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THE ROLE OF COLONIALISM IN SHAPING LOCAL AND WORLD RELIGIOUS HISTORY

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to analyze the role of colonialism in shaping the history of local and world religions, with a particular focus on the context of the Dutch East Indies. Using qualitative methods through a desk study approach, this study explores how colonial powers used religion as a tool for power, moral legitimacy, and social control. The findings indicate that colonialism not only encouraged the spread of Christianity through policies and missionary missions but also caused structural changes in local religions and Islam. Local religions experienced a weakening of traditional authority and syncretism, while Islam responded to colonial pressures through isolation and educational modernization as a form of political resistance. This study concludes that the current classification of religions and the standardization of teachings are a legacy of colonial power relations that placed religion within a formal and controlled state administrative framework. Keywords: Colonialism, History of Religion, Islam, Christianity, Local Religion, Power Relations.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

The colonial era, the majority of Sukabumi's population has converted to Islam, despite the Dutch building many churches. This was part of the "zending politiek" or Christianization policy, an effort to spread Christian teachings within the community. As Alwi Shihab points out, the colonial government's policies were successful in consolidating Christianity in the Dutch East Indies. From the 19th century (some say since 1816, others say since 1824) until the mid-20th century, the development of Christianity and the construction of churches flourished in the Dutch East Indies. This development was driven by the spirit of evangelism in Europe that flourished in the late 18th century. Various missions began forming organizations capable of encouraging more people to join the gospel-burning agenda(Salsabila Putri et al., 2023).

Regarding the 500-year-old history of Protestantism, it emerged from a struggle of ideas that later sparked Martin Luther's protest on October 31, 1517, in Germany. The current or wave of Christianity that initially emerged in Europe has now become part of the history of local communities in Maluku. The arrival of Protestantism, which has become a legacy for the Maluku people, was not immediately accepted consciously by the ancestors of Ambonese/Maluku. The process of becoming a Protestant Christian was not only political but also not instantaneous. The Maluku people's response to Protestantism was not automatic, like a remote control that switches on with one press. Therefore, Protestantism and the Maluku context are interesting to discuss critically and analytically for the development of the GPM and contextual services to congregations and communities in Maluku (Halik et al., 2024).

The Dutch colonial government viewed Islamic education as a challenge to their efforts to control the local population. To address this, they began interfering in the Islamic education system with the aim of weakening its influence and diverting the community's attention to more controlled, Western-style schools. In the pre-colonial period, Islamic education in Indonesia developed through traditional institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), surau (Islamic boarding schools), and madrasahs (Islamic schools), which served as vehicles for religious and cultural education. These institutions provided education based on Islamic values, including the teaching of the Quran, hadith, fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and subjects such as Arabic grammar (Yuniendel, 2024).

Islamic education during the Dutch colonial period was very concerning. Muslims faced constant pressure and harsh treatment. However, Muslims did not give up and continued to fight until Islamic education finally rose and flourished. The Western conquest of the East began through trade routes. Thus, Likewise, the Dutch came to Indonesia to develop trade, specifically to acquire spices, which were highly valued in Europe. They also sought wealth and prosperity, as well as to spread religious teachings (Wahid, 2022).

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with library research methods, as it focuses on exploring the meaning, historical processes, and dynamics of religious change resulting from colonial contact. All data in this study were collected from library sources such as books, academic journals, colonial archives, missionary reports, colonial government documents, and academic writings discussing the relationship between colonialism and religious development. Through careful reading of these sources, the researcher examines patterns, themes, and narratives that demonstrate how colonial powers shaped, shifted, or reshaped local beliefs and influenced the development of major world religions.

The collected data were then analyzed using content analysis, historical analysis, and postcolonial frameworks to ensure critical and contextual interpretation of these texts. To maintain data reliability, this study employed source triangulation by comparing various literatures from colonial, local, and modern academic perspectives, resulting in a more balanced interpretation that avoids any bias. In this way, this method allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how colonialism was not only a political and economic force but also played a role in shaping local and global religious history as a whole.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Colonialism was not only about seizing land and resources; it also profoundly influenced the most fundamental aspect of human life: religion. When colonial powers entered a territory, they brought new ways of thinking, including belief systems deemed more advanced and acceptable. In this situation, religion was not merely a spiritual issue, but was directly linked to the power relations between the colonizers

and the local population. Therefore, the history of the development of religion, both local and global, cannot be fully understood without considering colonialism as a key factor. In practice, religion was often used by colonial powers to justify their control.

European colonialism, for example, made the spread of Christianity part of its mission to spread civilization. Religion was used to support political and cultural domination over colonized societies. As a result, world religions shifted their role from personal spiritual teachings to tools linked to the interests of power. This process created a more hierarchical and formal religious structure, suited to the needs of colonial administrations. On the other hand, local religions faced strong pressure from the arrival of colonial powers. Traditional belief systems were often seen as obstacles to modernization and labeled as irrational practices.

Table 1. The Role of Colonialism in Shaping Local and World Religious History

Focus of Findings	Main Research Findings	Meaning and Implications
1. Colonialism and Religion	Colonialism directly influenced religious practices	Religion became a tool of power, not simply a spiritual belief
2. Religion as an Instrument of Power	Religion was used to support colonial control	Colonial forces gained moral and ideological support through religion
3. Christian Mission and Mission	The spread of Christianity was organized and encouraged by the colonial government	Christianization was linked to the introduction of Western culture
4. The Development of Christianity in the Dutch East Indies	Christianity grew rapidly from the 19th century onward	Religious growth was influenced by colonial policies and systems
5. Acceptance of Protestantism in Maluku	The process of accepting Protestantism was long and complex	Religion was not accepted quickly, but through adaptation to local culture

Focus of Findings	Main Research Findings	Meaning and Implications
6. Contextualization of Christianity	Protestantism blended with local traditions	Colonial religions changed to suit the local environment.
7. The Position of Local Religions	Local religions and beliefs are weakening	Traditional spiritual leaders are being replaced by global religions
8. Transformation of Local Religions	New religious practices are emerging	There is a fusion of local traditions with global religions
9. Resilience of Local Communities	The community continues to maintain its spiritual identity	Local religions serve as a form of cultural resistance
10. Islam from a Colonial Perspective	Islam was seen as a threat to order	The colonial government strictly monitored and controlled it
11. Policy Towards Islam	The government regulated and interfered in Islamic education.	Efforts to reduce the influence of Islam on society and politics
12. Islamic Religious Education	Islamic education continued despite pressure	It became a place of resistance and awareness-building
13. Structural Impacts of Colonialism	Religion was regulated according to colonial interests	Religious activities became more formal and controlled
14. Colonial Legacy	The impact of colonialism is still felt today	The official way of classifying local religions

Focus of Findings	Main Research Findings	Meaning and Implications
15. Conclusions	Colonialism influenced the development of religion.	The history of religion was shaped by power and social interaction

Christian missionary and missionary policies were one of the primary instruments of colonialism in shaping the religious landscape in Indonesia. Through the construction of churches, mission schools, and administrative support from the colonial government, Christianity experienced rapid growth, particularly from the 19th century. These missionary activities were not solely aimed at spreading religious teachings but also served as a means of penetrating Western culture into local communities. This demonstrates that the spread of Christianity during the colonial period went hand in hand with the process of westernization and the strengthening of hegemony.

The acceptance of Christianity, particularly Protestantism in the Maluku region, by local communities was a long and complex process. The entry of Protestantism was not immediately consciously accepted by the community, but rather through structural pressures, colonial power relations, and ongoing socio-cultural adaptation. Protestantism then became part of the Maluku community's identity, but in a form that had been contextualized within the local culture. These findings indicate that colonial religion was not immediately consciously accepted by the community, but rather through structural pressures, colonial power relations, and ongoing socio-cultural adaptation. Protestantism then became part of the Maluku community's identity, but in a form that had been contextualized within the local culture. These findings indicate that colonial religions were not only forcibly imposed but also underwent a process of negotiation with the social realities of local communities.

These views gradually weakened the position of local religions in society. Many rituals, symbols, and spiritual authorities were sidelined or forced to adapt to the framework of world religions introduced by colonialism. In this context, local religions not only lost their place but also experienced a redefinition of their meaning. However, colonialism did not completely eradicate local religions. In fact, in many cases, new forms of religious practice emerged from the intersection of local traditions and world

religions. This process created syncretic religious practices, where old and new elements intertwined.

This phenomenon demonstrates that local communities possessed the ability and creativity to maintain their spiritual identities, even under colonial pressure. Colonialism also influenced the dynamics of world religions in colonized regions. For example, Islam was often closely monitored because it was considered capable of awakening collective consciousness and resistance. This surveillance led to the standardization of religious teachings and the establishment of more controlled religious institutions. As a result, religious expressions, once flexible and context-dependent, became more formal and normative, in accordance with the needs of colonial stability.

Colonialism played a dominant role in shaping religious development and change, both at the local and global levels. In the context of the Dutch East Indies, colonialism was present not only as a political and economic force but also as an ideological force that systematically influenced societal belief systems. The colonial government used religion as a tool to legitimize its power by regulating, supporting, or restricting certain religious practices according to colonial interests. This pattern demonstrates that religion during the colonial period was not neutral but rather existed within an unequal power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

The impact of colonialism on the history of religion did not end with the colonial period. To this day, the colonial legacy is still felt in how states and societies view religion. The distinction between recognized religions and local beliefs is an example of how colonial thinking persists. This pattern often fuels inequality and identity conflict, especially in multicultural societies with long colonial histories. Thus, colonialism played a significant role in shaping the direction of local and global religious development. It not only influenced the spread of religion but also shaped how it was understood, practiced, and institutionalized. Understanding the relationship between colonialism and religion helps us see that religious history is not a neutral process, but rather the result of a complex encounter between faith, power, and social identity.

Discussion

1. Religion in Colonial Power Relations

Colonialism comes from the Latin word colonia, meaning settlement. In a political context, colonialism refers to a system in which one country controls another country to take over its economic, political, social, and cultural resources. Colonialism

not only involves physical conquest but also establishes ideological control by promoting the cultural superiority of the colonizer over the colonized people(Mindani et al.,2025).

Dutch colonial thought governed its colonies with three main concepts: assimilation, meaning equalizing rules; unification, referring to legal unity for the entire population; and association, involving cultural and political cooperation. The association policy, advocated by Snouck Hurgronje, viewed the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies as a geographically separate spiritual entity. With this approach, Western culture was introduced without eliminating local culture in order to strengthen ties between the two countries, with education being a primary tool to achieve this goal(Sakti et al., 2024)

The Dutch government, which controlled Indonesia, implemented a policy of pseudo-neutrality to control the religious situation. The goal was to maintain political stability in the region. In the 1854 Regeeringsreglement (Article 119), the government officially recognized freedom of religion. However, the government also retained the authority to intervene if religious activities were deemed disruptive to public discourse or unlawful. To prevent conflict or resistance, the governor-general enacted regulations in the form of special permits for missionaries and pastors before they could enter certain areas of Indonesia(Alfian, 2023).

Symbolic violence can occur through discrimination or separation, as well as through the use of soft words to convey meaning. Both of these methods occur in symbolic forms, such as through language and conversation. Language, as a means of communication, plays a crucial role in conveying or influencing others. This means that language and conversation can be used to control the perspectives and actions of people in society using religion as a means to legitimize political power can help leaders strengthen their authority(Haris, 2017).

They use sacred symbols and teachings to entice the public to obey. Historically, this has been seen in the concept of the divine right of kings in medieval Europe, where kings claimed their power was derived from God. The goal was to prevent rebellion and gain the moral support of the people. This phenomenon also occurred after the 1979 Revolution in Iran, where Ayatollah Khomeini implemented the principle of velayat-e faqih (clerical leadership) to establish a religious system. By combining spiritual and physical aspects, leaders can transform political power into a religious obligation that is difficult for the public to refute(Akmir et al., 2025)

Ideology functions as a mechanism that makes humans the creators of a single truth, but this truth is often systematically distorted by domination and social interests. In Slavoj Zzek's framework, ideology moves from the internal realm (in-itself) to external manifestation (for-itself), giving rise to institutions such as religion, education, and politics as forms of self-representation through normative channels. Critically, this ideology can be considered a "fantasy" used to maintain pseudo-stability, while also serving as a strategic tool for elites to control public perceptions of right and wrong in order to maintain power structures(Kaat, 2024)

2. B. Missions, Christian Missions, and the Hegemony of Western Culture

The history of Christian religious education in Indonesia began during the European colonial era, specifically when the Portuguese arrived in Ternate in 1538. According to Robert Boehlke, education was first established as a means of spreading religious teachings through simple catechism teachings by priests from the Jesuit Order. Because colonialism lasted for hundreds of years, both directly and indirectly, the impact of this educational system is still felt today in modern religious practices. Therefore, a postcolonial approach is necessary to understand the lingering influences of the past(Lauterboom, 2019).

The dynamics of Christianity and traditional culture in Savu. The arrival of missionary activity in Savu introduced a spirit of pietism that oftenplaced Western culture above local traditions, leading to conflict between Christianity and traditional beliefs. The missionaries often implemented exclusionary policies that required the erasure of indigenous cultural roots, including Father Agustinus de Rosarie's labeling of traditional religion as Jingitiu. This sparked resistance from the local community, ranging from passive actions such as banning children from attending church schools to aggressive actions such as the Mone Mola rebellion. In response to these conflicts, there is a growing awareness of the need for contextual theology, an approach that recognizes human experience and cultural context as essential elements in theological reflection. By integrating history, culture, and modern thought with sacred texts, perspectives on reality change; truth is no longer viewed as an external and foreign entity, but as something mediated by local cultural meanings. Ultimately, cultural context becomes a determining factor in shaping and organizing religious thought in Savu(Bire Logo, 2022).

Christian Religious Education (PAK) is a deliberate effort to guide students in understanding their faith and developing character based on the teachings of Jesus

Christ, going beyond mere formal theological instruction. In line with the National Curriculum and modern educational transformation theory, PAK combines spiritual growth with ethical responsibility in social life to bring about comprehensive changes in cognitive, emotional, and practical aspects. The importance of this education is emphasized by the principle of personal transformation found in Romans 12:2, which encourages the renewal of the mind to cultivate faith that leads to meaningful and active contributions to society(Stefany Yosephine Edrika & Elizama Gulo, 2025).

Christian education is a form of learning grounded in the Bible and based on the principles of Pancasila, with a national and global perspective. Its primary goal is to develop well-rounded individuals by integrating spiritual, social, and intellectual aspects through high standards of faith, service, discipline, and mastery of science and technology. This approach aims to produce qualified individuals who can make meaningful contributions in accordance with the expectations of society(Stevanus & Sitepu, 2020).

The notion that the West has a moral obligation to fill the "vacuum" in education in the East is a myth that ignores the existence of established educational systems during the colonial period. The narrative that the West is civilized and the East is primitive is proven wrong by historical facts that show that between 500 and 1800, the East achieved significant progress through the creation of global economic and communication networks. According to John M. Hobson, Western progress was made possible by the absorption and dissemination of assets from the East, including ideas, institutions, and technology. Colonialism did not bring civilization, but rather destroyed local educational systems based on traditional wisdom through a process of oriental globalization that had long been the foundation of global progress(Wardhani, 2017).

3. C. Colonial Politics of Islam

The discussion of political Islamic ideology in Indonesia appears to have been a political issue since the country's independence. This movement began with the emergence of the concept of nationalism, pioneered by Sukarno, who had to confront the power of Islamic politics in the context of the relationship between religion (Islam) and the state in developing the ideology of the Indonesian nation(Basyir, 2016).

Populism is on the rise in Indonesia and is linked to the growth of radical Islam, which has revived anti-Chinese sentiment, anti-foreigners, and promoted economic nationalism. Although radical Islamic groups have attempted to infiltrate various organizations, political parties, and educational institutions to push for the

implementation of Islamic law, their influence in the national parliament remains limited. This trend of Islamic populism deserves careful study from the perspective of Islamic politics, as it is not only a local issue in Indonesia but part of a larger global movement that also occurred in many other Muslim-majority countries(Putra, 2019).

In the early colonial period, the Dutch arrived primarily for trade, particularly because they were attracted to the valuable natural products and spices that were in high demand in Europe. To control these trade routes, the Dutch established a colonial system that lasted for more than three centuries in Indonesia. In this study, Islamic law is considered in relation to the colonial legal system in force in Indonesia at the time. Three legal systems operated simultaneously: customary law, Islamic law, and Western law. Each had distinct elements, although there were some similarities in certain areas. For example, both Western and customary law governed relationships between people and between people and rulers within a community(Hasanah et al., 2025).

Western colonization caused major changes in the economic structure of the Islamic world. Many regions that were once economically self-sufficient became dependent on colonial powers for trade and production. For example, in Egypt, the British introduced cash crops like cotton, which were exported to Europe. This significantly changed local agricultural practices. In Indonesia, the Dutch imposed the Cultivation System, which required local farmers to grow export crops like coffee and sugar. This brought significant profits to the colonizers but caused hardship for the local population(Halik et al., 2024).

The reaction of Islamic scholars to Dutch colonialism in Indonesia fell into two main categories: first, isolating themselves to protect the purity of Islamic teachings, and second, modernizing religious educational institutions as a way to compete with colonial government schools. This resistance arose in response to the expansion of capitalism, military aggression, and the influence of Western culture, which was perceived as contradictory to local religious values. From the 1930s to the 1940s, this movement became more organized through socio-religious groups such as Pemuda Anshor, Masyumi, and Hizbullah, which sought to find a balance between Islamic legalism and formalism. This demonstrates that Islam in Indonesia played a role not only in education and society, but also in the national political struggle against the colonial government and its administration(Solichin & Anwar, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Colonialism played a major role in shaping the development and change of religion, both locally and globally. Religion was used as a strategic tool to strengthen the political, cultural, and ideological control of the colonizers. In the Dutch East Indies, the colonial government used religion as a means of power to gain moral legitimacy and to manage society through formal administrative systems. This transformed religion from a personal spiritual belief into an instrument of hierarchical and controlled power. The spread of Christianity through missionary policies coincided with the process of westernization and the influence of Western culture, while local religions faced a weakening of authority and a redefinition of meaning due to structural pressures from the colonial administration.

Islam, on the other hand, was seen as a threat to stability, leading to stricter controls that encouraged the standardization of religious teachings and the establishment of more normative religious institutions. Muslim communities responded to these pressures by fostering resistance movements through the exclusion of religious teachings or the modernization of education as a space for political resistance and the development of national consciousness. To this day, the legacy of colonialism remains evident in the differences between official religion and local beliefs, demonstrating that the history of religion is not a neutral process, but rather the result of complex negotiations between faith and power.

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