discourse, and decentralized production of symbols. This shift marks a fundamental change from regulative power to productive and performative power, where legitimacy is no longer determined solely by structural position but by the actors' ability to manage meaning, affect, and social relevance.

The analysis results indicate that religious power in contemporary society does not undergo erosion but a significant transformation in its workings. This change is evident when compared to the classical religious power configuration based on institutions. In the classical model, power operates through hierarchical structures, doctrinal legitimacy, and relatively stable normative regulatory mechanisms. Religious authority is attached to formal institutions and official figures who have the authority to establish orthodoxy, define sacred-profane boundaries, and regulate the religious practices of the faithful in a top-down manner.

In contrast, in the contemporary context, research findings show that religious power is increasingly shifting to the realm of social practices and public discourse. Authority is no longer entirely determined by structural position but by the ability of actors—whether religious individuals, non-formal charismatic figures, or praxis communities—to produce meanings deemed relevant, authentic, and socially meaningful. Power works laterally and participatorily through symbolic persuasion, affective resonance, and the circulation of religious narratives in public spaces and digital media.

Fundamental differences are also evident in the way social regulation is carried out. In the classical configuration, social control is exercised through formal norms, moral sanctions, and relatively explicit disciplinary mechanisms. However, in the contemporary context, regulation occurs discursively and implicitly. Religious practices are shaped through discourse normalization, symbolic pressure, and the logic of social acceptance and rejection operating within community networks and digital spaces. Thus, religious compliance is no longer entirely based on normative obligations but on affiliation, identification, and participatory willingness.

This transformation also directly impacts the production of sacrality meaning. In classical religious power, sacrality is positioned as an absolute, stable, and separate entity from profane life. Research findings show that in contemporary practices, sacrality is produced contextually and situationally. It no longer exists as a taken-for-granted metaphysical substance but as the result of interactions between religious practices, social needs, and dominant discourses. Sacrality becomes fluid, negotiable, and dependent on continuously changing social recognition.

The relationship between religious power and political power also shows a shift in patterns. If in the classical model this relationship tends to be symbiotic or competitive within an institutional framework, then in the contemporary context it is more flexible and

opportunistic. Religious symbols and discourses are used selectively to respond to certain social issues without long-term attachment to rigid institutional structures. This strengthens the character of religious power as adaptive power, yet also vulnerable to meaning fragmentation and legitimacy volatility.

Overall, these results and discussion affirm that the shift from institution-based religious power to practice- and discourse-based power represents a change in mode of operation, not the disappearance of religion's role in social life. Contemporary religious power works productively and performatively, shaping religious subjects through experience, narrative, and affect, rather than solely through normative regulation. These findings reinforce the argument that religion in contemporary society remains influential but with a more fluid, decentralized, and contextual logic of power.

Theoretical Implications for the Study of Religion and Society

Theoretically, this study contributes to the sociology and anthropology of religion by proposing an analytical framework that does not treat sacrality as an initial assumption in the interpretation of religious phenomena. By centering the analysis on practices, power relations, and the negotiation of meaning, the study provides a framework for understanding religion as a dynamic social phenomenon shaped by contemporary social conditions. This approach complements and critically extends the lived religion perspective, which emphasizes the ways individuals experience and practice religion in everyday life, by explicitly incorporating the power relations that influence the production, legitimation, and contestation of religious meanings. Consequently, religious practices are understood not merely as expressions of established beliefs or institutional norms, but also as actions embedded in social relations, contextual interests, and processes of symbolic negotiation.

The findings further highlight the transformation of religious authority in the digital era, in which popular figures and religious influencers increasingly participate in shaping religious narratives, practices, and perceptions of religious legitimacy. The growing visibility of these actors may facilitate the dissemination of religious knowledge and expand access to religious discourse. However, it may also contribute to the commodification of religion and the fragmentation of religious teachings, particularly when popularity and digital visibility become important sources of religious influence (Cahyono et al., 2025; Simamora & Farid, 2024). This transformation presents challenges for conventional religious authorities, whose institutional legitimacy and formal religious education may compete with the appeal of emerging figures on social media who do not necessarily possess comparable formal religious credentials (Masruha et al., 2025; Zaki et al., 2026). Accordingly, religious authority in contemporary society is increasingly negotiated across institutional and digital domains rather than being exclusively determined by formal hierarchies (Harahap et al., 2025; Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026; Yuliani, 2026).

These theoretical implications are also relevant to methodological developments in religious studies, particularly qualitative research. By suspending the assumption that sacrality constitutes the necessary starting point for interpreting religion, researchers can examine a broader range of religious practices and meanings, including those that appear ambiguous, instrumental, contradictory, or situational. Such an approach makes it possible to investigate how religious actors understand and use religious symbols, how they negotiate claims of sacredness, and how power relations shape the acceptance or rejection of particular interpretations. Rather than presupposing that social or pragmatic motivations diminish the religious significance of a practice, this framework enables researchers to examine how spiritual,

communal, and instrumental meanings may coexist within the same practice. It therefore expands the analytical scope of religious studies while maintaining a critical orientation toward the social conditions under which religious meanings are produced and sustained.

Social Relevance and Study Limitations

From a social perspective, this study offers a conceptual framework for understanding the conflict, negotiation, and transformation of religion amid the social changes that characterize contemporary life. By conceptualizing religion as a social arena, the findings explain how religious practices can simultaneously foster solidarity and generate conflict, legitimize established forms of authority and provide resources for resistance, or strengthen collective identity while accommodating individual interests. These apparently contradictory functions indicate that religion does not simply disappear in response to modernization and digitalization. Rather, its meanings, modes of expression, and social functions are continually reconfigured through interactions among individuals, institutions, communities, and digital platforms. This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding contemporary religious life, in which ritual participation, personal belief, institutional affiliation, and public expressions of religiosity do not always correspond directly to one another.

From a theo-social perspective, which examines the relationship between theological values and their expressions and consequences in social life, the findings raise an important question: to what extent do contemporary religious practices reflect the internalization of religious values, and under what circumstances might religiosity become primarily formal, performative, or superficial? The findings suggest that this question cannot be answered through a simple distinction between genuine religious commitment and superficial religiosity. Religious rituals continue to provide frameworks for spiritual meaning, collective solidarity, moral orientation, and social belonging. At the same time, participation in religious practices may also be influenced by social expectations, the maintenance of communal relationships, the pursuit of moral legitimacy, or the desire for recognition within particular social settings. Consequently, ritual participation does not necessarily indicate that religious teachings have been fully internalized, just as the presence of pragmatic social motivations does not automatically demonstrate an absence of sincere religious commitment.

The distinction between religious practice and the internalization of religious values is therefore central to interpreting the findings. Individuals may participate actively in rituals while interpreting their meanings selectively or maintaining varying degrees of adherence to institutional teachings. Conversely, practices that serve social functions may still carry spiritual significance for the individuals involved. The findings thus point to a potential disjunction between belief, ritual practice, normative compliance, and everyday conduct. This disjunction should not be interpreted as definitive evidence that contemporary society has abandoned religious values. Rather, it indicates that the relationship between religious commitment and its practical expression has become more complex and context-dependent. Given the qualitative and context-specific scope of this study, the findings do not establish how widespread superficial religiosity may be across society. Instead, they demonstrate the importance of examining the meanings individuals attach to religious practices and the ways these practices intersect with social expectations, interests, and power relations.

An important implication for society is the need to evaluate religious life not solely through visible expressions of religious identity, the frequency of ritual participation, or adherence to formal conventions, but also through the ethical and social consequences of

religious commitment. From a theo-social standpoint, values such as honesty, justice, compassion, responsibility, solidarity, and respect for others provide relevant dimensions for examining how religious ideals are translated into everyday relationships and social conduct. This does not imply that the social consequences of religious practice constitute an exhaustive measure of spiritual authenticity. Rather, it emphasizes that the theological significance attributed to religious values can be considered alongside their practical implications for communal life. The findings encourage a more reflective understanding of religiosity in which ritual observance, spiritual orientation, and social responsibility are examined in relation to one another. Such a perspective may help communities recognize the difference between the public performance of religious identity and the broader ethical commitments that religious traditions seek to cultivate, without presuming that these dimensions are necessarily separated in every case.

The transformation of religious authority in the digital era further intensifies this issue. Religious symbols, rituals, and places of worship are increasingly represented through digital images, narratives, and online interactions. As a result, religious practices are no longer confined to physical settings but also acquire visibility and meaning through digital communities and mediated forms of participation (Barış & Çetin, 2025). Although these developments can create new opportunities for religious learning, participation, and community building, they may also encourage forms of religious representation in which visibility, popularity, and audience engagement become prominent criteria for perceived religious significance. These conditions raise questions about the relationship between religious expression, substantive understanding, and ethical practice. They also challenge conventional religious authorities, whose influence increasingly intersects with that of popular digital figures and content creators in an environment characterized by fragmented sources of information and competing claims to religious legitimacy (Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026; Syarifudin et al., 2025).

These developments can also transform public religious discourse into an arena of contestation, in which the authority to interpret religious teachings is negotiated among institutional leaders, digital influencers, and participating audiences. In some circumstances, religious discourse may shift away from sustained reflection on normative and theological principles toward more pragmatic, performative, or commercially oriented expressions of religious identity. Such tendencies may weaken the authority of established institutions while increasing the visibility of interpretations shaped by digital popularity and market considerations (Cahyono et al., 2025; Hoover, 2021; Zaki et al., 2026). Nevertheless, digital mediation should not automatically be equated with the superficialization of religion. Digital platforms may also support meaningful spiritual experiences, religious education, and new forms of communal solidarity. The analytical issue, therefore, is not whether religion practiced online is inherently less authentic than religion practiced in physical spaces, but how digital environments transform the production of religious meaning, the recognition of authority, and the relationship between spiritual experience and social representation (Evolvi, 2020; Rohmatin et al., 2025).

For society, these findings highlight the importance of cultivating critical religious literacy in responding to the rapid circulation of religious narratives and the emergence of new forms of religious authority. Religious institutions and leaders may need to strengthen their legitimacy through intellectual credibility, ethical conduct, dialogue, and responsiveness to contemporary social concerns rather than relying exclusively on institutional status or claims of sacred authority. At the same time, individuals and communities are encouraged to engage with digital

religious content critically, distinguishing popularity from religious competence and considering the ethical and social implications of the messages they encounter. Such efforts are relevant not only to the preservation of religious understanding but also to the development of more inclusive social relationships and the prevention of conflict arising from competing claims to religious legitimacy. In this respect, religion remains a significant resource for social life, but its constructive contribution depends partly on how religious meanings are interpreted, practiced, and translated into relationships with others.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations in its empirical scope. Its qualitative and context-specific orientation provides an interpretive understanding of religious practices and their associated power relations, but it does not support universal generalizations about the depth of religiosity or the prevalence of superficial religious observance in contemporary society. Further research is therefore needed to investigate the relationship between ritual participation, the internalization of religious values, social piety, and everyday ethical conduct across different social, cultural, and religious contexts. Comparative studies could examine how these relationships vary according to generational differences, institutional affiliations, community structures, and levels of engagement with digital religious media. Longitudinal research could also explore whether changes in religious authority and digital participation produce lasting transformations in religious understanding and social behavior.

Further investigation is particularly necessary to understand how digital spaces function not merely as channels for communicating religious ideas but also as environments that reshape spiritual experiences, collective identities, and perceptions of religious authenticity. Research addressing the ethical and theological implications of the digitalization of sacrality could clarify how communities negotiate the relationship between virtual participation and embodied religious practice, as well as between public expressions of religiosity and the internalization of religious values. Such inquiry would extend the present study by identifying the conditions under which religious practices reinforce spiritual reflection and social responsibility, as well as those under which they become predominantly associated with formal compliance, identity representation, or symbolic legitimation.

Finally, the analytical framework developed in this study may be applied to other social contexts characterized by religious plurality, changing forms of authority, and the negotiation of collective meanings. Its broader contribution lies in encouraging a more context-sensitive understanding of religion that neither assumes the disappearance of spirituality nor presumes that all visible religious practices necessarily express deeply internalized beliefs. By integrating the analysis of practice, power, and meaning negotiation with attention to ethical and social consequences, this framework opens avenues for comparative and interdisciplinary research on the changing place of religion in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that religion in contemporary social life can be understood as a dynamic social practice shaped by power relations and the negotiation of meaning, rather than solely as an integrated sacred belief system. The findings indicate that sacrality is not merely a predetermined analytical foundation but can also be produced, maintained, negotiated, and contested through interactions among individuals, institutions, and social structures. Religious practices serve multiple purposes, including spiritual expression, social solidarity, moral legitimation, and identity formation, reflecting the complex relationship between religious meanings and contemporary social conditions.

From a theo-social perspective, the findings reveal that ritual participation does not always correspond directly to the internalization of religious values or everyday ethical conduct. Although religious rituals continue to provide spiritual meaning and social cohesion, they may also serve pragmatic social purposes. This complexity does not necessarily indicate that religiosity has become superficial; rather, it underscores the need to examine the relationship between religious beliefs, ritual practices, and their ethical and social consequences. The study also highlights the transformation of religious authority in the digital era, where traditional institutions increasingly interact and compete with digital influencers and other non-institutional actors in shaping religious interpretations and practices.

Theoretically, this study contributes an analytical framework that integrates religious practice, power relations, and the negotiation of meaning without presupposing sacrality as the defining essence of religion. Practically, the findings encourage religious institutions, educators, and policymakers to respond to religious diversity through dialogue, critical reflection, and greater attention to the social and ethical implications of religious practices. Nevertheless, the qualitative and context-specific scope of this study limits the generalizability of its findings. Further comparative research is therefore needed to examine how religious authority, digital transformation, ritual participation, and the internalization of religious values interact across different social and cultural contexts.

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