

COMMUNAL TOLERANCE AND THE POLITICS OF NON-MUSLIM HOUSES OF WORSHIP IN CILEGON, INDONESIA EXTENDING JEREMY MENCHIK'S THEORY OF COMMUNAL TOLERANCE

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Abstract

This study examines the social dynamics and institutional barriers involved in establishing non-Muslim houses of worship in Cilegon City, Banten Province, Indonesia. Unlike prior case studies that rely primarily on legal-administrative analysis, this research combines legal and sociocultural approaches to examine how formal regulation, collective social memory, and local politics interact to shape religious tolerance in a Muslim-majority city. Using an intrinsic case study design, data were collected from 15 purposively sampled informants through in-depth interviews, field observation, and document review conducted between March 2022 and December 2024, with analysis completed by July 2025; data were analyzed thematically. The findings identify three interrelated factors that sustain the absence of permanent non-Muslim houses of worship: (1) the historical narrative of the 1888 Geger Cilegon uprising, which continues to shape perceptions of religious exclusivity; (2) a widely shared, undocumented narrative of an institutional agreement between PT Krakatau Steel and local Islamic leaders that is treated as a moral constraint on religious zoning; and (3) limited public understanding of Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM) No. 9 and 8 of 2006, which is interpreted through social and moral frameworks rather than administrative procedure. Together, these factors sustain a negotiated arrangement — termed here adaptive tolerance — in which minority worship is informally accommodated while remaining symbolically restricted. Conceptually, this study extends Jeremy Menchik's theory of communal tolerance by showing how historical and bureaucratic memory, rather than interreligious solidarity alone, structures the boundaries of tolerance. The findings inform two

policy directions: (1) participatory, village- and sub-district-based socialization of PBM regulations, and (2) the development of standardized mediation protocols within the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) to strengthen inclusive religious coexistence.

Keywords: communal tolerance; house of worship regulation; religious freedom; social memory; local governance in Indonesia

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika sosial dan hambatan kelembagaan dalam proses pendirian rumah ibadah non-Muslim di Kota Cilegon, Banten. Berbeda dengan studi kasus sejenis yang umumnya menggunakan pendekatan hukum administratif, penelitian ini memadukan pendekatan hukum dan sosiokultural untuk mengkaji bagaimana regulasi formal, memori sosial kolektif, dan politik lokal saling berinteraksi dalam membentuk toleransi beragama di kota yang mayoritas penduduknya beragama Islam. Dengan desain studi kasus intrinsik, data dikumpulkan dari 15 informan yang dipilih secara purposif melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi lapangan, dan telaah dokumen yang dilaksanakan pada Maret 2022–Desember 2024, dan analisis data diselesaikan pada Juli 2025; data dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga faktor yang saling terkait dan mempertahankan ketiadaan rumah ibadah non-Muslim permanen: (1) narasi historis peristiwa Geger Cilegon 1888 yang terus membentuk persepsi eksklusivitas keagamaan; (2) narasi yang diyakini luas namun tidak terdokumentasi mengenai perjanjian kelembagaan antara PT Krakatau Steel dan tokoh Islam setempat, yang diperlakukan sebagai batasan moral atas zonasi keagamaan; dan (3) lemahnya pemahaman publik terhadap Peraturan Bersama Menteri (PBM) No. 9 dan 8 Tahun 2006, yang dimaknai melalui kerangka sosial dan moral, bukan prosedur administratif. Ketiga faktor ini bersama-sama mempertahankan sebuah pengaturan yang dinegosiasikan — disebut di sini sebagai toleransi adaptif — yang mengakomodasi ibadah minoritas secara informal namun tetap membatasinya secara simbolik. Secara konseptual, penelitian ini memperluas teori toleransi komunal Jeremy Menchik dengan menunjukkan bahwa memori historis dan birokratis, selain solidaritas antarumat beragama, turut membentuk batas-batas toleransi. Temuan ini berimplikasi pada dua arah kebijakan: (1) sosialisasi PBM yang partisipatif berbasis desa/kelurahan, dan (2) pengembangan protokol mediasi yang terstandardisasi dalam Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) guna memperkuat koeksistensi keagamaan yang inklusif.

Kata kunci: toleransi komunal; peraturan rumah ibadah; kebebasan beragama; memori sosial; pemerintahan daerah di Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of resistance to the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Indonesia remains a recurring and sensitive issue. The rejection of the HKBP Maranatha Church construction in Cilegon City in 2022 illustrates the paradox of religious freedom in Indonesia (Calista et al., 2023; A. Lestari & Randisa, 2024; D. Lestari & Randisa, 2024; Riansyah et al., 2021). Although the right to worship is constitutionally guaranteed, it does not always translate into the availability of permanent, socially accepted worship spaces. This case suggests that beyond legal guarantees, social and moral considerations significantly influence public acceptance of religious diversity (Azhari, 2014; Firdaus, 2011; Muhammad, 2011; Subakir, 2010; Suntoro, 2020; A. Wahab, 2024).

Cilegon provides a relevant local context because resistance to non-Muslim houses of worship reflects tensions between formal legal norms and communal values within a Muslim-majority society. The case demonstrates how social values, historical memory, and perceptions of public space identity shape the boundaries of tolerance toward minority groups.

Based on this phenomenon, the central question of this study is: How do social norms and historical memory shape the symbolization of public spaces for minority groups despite formal guarantees of religious freedom? This question arises from the observation that regulations such as Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM) No. 9 and No. 8 of 2006 do not fully address local social complexities, as their implementation is often influenced by collective perceptions and community value structures. Previous studies have predominantly examined houses of worship from legal and administrative perspectives, including licensing requirements, public support, and spatial planning (Firdaus, 2011; Lay, 2009; A. J. Wahab et al., 2024).

Recent studies, however, emphasize that religious conflict cannot be separated from the social and spatial contexts in which tolerance is practiced. Pedersen (2016) argues that religious pluralism in Indonesia operates within a tension between state policies and local social dynamics. Damayanti & Yunanto, (2022) show that changing perceptions of interreligious threats often become the basis for symbolic restrictions on worship spaces. Likewise, Laksana, (2014) highlights the role of civic education and religious identity in shaping public tolerance, while Parihat (2024) demonstrates that authentic coexistence can emerge when supported by social trust and inclusive governance.

Despite this growing body of literature, important analytical gaps remain. Existing studies generally focus on legal regulations, institutional arrangements or indicators of social harmony, while paying comparatively little attention to how collective memory, communal identity, and local cultural narratives shape public attitudes toward minority religious groups (Liu et al., 2025; Verkuyten et al., 2019). Because public space is not a neutral arena but a site where communities negotiate recognition, legitimacy, and social boundaries (Sinn et al., 2015; Verkuyten et al., 2019), understanding resistance to minority houses of worship requires closer attention to the interaction between historical memory, communal identity, and social mechanisms of exclusion, a gap that existing legal-administrative approaches have not adequately addressed.

The Cilegon case illustrates this gap. Public responses to the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship cannot be fully understood through legal or administrative frameworks alone because they are embedded in broader social meanings shared by local communities. Historical narratives, religious symbolism, and perceptions of collective identity influence how religious diversity is interpreted in everyday life. These factors often operate informally but have important implications for public acceptance, social legitimacy, and the implementation of religious freedom policies (Anas et al., 2025; Fanani, 2026). Studies on religious tolerance and public space suggest that acceptance of minority groups is strongly influenced by community identity, perceptions of “the others,” and locally constructed boundaries of belonging rather than by formal regulations alone (Anas et al., 2025). Likewise, places of worship function not only as religious facilities but also as symbolic representations of identity and recognition, making them subject to public contestation and negotiation (Fanani, 2026).

Therefore, this study positions the establishment of houses of worship not merely as a matter of regulatory compliance but as a reflection of broader negotiations over identity, social space, and communal values. By examining the interaction between historical memory, social norms, and local governance, this research seeks to explain the mechanisms that sustain tolerance, resistance, and accommodation within religiously diverse societies.

From a broader comparative perspective, Modood and Triandafyllidou (2017) argue that the governance of religious diversity involves not only legal regulation but also the management of moral boundaries in public religious space. Similarly, (Fox, 2021) and Grim and Finke (2010) demonstrate that restrictions on religious expression often reflect discriminatory social and political structures and increase the potential for social conflict. This gap makes Jeremy Menchik's theory of communal tolerance particularly relevant, as it explains how tolerance in Indonesia is often grounded in community solidarity rather than liberal individual rights (Menchik, 2016).

This study employs the concept of communal tolerance to analyze the social dynamics surrounding the establishment of houses of worship in Cilegon. It examines how historical memory, local power relations, and social mechanisms shape exclusive forms of tolerance and produce what Menchik (2016) describes as a nonviolent status quo, in which minority religious practices continue through informal compromises and symbolic pressures.

Theoretically, this research extends the concept of communal tolerance through two micro-level dimensions. First, it highlights the role of historical memory, particularly how the legacy of the *Geger* Cilegon uprising of 1888 continues to influence collective perceptions and the boundaries of minority acceptance. Second, it examines the role of local government as a symbolic mediator that maintains social stability through compromise rather than substantive transformation. These findings expand the understanding of peaceful intolerance, a condition in which social harmony is maintained through the regulation of symbols and space rather than through formal equality.

Academically, this study contributes to the literature on the politics of religious space and community-based tolerance in Muslim-majority societies by connecting global theoretical debates with the Indonesian context. Practically, the findings are expected to support the formulation of culturally sensitive public policies through: (1) participatory village-based socialization of PBM regulations and religious legal literacy; and (2) the development of FKUB mediation protocols that promote social dialogue, interfaith understanding, and the reduction of symbolic resistance within local communities. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The Methods section outlines the study's qualitative case-study design, sampling strategy, and analytic procedure. The Findings and Discussion section presents the three empirical themes identified in the data and interprets them through Menchik's framework of communal tolerance, proposing adaptive tolerance and status quo tolerance as theoretical extensions. The Conclusion summarizes the study's theoretical and policy contributions and notes its limitations.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with an intrinsic case study approach (Stake, 2010), because its focus is on an in-depth understanding of a specific social phenomenon, namely the dynamics of establishing non-Muslim houses of worship in Cilegon City. This approach was chosen so that researchers can interpret the social meaning, power relations, and communal values that shape the practice of community tolerance. According to (Creswell, 2015, 2017; Creswell and Creswell, 2018), case studies allow researchers to explore bounded social systems contextually by combining various data sources and perspectives.

The research was conducted in Cilegon City, Banten Province. The field research process was carried out during March 2022–December 2024 and the data analysis and verification phase was carried out in January–July 2025. Informants are selected through purposive sampling, considering the representation of actors and the depth of information they possess. There are a total of 15 key informants, consisting of: 1) Local Government Officials (Pemerintah Kota and Kesbangpol) as many as 3 people, as representatives of policy makers and field implementers, 2) FKUB (Forum for Religious Harmony) figures, as many as 2 people, as representatives of interfaith relations mediators, 3) Islamic religious leaders (Al-Khairiyah and Jauharotunnaqiyah Islamic Boarding School) as many as 2 people, as representatives of the majority community, 4) Church figures as many as 2 people, as a representative of minority groups, 5) Academics and Socio-Religious activists as many as 3 people, as representatives of observers and observers of tolerance and 6) 3 residents, as a representation of direct objects of social impact.

The selection of this number is based on the principle of data saturation (Miles et al., 2014), which is when additional interviews no longer produce significant new information. Data is collected through four main techniques: a) In-depth interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner for 45–90 minutes, b) Non-participant observations, observing social activities, religious interactions, and FKUB meetings, c) Official documentation, examining PBM No. 9 and 8/2006, FKUB recommendation letters, Cilegon City Government archives and other important documents and d) Literature study, examining the theory of communal tolerance (Menchik, 2016) and literature related to the politics of religious space.

The interview guide was compiled based on the main dimensions of Menchik (2016) theory of communal tolerance, which includes collective morality, symbolic boundaries, and majority–minority relations. Next, a pilot interview was conducted with the two initial informants (1 Islamic religious leader and 1 resident) to assess understanding of the questions and the interview duration. The final revision reinforces the coherence of the questions with the research objectives.

This study uses the Thematic Analysis model of Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2020) combined with the reflexive iteration principle of Braun and Clarke (Byrne, 2022). The analysis process is carried out through four main stages: a) Data reduction: selecting and grouping interview and observation data into initial categories (open codes), b) Data display: organize data in a thematic matrix between actors

(government, religious leaders, society), c) Theme identification: develop axial codes into a primary theme that represents social patterns and d) Reflective conclusion drawn: examining the connection between themes with Menchik's theory and verifying repeatedly.

Research ethics are maintained through the principles of non-maleficence, beneficence (beneficial to society), and confidentiality (maintaining informant anonymity). The main instrument of research is the researcher himself as a human instrument (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), assisted by: a) Interview guide (semi-structured), b) Field observation sheet and c) Reflective notebook (field diary). All data is collected manually and stored in an encrypted format to maintain participants' confidentiality. With a planned methodological design and combination of reflexive thematic analysis and ethical rigor, this research not only meets the standards of trustworthiness in qualitative research but also makes a methodological contribution to understanding how social mechanisms of exclusive tolerance are formed and operate at the local level.

This study received ethical clearance through the internal research review procedures of the Jakarta Office of Religious Research and Development (Balai Penelitian dan Pengembangan Agama Jakarta), and all informants provided verbal consent prior to the interview, including consent to anonymized quotations. Given the sensitivity of majority-minority religious relations in Cilegon, the researcher (an Indonesian Muslim academic affiliated with a state Islamic university) maintained a reflexive stance throughout data collection and analysis, cross-checking interpretations with informants from both majority and minority positions and documenting analytic decisions in the reflective field diary to guard against confirmation bias toward any single stakeholder group. Trustworthiness was further supported through data triangulation across interviews, observation, and documents, and through peer debriefing with two senior researchers not involved in data collection.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Cilegon City is an autonomous city that was established by Law No. 15/1999. As a city on the western tip of Java Island, Cilegon City is the main gateway connecting Java Island to Sumatra. Geographically, Cilegon City is bordered to the west by the Sunda Strait, to the north by Serang Regency, to the east by Serang Regency, and to the south by Serang Regency.

Cilegon is one of the areas in Banten Province that has not had a house of worship other than mosques and prayer rooms, because most of the population are indigenous people who are Muslims. Non-Muslim residents of Cilegon are generally immigrants, including those who work in the industrial, trade, mining, and other sectors.

Table 1.

Number of Population by District in Cilegon City Year 2024

Kecamatan	Jumlah Penduduk (ribuan)
Ciwandan	51.6
Citangkil	85.7
Pulomerak	50.1
Purwakarta	44
Grogol	43.6
Cilegon	48.8
Jombang	66.8
Cibeber	65.1
Kota Cilegon	455.6

Source: Cilegon City Statistics Agency 2024

Table 2 presents the most recent officially disaggregated population data by district and religion available from the Ministry of Religion of Cilegon City; because a more recent district-level breakdown by religion has not been published, these 2015 figures are presented alongside the 2024 total-population data in Table 1 as an indicator of long-standing demographic composition rather than a precise current count:

Table 2.

Number of Population by District and Religion Practiced in Cilegon City, 2015

Kecamatan	Islam	Kristen	Katolik	Hindu	Buddha	Lainnya
Ciwandan	42,281	58	32	41	11	42
Citangkil	63,849	654	213	206	112	64
Pulomerak	46,874	616	11	183	50	51
Purwakarta	37,078	702	125	201	67	49
Grogol	38,194	272	37	29	22	76
Cilegon	38,394	681	50	247	81	236
Jombang	57,769	1,115	59	638	47	760
Cibeber	44,971	1,001	26	36	26	93
Kota Cilegon	369,41	5,099	553	1,581	416	1,371

Source: Ministry of Religion of Cilegon City, 2015

Based on data from the Ministry of Religion of Cilegon City, the houses of worship that stand in Cilegon City are only available Mosques, Mushalas or Langgar. Meanwhile, non-Muslim houses of worship are not found in Cilegon City. The following is data on houses of worship in Cilegon City:

Table 3.

Number of Places of Worship by District in Cilegon City, 2024

Kecamatan	Masjid	Mushalla	Gereja Protestan	Gereja Katholik	Pura	Vihara
	2024	2024	2024	2024	2024	2024
Ciwandan	64	54	0	0	0	0
Citangkil	92	76	0	0	0	0
Pulomerak	60	63	0	0	0	0

Purwakarta	48	30	0	0	0	0
Grogol	52	46	0	0	0	0
Cilegon	45	28	0	0	0	0
Jombang	49	76	0	0	0	0
Cibeber	84	89	0	0	0	0
Kota Cilegon	494	462	0	0	0	0

Source: Ministry of Religion of Cilegon City, 2024

The findings of this study indicate that the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Cilegon City is shaped by three major interrelated factors: historical memory, collective social narratives, and socio-administrative practices. These findings are derived from interviews with 15 informants, field observations, and document analysis conducted between 2022 and 2025.

Empirical evidence collected during the study suggests that public responses to the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Cilegon cannot be understood solely through formal legal frameworks. Instead, they are shaped by the interaction of historical experiences, collective beliefs, and everyday social practices that have evolved within the local community. Across interviews and field observations, informants frequently referred to religious identity, local traditions, and social harmony when explaining their views regarding religious facilities. These references indicate that public perceptions are often influenced by shared cultural meanings that extend beyond administrative regulations. As a result, decisions and attitudes regarding houses of worship are closely connected to broader concerns about communal values, local history, and the preservation of social cohesion.

Together, these factors explain how public attitudes toward non-Muslim houses of worship are formed and maintained in the local context. Rather than emerging solely from formal legal considerations, public responses are influenced by historical experiences, shared moral beliefs, and everyday social practices that continue to shape the management of religious diversity in Cilegon.

Field findings indicate that historical memory constitutes one of the most influential factors shaping public attitudes toward the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Cilegon. Interviews conducted with religious leaders, community leaders, local government officials, and residents consistently referenced the historical legacy of the *Geger Cilegon* uprising of 1888. Although the event occurred more than a century ago, it remains embedded in local collective consciousness and continues to influence contemporary perceptions of religious identity and public space. One *pesantren* leader explained: "For us, the history of *Geger Cilegon* is not merely a historical event. It represents the struggle of the ulama to defend Islamic values and has become part of the identity of the people of Cilegon" (E.A., interview, 2023). Another community leader stated: "People often refer to the history of the ulama when discussing issues related to religious symbols in public spaces. It is part of our collective memory" (M.H., interview, 2024).

Several informants described the uprising as an important symbol of Islamic resistance and the struggle of local ulama. Historical narratives surrounding the event are frequently transmitted through family stories, religious gatherings, *pesantren* activities, and local commemorative discussions. As a result, the memory of the

uprising functions not merely as historical knowledge but also as a cultural resource that shapes communal identity. Similar findings regarding the persistence of collective memory in shaping community behavior have been reported in studies on social memory and identity formation (Liu et al., 2025).

During interviews, respondents repeatedly emphasized the image of Cilegon as a “city of santri” and a center of Islamic struggle. This image was frequently linked to the expectation that public symbols in the city should reflect the community's dominant religious identity. Several participants stated that preserving this identity was considered important for maintaining social cohesion and continuity with local historical traditions. Observational data collected during community meetings and religious events also showed frequent references to local Islamic heritage in discussions of religious diversity and public facilities.

A second major finding concerns the existence of a widely shared narrative regarding an alleged social agreement between PT Krakatau Steel and local Islamic leaders. Although documentary evidence supporting such an agreement was not found during archival investigations, the narrative remains widely recognized among residents and local stakeholders.

Interviews with community leaders revealed that many residents believe that the development of Cilegon as an industrial city was accompanied by informal understandings intended to preserve the city's Islamic character. These beliefs are reproduced through community discussions, local networks, and oral communication rather than through formal institutional mechanisms. Several informants acknowledged that they had never seen written evidence of the agreement but nevertheless regarded it as an important element of local social norms.

Field observations suggest that the narrative functions as a source of moral legitimacy within the community. Residents often referred to it when explaining why proposals for non-Muslim houses of worship generated public debate. In this sense, the narrative serves as a social reference point that influences public opinion regardless of its legal status. Similar patterns have been identified in studies showing how collective narratives and symbolic beliefs shape community responses to social change and public policy (Verkuyten et al., 2019).

Interestingly, interviews with local government officials revealed differing interpretations of the narrative. While some officials viewed it as part of local historical culture, others considered it merely a social perception without legal relevance. This divergence indicates that the narrative operates primarily within the social sphere rather than the administrative sphere. Nevertheless, its influence on public attitudes remains significant, as it shapes the moral framework by which residents evaluate proposals for religious facilities.

The third major finding concerns the interaction between limited public understanding of Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM) No. 9 and 8 of 2006 and the persistence of informal worship practices among minority religious communities. From the administrative side, the study found that weak dissemination of PBM remains one of the main factors contributing to public resistance toward the

establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship. Most informants admitted that they did not fully understand the content and procedures stipulated in the regulation. One neighborhood leader explained: "All the community knows is: a house of worship permit is difficult, there must be a recommendation from residents. But I do not know how" (S., interview, 2024).

Many participants were aware that recommendations from residents and community approval were required, yet only a few could accurately explain the administrative provisions contained in the regulation. Several respondents acknowledged that their understanding was largely obtained from informal discussions rather than from official government socialization programs. Field observations similarly revealed that discussions regarding permits often focused on assumptions, perceptions, and local expectations rather than on the actual regulatory framework.

Consequently, administrative procedures were frequently interpreted through social and moral frameworks. Public recommendations, which legally function as part of the licensing process, were often perceived as moral instruments used to accept or reject religious facilities. Interviews with government officials also confirmed that dissemination activities related to PBM implementation have been relatively limited due to resource constraints and the absence of structured outreach programs. The lack of comprehensive socialization creates opportunities for misinformation and differing interpretations among stakeholders. As a result, licensing issues that should be addressed through administrative procedures frequently become subjects of broader social debate.

The study also found that social compromise is reflected in the religious practices of non-Muslim communities in Cilegon. Although no officially registered permanent non-Muslim houses of worship exist (Bimas Kristen, 2014; Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2024), Christian and Catholic communities continue to conduct worship activities in private homes, shop houses, and multipurpose buildings. A Catholic community administrator explained: "We can worship as long as we do not stand out, do not put a big cross in front" (A.W., interview, 2024).

Interviews with members of minority religious communities revealed that these arrangements have been practiced for many years and are generally accepted if they do not involve highly visible religious symbols. Informants frequently emphasized the importance of maintaining harmonious relations with surrounding communities and avoiding actions that could trigger public controversy. Field observations confirmed that religious activities in these locations were conducted regularly and without major disturbances during the research period.

Residents were generally aware of these activities, although they tended to perceive them as private gatherings rather than formal religious institutions. Several informants described these arrangements as pragmatic solutions that enable both majority and minority groups to maintain peaceful coexistence. Field data also indicate that conflicts related to houses of worship during the study period were generally expressed through symbolic forms of resistance, including petitions, public

statements, and objections submitted to authorities. No major incidents of physical violence were recorded between 2022 and 2025.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that public responses to the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Cilegon are shaped by the interaction of historical memory, collective narratives, and socio-administrative practices. Historical memories associated with the *Geger Cilegon* uprising continue to influence perceptions of religious identity and public space, while the narrative of a social agreement provides a source of moral legitimacy that guides community attitudes. At the same time, limited public understanding of PBM regulations and the continued accommodation of informal worship practices help maintain a social arrangement in which minority religious activities are tolerated, while permanent houses of worship remain highly contested. Together, these findings illustrate how religious diversity in Cilegon is negotiated through a combination of historical, cultural, and administrative mechanisms.

More importantly, the evidence suggests that community responses toward religious diversity are neither entirely restrictive nor fully inclusive. Rather, they reflect a negotiated social arrangement that allows minority religious groups to continue their religious activities while simultaneously maintaining boundaries considered important by the majority community. This arrangement is reinforced through historical narratives, shared moral understandings, and informal mechanisms of accommodation that operate alongside formal legal procedures. The coexistence of these elements demonstrates that the governance of religious diversity in Cilegon is shaped not only by state regulations but also by locally embedded social norms. Consequently, the dynamics surrounding houses of worship can be understood as the outcome of continuous interactions between formal institutional frameworks and the cultural contexts through which those frameworks are interpreted and implemented in everyday community life.

Discussion

The analysis of these findings shows strong relevance to the communal tolerance theory of Jeremy Menchik (2016, 2019). Menchik explained that tolerance in Indonesia is built on the solidarity of religious groups, not on individual freedom as in the Western liberal-secular paradigm. Within this framework, the practice of Cilegon society rejecting the permanent symbol of non-Muslims can be understood not as liberal intolerance, but as an expression of communal tolerance, a social mechanism to maintain internal cohesion and moral stability. The concept of productive intolerance (Menchik, 2019) also helps explain this phenomenon: symbolic forms of intolerance actually function productively in maintaining social balance and strengthening godly nationalism. Cilegon, in this context, is an example of how communal tolerance works stably without giving rise to open conflict, since harmony is maintained through socially agreed symbolic restrictions.

In the historical-communal dimension, this study shows that religious memory, especially the 1888 *Geger Cilegon incident*, functions as a culturally valid moral regulatory instrument. This collective memory forms the basis for moral

boundaries that determine the legitimacy of certain religious symbols in the public sphere. In the political-local dimension, local governments serve as symbolic mediators who balance the constitutional enforcement of religious rights with the need to maintain social order.

An informant, a representative of the city government, asserted that decisions on the licensing of houses of worship are often "indistinguishable only from the rules, but also from the social conditions underneath" (F., interview, 2024). This statement shows that harmony in Cilegon is maintained through a form of *communal governance* that is, governance based on social legitimacy and cultural compromise, not just legal regulations.

Beyond confirming Menchik's model, the Cilegon case suggests two conceptual extensions. The first, adaptive tolerance, describes a form of religious accommodation in which minorities continue to practice their faith without demanding symbolic parity in public space: worship persists in private homes, shop houses, and multipurpose buildings, and is generally accepted so long as it remains socially inconspicuous. The second, status quo tolerance, describes how the prolonged absence of permanent non-Muslim houses of worship functions not simply as unresolved conflict but as an actively maintained equilibrium — a mechanism through which local actors avoid open confrontation while leaving underlying claims unsettled. Together, these concepts extend Menchik's framework in three ways: they show that stable coexistence can persist without full symbolic equality; that a religious status quo can operate as a deliberate mechanism of conflict prevention rather than mere inertia; and that collective moral narratives — particularly historical memory — can exert stronger influence over local tolerance practices than formal legal rules. In this sense, Cilegon illustrates a form of "tolerance without liberalism" (Menchik, 2016), sustained through cultural negotiation rather than through the removal of symbolic restrictions.

These findings resonate with and extend several strands of existing scholarship. The salience of collective memory observed here is consistent with Liu et al. (2025), who show that social memory sustains community cohesion and identity in religiously mixed settings, and with Verkuyten et al. (2019), who argue that tolerance is a social process through which communities negotiate the limits of acceptable difference rather than a fixed disposition. From an Indonesian perspective, the findings align with Anas et al. (2025), who found that acceptance of religious minorities is strongly shaped by local cultural norms and community perception, and with Hakim (2021), who argues that communal tolerance represents a distinct model of social order rather than simply a constraint on individual rights. The findings also support Modood and Triandafyllidou's (2017) argument that governance of religious diversity requires continuous negotiation of moral boundaries, not legal regulation alone: PBM No. 9 and 8 of 2006 are interpreted in Cilegon through local social norms rather than applied procedurally, so their practical effectiveness depends heavily on social legitimacy. Consistent with Fox (2021), limited dissemination of PBM regulations further illustrates how religious-freedom policy can fail at the point of local implementation even where the formal legal framework is sound.

The Cilegon case also speaks to broader debates on religious diversity and public space. Consistent with Burchardt (2019, 2023) and Lefebvre (2020), disputes over houses of worship in Cilegon are not simply disputes over building permits but over the symbolic ownership of public space and the visibility of minority identity within it. Comparative research on mosque-siting conflicts in Europe similarly shows that opposition is often directed less at religious practice itself than at the perceived transformation of local cultural landscapes (Lefebvre, 2020; Verkuyten et al., 2023) — a dynamic broadly comparable to Cilegon, though expressed through a distinctly Indonesian idiom of historical memory and communal obligation rather than the individual-rights framing that dominates Western debates on religious freedom. This distinction reinforces calls for greater sensitivity to cultural and historical context when analytical frameworks developed in liberal-democratic settings are applied to majority-minority relations elsewhere (Verkuyten et al., 2019, 2023).

More broadly, the persistence of the undocumented Krakatau Steel narrative and the continued tolerance of informal worship despite the absence of any permanent legal permit both illustrate that informal norms and collective memory can exercise as much influence over public behavior as formal legal provisions (Hakim, 2021; Muqtada et al., 2025). Rather than treating law and social norms as separate spheres, the Cilegon case suggests that formal rules gain practical effectiveness only when perceived as compatible with local moral expectations, while informal community norms gain stability when supported by institutional structures (Cahyati et al., 2025; Hakim, 2021).

In terms of policy implications, these findings suggest that resolving disputes over houses of worship cannot rely solely on legal compliance. A combined strategy is needed: participatory, history-sensitive socialization of PBM procedures at the village and sub-district level, paired with sustained interfaith dialogue that reinterprets the memory of *Geger Cilegon* as a shared symbol of resilience rather than of exclusion. The Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) is well placed to lead this shift, moving beyond its current administrative role in recommending permits toward a more active role as a facilitator of social dialogue and historical reconciliation between religious communities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that future studies of religious tolerance should move beyond binary distinctions between tolerance and intolerance, or inclusion and exclusion. The empirical reality observed in Cilegon points instead toward a spectrum of negotiated arrangements shaped by local history, social relationships, and institutional context — underscoring the value of examining tolerance as an evolving social process rather than a fixed normative condition (Burchardt, 2023; Verkuyten et al., 2019, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the challenges surrounding the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Cilegon City cannot be explained solely through legal and administrative perspectives. The findings demonstrate that historical memory,

collective narratives, and local religious values play a significant role in shaping public attitudes toward religious public space. The memory of the *Geger* Cilegon uprising of 1888 serves as a moral reference point that reinforces local religious identity and shapes perceptions of the legitimacy of religious symbols in public space. In addition, the narrative of a social agreement between PT Krakatau Steel and local religious leaders, although lacking formal documentary evidence, continues to serve as a socially recognized moral framework. The study also reveals that limited public understanding of Peraturan Bersama Menteri (PBM) No. 9 and 8 of 2006 contributes to the gap between formal regulations and community practices. Taken together, these findings indicate that maintaining the status quo without permanent non-Muslim houses of worship reflects a form of communal tolerance in which social harmony is sustained through negotiated symbolic boundaries and collective agreements rather than unrestricted individual freedom.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of communal tolerance theory by demonstrating how tolerance is shaped not only by interreligious solidarity but also by historical memory, public morality, and local governance. The concept of *status quo tolerance* proposed in this study offers a contextual explanation of how religious coexistence is maintained through social compromise and adaptive accommodation. This finding enriches the literature on religion and public space by showing that tolerance is neither uniform nor exclusively liberal, but is influenced by local historical and cultural conditions. Practically, the study highlights the importance of policy approaches that integrate legal frameworks with socio-cultural engagement. Strengthening PBM literacy, improving participatory dialogue mechanisms, and enhancing the mediating role of the Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama (FKUB) may contribute to reducing misunderstanding and strengthening social legitimacy in managing religious diversity.

This study is subject to several limitations. The research focuses on a single case study in Cilegon City and therefore reflects a specific socio-historical context that may not be directly generalizable to other regions in Indonesia. The sample also skews toward institutional actors, government officials, FKUB figures, religious leaders, and academics, who account for ten of the fifteen informants, compared to three lay residents and two minority-congregation representatives, so the findings should be read as reflecting institutional and elite framings of communal tolerance more strongly than the everyday perspectives of ordinary residents and minority worshippers. Future studies may expand the comparative scope by examining similar cases in other regions with different demographic and religious compositions, deliberately balancing institutional and lay informants, and may adopt a longitudinal design to assess whether adaptive tolerance arrangements in Cilegon remain stable or shift over time. Comparative research could further explore how collective memory, local governance, and community narratives interact in shaping patterns of tolerance and religious coexistence, contributing to a broader understanding of the diverse forms of communal tolerance that emerge within Indonesia's plural society.

AI DISCLOSURE

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing and grammar improvement. The authors reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

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