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Virtual Religious Conflict: From Cyberspace to Reality

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Freedom of expression on social media is sometimes carried out unethically and often undermines religious symbols, resulting in friction and destructive actions. This research was conducted with the aim of knowing the polarisation of religious conflict in cyberspace and the process of diffusion of religious conflict from the virtual world to the real world. This type of research is descriptive qualitative. This research was conducted in Central Java, namely, in the cities of Solo and Semarang. The results of the study show that the process of diffusion of religious conflict from the virtual world to the real world occurs through the stages of information sharing and conflict initiation, equalisation of perceptions, virtual community support, virtual action and real action. Therefore, to anticipate virtual conflicts, it is necessary to have filters from authorised authorities such as administrators, website managers or law enforcement officials. In addition, there needs to be regulatory support related to provocation in cyberspace, so as to minimise the emergence of conflicts in cyberspace.

Contribution: This research contributes to anticipating virtual conflicts before they actually occur.

Keywords: religious conflict; diffusion; cyber space; real word; virtual world.

Introduction

The penetration of technology into religious lives has led to new religious practices called virtual religious practices. At its most basic level, virtual religion has influenced religious communities, authorities, and identities. However, online religious activity has also changed ritual practices, religious information-seeking behaviour and the religious experiences of others. Virtual religion is also having a significant impact in changing the way people practice religion in a wireless world (Helland 2015).

The most obvious impact of virtual religious practices is the emergence of various religion-based conflicts, both inter-religious conflicts and internal conflicts within a religion (Dowson 2020; Epps et al. 2021; Kadafi et al. 2021). In 2019, there was a religious lecture conducted by Ustadz Ahmad Muwafiq, which was questioned because it allegedly contained elements of insulting the prophet. Even though there has been clarification, the case continues to roll on social media and raises pros and cons. The climax was a clash between the Surakarta City Sharia Council (DSKS) and the Surakarta Islamic Community Forum (FUIS) with Banser NU.

The burning of a place of worship that occurred in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra, also started with information on social media. This case occurred when Meliana, a Chinese-Indonesian woman, asked the administrator of the mosque to turn down the volume of the speaker. As a result of the protest, Meliana was accused of blasphemy, which led to the burning of monasteries and pagodas. The latency of religious conflict that occurs in cyberspace experiences diffusion and becomes a conflict in the real world. The flow of unbalanced information about religious issues in cyberspace has a destructive effect and tends to create intolerance. Religion, which was once a cohesive factor and peaceful coexistence, has become a tool for political manipulation, violence, destruction of life and property (Ushe 2015).

Religious conflicts occur because people are immature in responding to differences in religious ideology in the public sphere (Eko & Putranto 2019; Hjarvard & Rosenfeldt 2017; Mubarrak & Yahya 2020; Stoeckl 2016). There have been surveys conducted on the topic of attitudes towards violence in the name of religion, particularly in the context of Islamic extremism and the concept of jihad. However, it is important to note that the results of such surveys can vary widely depending on the methodology, sample size and cultural context in which they are conducted.

One notable survey is the Pew Research Center's 2013 survey of the Muslim public in 11 countries, which included questions about attitudes towards violence in the name of Islam. The survey found that while a majority of Muslims in most countries surveyed rejected suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians, significant minorities in some countries expressed support for such actions. For example, 39% of Muslims in Palestine said that suicide bombings against civilians can be justified in order to defend Islam, while 29% of Muslims in Egypt and 26% of Muslims in Bangladesh expressed similar views. It is important to note, however, that these findings do not necessarily represent the views of all Muslims or even a majority of Muslims and that there are many factors that contribute to attitudes towards violence in the name of religion. Additionally, it is important to approach such surveys with caution and to consider the broader cultural and political context in which they are conducted.

Conflicts that arise are not resolved wisely through good communication but instead are carried out by attacking each other on social media. Aggressive methods such as cyberbullying and hate speech are often used to strengthen arguments because of differences of opinion (Arafah et al. 2020). The cases of violence in the name of religion and radicalism have unfortunately targeted students in various parts of the world. Schools and universities are often seen as symbols of Western or secular influence, which can make them targets for extremist groups who seek to undermine those values. In some cases, students have been targeted specifically because of their religious or ethnic background, or because they represent a particular political or ideological group that is seen as a threat by extremist organisations. For example, in Nigeria, the extremist group Boko Haram has carried out numerous attacks on schools, particularly targeting girls' education, which they see as a Western influence that undermines their interpretation of Islam. In other cases, students have been caught in the crossfire of broader conflicts between extremist groups and government forces. For example, in Syria, schools and universities have been damaged or destroyed by both government and opposition forces during the ongoing civil war. Regardless of the specific context, violence against students in the name of religion or radicalism is a deeply concerning trend that underscores the need for greater efforts to promote tolerance, respect for diversity and peaceful conflict resolution. Resolving conflict by causing friction on social media is like 'fire in the husk', it is just a matter of time to turn into a communal conflict that results in destructive actions.

This research is important considering that religious conflicts, both horizontal and vertical, have a destructive impact on human life (Baumeister et al. 2001); if not taken seriously, it could lead to more massive communal conflict. In addition, there are unhealthy phenomena related to social interaction in cyberspace (Mustafa & Hamzah 2011), especially on religious issues. Freedom of expression on social media is sometimes carried out unethically and often undermines religious symbols, resulting in friction and destructive actions (Elliot & Holt 2020; Jørgensen & Zuleta 2020; Kouroupis & Vagianos 2021; Monts 2021). Therefore, this research was conducted in order to identify the process of diffusion of religious conflict from the virtual world to the real world.

Methods

This research was descriptive qualitative research. The qualitative research aimed to answer research questions through formal and argumentative thinking (Azwar 2007). This research was called descriptive because it sought to provide solutions to the problems studied based on data through data presentation, data analysis and data interpretation (Abu & Narbuko 2005). It described the research data obtained and analysed them to get valid and accurate conclusions (Moleong 2007).

The following data collection techniques were used in this study:

- Interview technique: The interviews were conducted through in-depth and natural dialogue to gather data on the polarisation of religious conflict and the process of diffusion of religious conflict from the virtual world to the real world. Interviews were conducted with students to find out their perceptions of religious conflicts that occur in cyberspace.
- Observation: In this study, observation techniques were used to reveal the phenomenon of religious conflict that occurred in society.
- Document study: Document studies are used to collect data about religious conflicts in cyberspace, in the form of articles, videos, photos and other documents related to this research.

Results and discussion
Polarisation of religious conflict in the virtual world

Religious issues are difficult to resolve when conflicts occur (Isaacs 2017; Lakitsch 2018; Rios 2021; Syarif 2019). Because religious issues are considered a sensitive issue, it would be better not to talk about them or to take steps to minimise news. The impact is in the long run, when this religious conflict grows, the community is not used to managing these differences professionally. Swearing, insulting, all forms of intimidation and cyberbullying are actions that are taken when religion is discussed in public spaces, especially on social media.

Often, social media is used without regard to ethics and applicable rules. With the result that social media has a very large influence on social life, including the potential to cause conflict. Social media also helps form a new paradigm in people's lives (Singh & Mathur 2019). Social media is not only used as a medium of communication but also used to carry out propaganda and even to mobilise the masses. The potential for conflict in social media is considerable.

The social media can have both positive and negative impacts on individuals and society as a whole. Positive impacts of social media include the following:

- Connecting with others: Social media platforms provide opportunities for people to connect with friends, family and acquaintances across the world, regardless of physical distance.
- Sharing information: Social media platforms can be used to share information, news and ideas with a broad audience quickly and easily.
- Promoting social causes: Social media can be used to raise awareness of social causes and to mobilise support for movements and campaigns.
- Facilitating communication: Social media platforms provide a convenient way to communicate with others, whether through direct messaging or public forums.

The negative impacts of social media include the following:

- Cyberbullying: Social media platforms can be used to bully, harass and intimidate others, which can have serious negative impacts on mental health and well-being.
- Spread of misinformation: Social media platforms can facilitate the spread of false information, which can have harmful impacts on public health and social cohesion.
- Addiction: Social media can be addictive, with some individuals spending excessive amounts of time on social media platforms to the detriment of other activities and responsibilities.
- Encouraging comparison and jealousy: Social media can promote a culture of comparison and jealousy, with individuals feeling pressure to present a certain image of themselves online and to keep up with the perceived successes and accomplishments of other people.

It is important to recognise that social media is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can have both positive and negative impacts, depending on how it is used and the broader social and cultural context in which it operates. To maximise the positive impacts of social media and minimise the negative impacts, it is important to use social media responsibly and with awareness of its potential impacts.

According to Seo, Park and Choi (2020), the characteristics of social media tend to be easy to access, interactive and unlimited, so that it will cause its own problems. Some interest groups even deliberately use this virtual space as a means of triggering conflict. Meanwhile, according to Diefenbach and Ullrich (2019), conflict in the digital world can actually be classified into two forms, namely, horizontal conflict and vertical conflict. As for horizontal conflict, it refers to conflicts that occur between two or more different cultural or religious groups. Meanwhile, vertical conflict refers to conflicts that occur between the government and certain cultural or religious groups.

The explosion in the number of social media users is accompanied by risks such as the emergence of conflict in society. The latency of religious conflict spreads through social media to the real world. Researchers identified two patterns of religious conflict, given as follows:

The cause and result are:

- Real – Virtual – Real

That is a conflict that originates from the real world and then spreads in the virtual world and becomes a conflict in the larger real world. One example is the Meiliana case in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra, which resulted in the destruction of a monastery.

This case began when Meiliana protested because of the sound of the call to prayer echoing from the Al Maksun Mosque. Meiliana's protest was conveyed to a mosque Nazir named Kasidik. After the Maghrib prayer, Kasidik informed the congregation of the mosque.

After a dialogue with the congregation of the mosque, Harris Tua Marpaung, the Imam of the Mosque, and several administrators of the Mosque Prosperity Agency visited Meiliana's house. There had been a debate between the congregation of the mosque with Meiliana.

The debate that took place at Meiliana's house did not last long because Lian Tui (Meliana's husband), was present to mediate and apologised to the congregation of the mosque. However, the atmosphere became tense again after Meiliana shouted and became angry at the *Isha* call to prayer. This type of attitude tends to make people emotional. The management of the Mosque Prosperity Agency and the congregation took Meiliana to the Tanjung Balai Kota 1 Urban Village office and then to the Tanjung Balai Police Station for mediation. In the middle of the mediation, at around 21.30 Western Indonesia Time (WIB), a riot broke out. It is suspected that residents from outside the Tanjung Balai Kota 1 sub-district came to Meiliana's house and carried out the riot, causing damage. The riots occurred probably because of provoking messages on social media and because the news spread quickly, it resulted in mobilising a large number of people.

The riots spread from the unknown mass of origin that invaded the temples and monasteries around Tanjung Balai City. The mass rage culminated in the attack on the Tri Ratna Vihara and the Dewi Samudera Temple located on the banks of the Asahan River before dawn. The whole night was eerie. As a result, at least three monasteries, eight temples, two Chinese foundations, one medical center and Meiliana's house were damaged. A total of 20 people were also detained by the police for being the perpetrators of vandalism.

In the aftermath of the series of events, Meiliana became a suspect in blasphemy in March 2017 and was brought to court. About eight people who were involved in vandalising temples and pagodas were also dragged away and sentenced to 1–3 months in prison (Biyanto 2018).

Based on the chronology of the occurrence of the case, it can be seen that in fact, the case could have stopped when mediation was carried out. However, because of messages on social media that are provoking, it caused incitement and riots.

• Virtual – Real

Namely, conflicts that originate from social media then turn into real conflicts and involve many parties. One example is the case of Gus Muwafiq related to the content of his lecture, which was considered insulting to the prophet Muhammad.

The content of Gus Muwafiq's lecture was in the spotlight because it told of the childhood life of the Prophet Muhammad. As a child who was raised by his grandfather and without both parents, Gus Muwafiq said that the Prophet Muhammad was not brought up properly.

The video of the lecture, which was predominantly in Javanese, went viral and led to criticism from a number of circles. The climax was a clash between the Surakarta City Sharia Council (DSKS) and the Surakarta Islamic Community Forum (FUIS) with Banser NU Surakarta (CNN Indonesia 2019).

This case arose from social media posts that went viral because of differences in audience perceptions of the messages conveyed on social media. Differences in interpreting messages sometimes lead to debates between social media users, which often lead to social conflict. According to Kuloğlu and Asasoğlu (2010), the message contains the desired meaning from the encoder and the message will experience a change in meaning from the influence of the decoder's culture, which has become part of the meaning of the message.

After the message is conveyed, there is a process of construing or interpretation based on the way a person interprets events. Therefore the same event can be interpreted differently by the audience (Kujalienė 2004).

This is in accordance with the opinion of which states that there are four paradigms in communication that can be used for conflict resolution, namely, the encoding-decoding, intentionalist, perspective-taking and dialogic paradigms. If it is related to the case of religious conflict that occurred in Indonesia, then the right paradigm is intentionalist. In the intentionalist paradigm, both the communicant and the communicator must try to understand what the message maker actually meant. In addition, when writing messages, a communicator must pay attention to the impact that words can have on others.

In social media communication is, free-to-express messages. However, each ethnic group has a different understanding, causing conflict. Misunderstandings lead to differences in meaning among multi-ethnic communities. Communication is irreversible, every expression given cannot be taken back.

Even if someone has apologised, it will always remain in the memory (Acemoglu, Bimpikis & Ozdaglar 2014).

Interaction on social media that uses technology has prevented emotional ties. People are free to express themselves on social media at any time. What then emerges is a positive response and a negative response, which in the end creates a conflict or even becomes a legal issue.

The use of language in social media differs from mass media in general. Everyone is free to express themselves on social media without gatekeepers or editors like the mass media. From the several cases mentioned that occurred in Indonesia, interactions on social media can cause conflict because they use racist language that offends other people's feelings. According to Handelman (2022), the term racist language means language that is used to insult or degrade the culture and customs of that culture and has a negative connotation.

The assimilation of mixing religious conflicts from the virtual world to the real world

Religious conflicts can arise as a result of posting *Suku Agama Ras Antar* [ethnic, religious, racial, and inter-group] issues. Sometimes, this issue becomes the subject of discussion in the virtual community. Several informants in this study stated that postings about SARA issues can also cause conflict in virtual communities. One of the informants stated:

> 'In my opinion, the cause of conflict in social media groups is differences of opinion on posts containing SARA, such as insulting the prophet or others.' (Interview with Ekayasa, male, Semarang, 2021)

The quote above shows that the posting of SARA issues has become a contentious issue being discussed. Controversial posts cause differences in views between members of the virtual community and result in the fragmentation of virtual community members into groups that accept and groups that reject. These different views tend to cause conflicts both internally and externally that occur in virtual communities. Conflicts that escalate and do not find a solution turn into real conflicts and confrontations are not uncommon. As stated by the following informant:

> 'Conflicts in social media can turn into conflicts in the real world because mass hegemony is currently very easy to do through social media that can reach all circles without any boundaries.' (Interview with Mulyana, male, Semarange, 2021)

The hegemony of the mass media has contributed to the process of diffusion of religious conflicts from the virtual world to the real world. Media hegemony can be understood as a condition of domination by individuals behind the mass media over certain ways of life and ways of thinking. This way of thinking and living is then disseminated to the public through the use of media (Khoiriyah & Suprapto 2021).

In the tradition of cultural studies developed by Stuart Hall, the media is an instrument of elite group power, and the

function of the media is to convey the thoughts of groups that dominate society regardless of whether these thoughts are beneficial or not (Colpani 2022).

Researchers identify that there are several stages of the process of assimilation of religious conflicts from the virtual world to the real world, given as follows:

• Sharing information and conflict initiation

Online posts that exist in cyberspace are not always true. Information can be disseminated not from a direct source. So that people who have heard of information can pass it on to others through various kinds of social media they have (Evelina et al. 2021).

When a controversial issue arises, there is a tendency for someone to post the issue on social media. In the case of insulting the prophet, the post is made to express rejection and protect a role model that must be respected. According to the results of this group is referred to as a conservative group. Conservative groups quickly respond to opinions, information and issues that are considered to be targeting Muslims on social media. They feel insulted by this conservative movement.

Meanwhile, the group that considers that the post has no indication of demeaning the prophet is referred to as a liberal group. Referring to Savirani et al. (2021) research, liberal groups consider that the post is only an attempt by certain individuals for personal gain. At this stage, the seeds of conflict have begun to emerge.

• Perception equation

One of the goals of spreading controversial issues is to build a common perception among virtual community members. There is an attempt to build an opinion that what is done in the post is something that is not true, so there needs to be action or sanctions.

• Virtual community support

After establishing a common perception, it is hoped that there will be sanctions for the perpetrators. To be able to impose sanctions, it is necessary to have support from various parties, including members of the virtual community.

• Virtual action

After getting support from members of the virtual community, a virtual solidarity action will appear. The emergence of hashtags, to support a virtual action, is often carried out massively so that the post gets more support and there is a realisation of sanctions for perpetrators. But on the one hand, these actions also receive resistance from groups who reject the post. Often, there are also counter-actions against opposing groups. From here, hate speech and wild comments can emerge to target each other and bring them down. This is where virtual conflicts begin to emerge clearly, which can be huge given the easily accessible nature of social media.

• Real action

Religious conflicts that occur in the virtual world will gradually turn into action in the real world. This real action was carried out to show the strength and magnitude of solidarity. According to Vogt, Gleditsch and Cederman (2021), this real action is an escalation of the conflict that occurs because of the action and reaction. If the power between the two groups is equally strong, a confrontation will occur and end in destructive action. Therefore, the process of diffusion of religious conflicts from the virtual world to the real world needs to be anticipated so as not to cause big losses.

According to State et al. (2015), the diffusion of religious conflicts in cyberspace to the real world can be related to the principles of control and communication processes in cyberculture theory as follows:

• Positive and negative feedback: The occurrence of religious conflicts as described above is more likely to lead to negative feedback.
• Restrictions: Generates restrictions on actions that prevent positive responses and maximise negative responses. In Indonesia, the response to the actions of perpetrators of attacks on certain religions will also get a response that tends to be negative. There is no positive response that supports criticising through social media.
• Information varies inversely as noise: Some information is noise in the interaction. When an event is revealed by the media, people will give various responses, almost all of them attack the perpetrator who uploaded the negative message.

Conclusion

The results showed that religious polarisation of religious conflict in the virtual world is divided into two forms, namely, firstly, real – virtual – real conflict, a conflict that originates from the real world and then spreads in the virtual world and becomes a conflict in the larger real world. Secondly, virtual – real conflicts, conflicts that originate from social media then turn into real conflicts and involve many parties. The process of diffusion of religious conflict from the virtual world to the real world occurs through the stages of sharing information and conflict initiation, perception equation, virtual community support, virtual action and real action. This shows a new phenomenon of religious practice in the virtual world, where a religious conflict can change from virtual to real. The effects can be more destructive because it can be done massively and involves many parties in any part of the world.

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Authors' contributions

A.P. and A.R. contributed to the data collection, data documenting and analysis and manuscript preparation.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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