

Editorial Note

Religious Life between Symbolic Power, Sacred Space, Political Thought, and Knowledge Production

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Abstract: This editorial note introduces Vol. 10 No. 1 (2026) of *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya* by situating its five articles within a shared narrative on religious life across diverse social, political, spatial, aesthetic, and academic contexts. The issue brings together five original research articles authored by eight scholars from six countries: Cameroon, Portugal, Bulgaria, Russia, Indonesia, and Turkey. The articles collectively explore religious extremism and symbolic domination, sacred space and contemplative atmosphere, illuminative ontology and political thought, Orthodox hymnography and iconography, and the production of knowledge within Religious Studies. This editorial note argues that religion should not be understood only as doctrine, ritual, or institutional affiliation, but also as a symbolic force, spatial experience, political imagination, aesthetic expression, and academic practice. By reading the articles through the themes of symbolic power, sacred space, political thought, and knowledge production, this issue contributes to the development of Religious Studies through interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. It opens further discussion on how religion shapes collective life across regions, traditions, and scholarly formations.

Keywords: Knowledge production; political thought; religious aesthetics; sacred space; symbolic power.

Abstrak: Editorial note ini memperkenalkan Vol. 10 No. 1 (2026) dari *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya* dengan menempatkan lima artikel di dalamnya dalam satu narasi bersama tentang kehidupan keagamaan pada beragam konteks sosial, politik, spasial, estetis, dan akademik. Edisi ini memuat lima artikel penelitian asli yang ditulis oleh delapan penulis dari enam negara: Kamerun, Portugal, Bulgaria, Rusia, Indonesia, dan Turki. Artikel-artikel tersebut secara kolektif mengeksplorasi ekstremisme keagamaan dan dominasi simbolik, ruang sakral dan atmosfer kontemplatif, ontologi iluminatif dan pemikiran politik, hymnografi dan ikonografi Ortodoks, serta produksi pengetahuan dalam Studi Agama. Editorial note ini berargumen bahwa agama tidak seharusnya dipahami hanya sebagai doktrin, ritual, atau afiliasi institusional, tetapi juga sebagai kekuatan simbolik, pengalaman ruang, imajinasi politik, ekspresi estetis, dan praktik akademik. Dengan membaca artikel-artikel tersebut melalui tema kuasa simbolik, ruang sakral, pemikiran politik, dan produksi pengetahuan, edisi ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan Studi Agama melalui perspektif interdisipliner dan lintas budaya. Edisi ini juga membuka diskusi lebih lanjut tentang bagaimana agama membentuk kehidupan kolektif lintas kawasan, tradisi, dan formasi keilmuan.

Kata Kunci: Produksi pengetahuan; pemikiran politik; estetika keagamaan; ruang suci; kekuatan simbolis.

1. Introduction

In contemporary public life, religion continues to operate beyond the boundaries of doctrine, ritual, and institutional affiliation. Recent scholarship shows that religion functions as a symbolic force that shapes social values, identity formation, and public discourse, while also participating in the negotiation of authority, legitimacy, and social cohesion (Edgell, 2012; Sumi et al., 2025). Religious symbols and sacred meanings are increasingly mobilized within social and political arenas, including in contexts where sacred values become entangled with identity-based tensions, public contestation, and the transformation of collective life (Jamaluddin et al., 2026). At the same time, sacred spaces remain significant sites where historical memory, national identity, religious atmosphere, and communal belonging are produced and contested (Casanova, 2025). Religion also contributes to political imagination and governance by shaping ethical frameworks, legal traditions, civic responsibility, and visions of social order (Garmany, 2010; Vilks, Kipane, & Krivins, 2025). These studies suggest that religion should be understood not merely as a private spiritual system, but as a dynamic cultural, political, spatial, aesthetic, and intellectual force that continues to shape contemporary societies across diverse historical and geographical contexts.

Within this broader scholarly landscape, Vol. 10 No. 1 (2026) of *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya* presents a diverse collection of five original research articles authored by eight scholars from six countries: Cameroon, Portugal, Bulgaria, Russia, Indonesia, and Turkey. The articles examine religion across different social, political, philosophical, spatial, aesthetic, and academic contexts. Together, they show how religion continues to shape symbolic domination and socio-economic reconstruction, contemplative space and spiritual atmosphere, political thought and visions of an ideal society, eschatological aesthetics, and the production of knowledge within Religious Studies.

Beyond its geographical diversity, this issue affirms the journal's commitment to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural Religious Studies. Although the articles move beyond Southeast Asia, they remain closely aligned with the journal's concern for the Global South and underrepresented scholarly voices by placing African, Portuguese, Iranian, Russian, and Indonesian contexts into a wider transregional scholarly dialogue. In this sense, the issue does not merely present studies from different locations, but opens a comparative space in which diverse religious experiences, intellectual traditions, and cultural expressions can speak to one another.

The central argument of this issue is that religious life cannot be reduced to doctrine, ritual practice, or institutional affiliation alone. Rather, religion operates through multiple forms of social and cultural mediation: as symbolic domination that shapes authority and collective reconstruction, as sacred spatiality that preserves memory and spiritual atmosphere, as political imagination that constructs visions of an ideal society, as aesthetic consciousness that gives form to eschatological hope, and as academic knowledge production that determines how religion is studied, represented, and transmitted. By foregrounding these dimensions, this issue positions religion as a dynamic force that continues to organize social relations, cultural meanings, intellectual traditions, and public life across different historical and geographical contexts.

The articles in this issue are united by a shared concern with how religious life continues to shape human experience through social, spatial, political, aesthetic, and academic registers. Rather than treating religion as a fixed doctrinal system or merely institutional practice, this issue approaches religion as a lived and dynamic force that operates through symbolic power, sacred space, political thought, and knowledge production. The five articles are therefore placed together because they collectively illuminate different dimensions of religion's public and cultural presence: its capacity to structure authority and social reconstruction, to sustain contemplative atmosphere and sacred memory, to inform political imagination and visions of an ideal society, to produce aesthetic consciousness through hymnography and iconography, and to shape the academic formation of Religious Studies itself. These interconnected concerns provide the basis for reading the issue through three main clusters: the socio-political dimensions of religion, the spatial and aesthetic expressions of the sacred, and the production of knowledge within Religious Studies.

2. Religion, Power, and Social Order

This cluster examines the socio-political dimensions of religion by showing that religion does not operate only as personal belief, ritual practice, or individual moral orientation, but also as a force that shapes power, authority, ideology, social structures, and political imagination. Through Amada Talikoa's (2026) article, "Religious Extremism as Symbolic Domination: Mosque Communities and Socio-Economic Reconstruction in Sub-Saharan Africa," and Bogdana Todorova's (2026) article, "Illuminative Ontology and the Construction of the Ideal Society in Ayatollah Khomeini's Political Thought," this cluster brings together two different yet connected discussions on religion, power, and social order. The first article examines religious extremism as a form of symbolic domination and explores its implications for socio-economic reconstruction within mosque communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, while the second analyzes how illuminative ontology and religious-political thought shape Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of an ideal society. Read together, these articles demonstrate that religion participates in the formation of authority, legitimacy, social reconstruction, and political imagination, making it a significant force in the organization of collective life.

Amada Talikoa's article examines religious extremism as a form of symbolic domination that affects mosque communities and shapes the possibilities of socio-economic reconstruction in Sub-Saharan Africa. The article is important because it does not treat extremism only as physical violence or ideological deviation, but as a struggle over religious interpretation, authority, legitimacy, and collective disposition. Extremist actors, as the article argues, seek to monopolize religious meaning, legitimize violence, and reshape social life under conditions of poverty, exclusion, and state fragility. This form of symbolic domination deepens structural suffering by disrupting livelihoods, weakening solidarity, and limiting grassroots capacities for survival and recovery. At the same time, the article avoids reducing religion to extremism by showing that mosque-based communities may also become spaces of resistance, moral protection, peacebuilding, and socio-economic recovery. In this sense, religion appears in an ambivalent position: it can be mobilized as a tool of domination, but religious communities can also function as infrastructures of resilience and reconstruction.

Bogdana Todorova's article shifts the discussion from religious extremism to political thought by exploring how illuminative ontology informs Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of an ideal society. The article shows that religious-political thought should not be understood merely as a set of normative doctrines or legal prescriptions, but as a philosophical and theological framework that shapes ideas of authority, leadership, legitimacy, and social order. By reading Khomeini's thought through the influence of Illuminative Philosophy, the article argues that his concept of ideal society is grounded in a hierarchy of existence and spiritual authority, in which *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* functions as a mediation between transcendent reality and social order. This interpretation is significant because it demonstrates how metaphysics, ethics, leadership, and political imagination are interwoven in the construction of collective life. Religion, in this reading, does not only legitimate political authority from the outside; it provides the ontological and epistemological foundations through which a vision of society is imagined and organized.

These articles demonstrate that religion is not confined to personal belief or ritual practice, but participates in the construction of authority, legitimacy, collective reconstruction, and political imagination. Talikoa's article demonstrates how religious extremism operates through symbolic domination, affecting mosque communities and the prospects for socio-economic recovery in Sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast, Todorova's article illustrates how illuminative ontology provides a philosophical and theological foundation for envisioning an ideal society in Khomeini's political thought. The connection between the two lies in their shared attention to religion as a force that enters social and political structures through symbols, communities, interpretations, and theological ideas. In one case, religion appears within the struggle over authority and reconstruction after domination; in the other, it appears as a source of ontological vision and political order. Both articles, therefore, reveal that religion works collectively, not merely privately, by shaping how societies understand power, legitimacy, community, and the possibility of social transformation.

This cluster reveals the ambivalent role of religion in socio-political life. Religion can provide symbolic resources for legitimacy, solidarity, ethical imagination, peacebuilding, and socio-economic reconstruction, yet it can also be mobilized as an instrument of symbolic domination, exclusion, and political control. Studies on religion and social movements show that religious narratives and institutions may inspire collective action, social repair, and public engagement, but they may also be used to consolidate authority, intensify identity-based divisions, or sacralize political agendas (Akbari, Hasanzadeh, Motamedi, & Asgharpourmasouleh, 2024; Goldstein & Reed, 2022; Marchetti, Righetti, Pagiotti, & Stanziano, 2022; Sherkat, 2015). This ambivalence is central to reading the two articles in this cluster. Talikoa's article demonstrates how religious extremism can operate as symbolic domination that disrupts social and economic life, while also showing that mosque communities may become spaces of resilience and reconstruction. Todorova's article, in turn, shows how religious ontology can generate a vision of political order and collective life. Religious Studies must therefore avoid two reductive positions: treating religion only as a source of harmony or only as a source of conflict. Instead, religion should be examined as a complex social force whose effects depend on how symbols, communities, institutions, and theological ideas are mobilized within specific historical and political contexts.

Talikoa's article also raises a critical question about how religious symbols, religious authority, and mosque communities may participate in either shaping or restoring social order. In this context, mosques should not be understood merely as places of worship, but as social spaces where authority, solidarity, community economy, and social reconstruction are negotiated. Recent studies show that mosques can function as centers of social interaction, education, conflict mediation, community service, and economic empowerment, thereby contributing to social sustainability and communal resilience (Al-Hakim, Sonjaya, Adityawati, Rahmayanti, & Rozikin, 2025; Fuady, Aulia, & Jumala, 2024; Indrarani, Sari, Lukman, & Sahid, 2025; Suprpto, 2025). The idea of the mosque as a "living" and multifunctional institution further suggests that mosque communities may become important infrastructures for countering exclusionary ideologies, strengthening collective trust, and rebuilding social relations after disruption (Amaliyah et al., 2026; Gün, 2025). From this perspective, the mosque is not a passive religious setting but an active arena in which religious authority and communal agency can be mobilized either toward domination or toward recovery, peacebuilding, and socio-economic reconstruction.

Todorova's article opens a critical question about the relationship between metaphysics and politics. Religious-political thought shows that the idea of an ideal society is not constructed only through secular political theories, but may also be shaped by theological, ontological, and ethical concepts that provide foundations for authority, legitimacy, moral order, and collective purpose. Scholarship on political theology and post-secular thought has shown that religious ideas continue to inform political concepts such as sovereignty, law, justice, community, and social responsibility, while also offering alternative frameworks to purely secular understandings of political order (Fiorenza, 2018; Moore, 2024; Newman, 2021). Ontological assumptions about the nature of society also influence political theory, especially when social life is imagined as grounded in divine, moral, or relational principles rather than only in procedural or institutional arrangements (Ruokanen, 2023; Wilson, 2017). However, this discussion must remain critical: every religious vision of an ideal society raises important questions about authority, plurality, freedom, and the boundary between spiritual aspiration and political governance. In this sense, Todorova's article is valuable not because it asks readers to endorse a particular political theology, but because it clarifies how metaphysical and theological ideas can shape political imagination and the construction of social order.

This cluster argues that religion operates as a symbolic and political force that shapes collective life, whether through the dynamics of extremism and socio-economic reconstruction or through theological and ontological visions of an ideal society. In relation to the broader theme of *Religious Life between Symbolic Power, Sacred Space, Political Thought, and Knowledge Production*, the two articles fill the dimensions of symbolic power and political thought by showing how religion participates in the formation of authority, legitimacy, social order, and collective imagination. Talikoa's article

foregrounds the ways religious symbols and mosque communities are implicated in domination, resilience, and reconstruction, while Todorova's article demonstrates how metaphysical and theological ideas can inform political visions of society. Together, they show that religion is not only lived in personal devotion or ritual practice, but also in the contested formation of power, community, and social transformation.

3. Sacred Space and Religious Aesthetics

The second cluster turns to the spatial and aesthetic dimensions of religion by examining how sacred presence is mediated through place, atmosphere, hymnography, and iconography. It shows that religious consciousness is not formed only through doctrine, institutional authority, or formal systems of belief, but also through embodied, spatial, and sensory experiences that give shape to sacred meaning. Maria Joao Castro's (2026) study of the Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery in Évora, Portugal, and Nadezhda Z. Gayevskaya's (2026) analysis of Orthodox hymnography and iconography in medieval Rus are brought together in this cluster because both articles demonstrate how religion operates through media that are not always verbal or conceptual. While the first article foregrounds sacred space, religious atmosphere, spirit of place, and the continuity of contemplative experience, the second highlights hymnography, iconography, and eschatological aesthesis as forms through which religious imagination and consciousness are aesthetically constituted.

Maria Joao Castro's article on the Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery in Évora, Portugal, invites readers to understand sacred space not merely as an architectural site, historical monument, or religious heritage, but as a contemplative environment in which spiritual atmosphere, memory, and communal experience are continuously preserved. The monastery becomes significant because it embodies a "spirit of place" that is not reducible to its physical structure. Rather, its sacred meaning is formed through the interaction between space, silence, ritual rhythm, collective memory, and the lived experience of those who inhabit or encounter it. In this sense, the monastery functions as a spatial medium through which religious continuity is maintained across time.

The article also shows that community transition does not necessarily erase the spiritual meaning of a sacred place. Even when institutional arrangements, communal actors, or patterns of religious life change, the contemplative atmosphere of the monastery may continue to shape religious experience and preserve a sense of sacred continuity. This point is important for Religious Studies because it challenges the assumption that sacred space depends solely on stable institutional presence. Instead, the monastery demonstrates how religious space can retain memory, atmosphere, and identity even amid transformation. Sacred space, therefore, becomes a bridge between the past and the present, between communal history and contemporary spiritual experience, and between material place and the affective dimensions of religious life.

Nadezhda Z. Gayevskaya's article on Orthodox hymnography and iconography in medieval Rus extends this discussion by showing how religious consciousness is formed through aesthetic and liturgical media. Hymnography should not be understood merely as religious song or verbal praise, but as a sonic and theological expression that carries memory, devotion, and eschatological expectation. Through hymns, religious communities do not only articulate doctrine; they also experience sacred time, remember theological truths, and imagine the relationship between earthly life and the transcendent horizon. In this way, hymnography becomes a medium through which religious imagination is shaped through sound, rhythm, repetition, and liturgical performance.

Similarly, iconography is not simply visual art or sacred decoration, but a visual form of religious consciousness that mediates the presence of the sacred and gives shape to eschatological imagination. The article's attention to eschatological aesthesis demonstrates how Orthodox visual and liturgical traditions help believers perceive the world in relation to salvation, final reality, and divine presence. Icons and hymns therefore function as symbolic, visual, musical, and liturgical media through which the faithful understand the connection between the present world and the ultimate horizon of religious hope. This contribution is important because it shows that religious aesthetics is not secondary to theology, but one of the ways theology is embodied, sensed, and transmitted within religious life.

Read together, the two articles show that religion is not only understood through doctrine, text, or institutional authority, but is also experienced through space, atmosphere, sound, image, memory, and embodied sensation. The Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery demonstrates how sacred space preserves contemplative memory and spiritual atmosphere across communal transition, while Orthodox hymnography and iconography reveal how religious aesthetics shapes eschatological imagination and sacred consciousness. Both studies therefore place sacred presence within forms of mediation that are spatial, atmospheric, symbolic, and aesthetic. Monastery, hymnography, and iconography become more than religious objects or cultural artifacts; they function as media through which religious communities remember, sense, and inhabit the sacred. This connection expands Religious Studies beyond a primarily doctrinal or institutional approach toward a more phenomenological, aesthetic, and cultural understanding of religious life.

Critically, this cluster reminds us that sacred space is never a neutral or purely physical space. It is continuously shaped by history, community, memory, ritual practice, and social change. Studies on sacred landscapes and religious spaces show that sacred places often function as repositories of collective memory, community identity, and cultural continuity, while at the same time remaining open to reinterpretation, contestation, and transformation (Chen, 2017; Liutikas, 2025; Saretzki, 2019). In this regard, the Santa Maria Scala Coeli Monastery should not be understood merely as an architectural or heritage site, but as a living contemplative space whose religious atmosphere persists through changing communal conditions. The continuity of its spirit of place amid community transition reveals an important tension within religious life: sacred spaces may preserve memory and spiritual identity, yet they are also shaped by historical disruption, institutional change, and shifting patterns of communal belonging. This tension between continuity and transformation makes sacred space a critical category for Religious Studies, especially for understanding how religion is inhabited, remembered, and reconfigured across time.

Second, this cluster demonstrates that religious aesthetics should not be treated as mere ornament, decoration, or secondary expression of doctrine. Hymnography and iconography function as media of religious knowledge, spiritual emotion, and eschatological imagination. Studies on liturgical hymnography show that hymns shape theological understanding through sound, rhythm, repetition, metaphor, and affective participation, allowing religious communities to know, remember, and emotionally inhabit sacred narratives (Gador-Whyte, 2023; Sulava, 2020). Similarly, scholarship on iconography emphasizes that sacred images do not merely illustrate religious ideas, but interpret scripture, mediate divine presence, and organize visual forms of religious consciousness within liturgical space (Labriola, 2011; Macheta, 2024; Rentetzi, 2011). In this sense, hymnography and iconography are not external artistic additions to religious life; they are formative modes through which theology is sensed, imagined, and transmitted. Their eschatological dimension is particularly important because religious aesthetics gives visual, musical, and symbolic form to ideas of judgment, salvation, divine presence, and final reality (Lebedev & Prilutskii, 2025; Miháliková, 2026). Religious aesthetics, therefore, should be understood as a way religion produces meaning, forms spiritual emotions, and articulates the horizon of transcendence.

Third, these two articles challenge approaches in Religious Studies that remain too centered on texts, doctrines, and institutions. If religion is also encountered through atmosphere, space, sound, image, bodily movement, and sensory experience, then the study of religion must give greater attention to embodied, sensory, and affective dimensions of religious life. Recent studies have shown that religious experience is often formed through bodily practices, sacred mobilities, ritual movement, soundscapes, visual symbols, and emotionally charged spaces (Finlayson, 2012; Maddrell, 2019; Winchester & Pagis, 2022; Woods, 2019). Sacred architecture and ritual environments are not passive backgrounds, but active media that shape perception, memory, emotion, and communal belonging (Yüksel Schwamborn, 2026; Zhang, Li, Xie, Guo, & Li, 2026). Similarly, sound and visuality can generate forms of spiritual engagement that exceed formal doctrinal instruction, allowing communities to experience the sacred through affective and sensory participation (Bellia, 2025; DeMaris, Al-Suadi, & Ascough, 2025). In this sense, the cluster contributes to a broader reorientation of Religious Studies

toward the lived, material, sensory, and affective forms through which religion is practiced, remembered, and made meaningful.

4. Knowledge Production in Religious Studies

The final cluster turns to the academic field of Religious Studies itself by examining how religion becomes an object of scholarly inquiry within student research, curricular structures, and institutional traditions. This cluster shows that Religious Studies is not only concerned with interpreting religion as a social, political, cultural, or aesthetic phenomenon, but also with reflecting on how knowledge about religion is selected, framed, researched, and represented in academic work. Through the article "Underrepresentation of Sacred Text Studies in Students' Theses: Evidence from a Religious Studies Program in Indonesia," Khairullah Zikri, Saniatul Hidayah, Raya Moniqa Atilla, and Roma Wijaya invite readers to consider undergraduate theses as important indicators of broader patterns of knowledge production (Zikri, Hidayah, Atilla, & Wijaya, 2026). The article is placed in a separate cluster because it shifts the discussion from religion as an object of analysis to Religious Studies as a changing academic field shaped by curriculum, student interests, methodological orientations, institutional priorities, and epistemological transformations.

The article by Khairullah Zikri, Saniatul Hidayah, Raya Moniqa Atilla, and Roma Wijaya highlights the underrepresentation of sacred text studies in undergraduate theses as an indicator of changing academic interests and methodological orientations within an Indonesian Religious Studies program. By treating students' theses as data, the article offers an important entry point for understanding how the field of Religious Studies is practiced, developed, and institutionally shaped at the undergraduate level. The limited representation of sacred text studies should not be read simply as a deficiency or neglect, but as an academic tendency that reflects broader shifts in research interests, including growing attention to social, cultural, anthropological, sociological, and contemporary issues in religion. In this sense, the article suggests that undergraduate research can serve as a mirror of wider disciplinary transformations, showing how students' topic choices, methodological preferences, and academic environments contribute to the changing direction of Religious Studies.

The production of knowledge in Religious Studies is shaped not only by inherited scholarly traditions, but also by curricular structures, supervisory practices, student interests, institutional priorities, access to literature, and broader methodological shifts within the field. Students' theses do not emerge in isolation; they reflect the academic environment in which certain topics, questions, and methods become more visible, accessible, and institutionally encouraged. In this context, the underrepresentation of sacred text studies may indicate the growing prominence of social, cultural, anthropological, and sociological approaches to religion, rather than a simple rejection of textual inquiry. Such a tendency reveals the dynamic character of Religious Studies as an interdisciplinary discipline, where the balance between textual, social, and cultural approaches is continually negotiated. The article therefore opens a wider discussion on how academic structures and methodological orientations shape what kinds of religious knowledge are produced, legitimized, and transmitted within university settings.

Critically, the underrepresentation of sacred text studies should not be immediately interpreted as an absolute weakness or institutional failure. Rather, it can be read as a symptom of a broader paradigm shift within Religious Studies, in which the field has increasingly moved beyond a primary focus on sacred texts, doctrines, and theological systems toward the study of religion as a socio-cultural, political, and lived phenomenon. Contemporary scholarship has shown that Religious Studies has undergone significant methodological and epistemological transformations, challenging fixed definitions of religion and opening the field to cultural studies, sociology of knowledge, lived religion, subjectivity, and interdisciplinary approaches (Abdullah, 2014; Bergunder, 2011; Hedges, 2021; Krüger, 2021). The growing attention to lived religion and religious experience also reflects an effort to understand how religion is practiced, negotiated, embodied, and interpreted in everyday social life rather than only preserved in canonical texts (Bender, 2007; Nilsson, Liepe, & Zachrisson, 2022; Roldán & Pérez, 2020). From this perspective, the limited presence of sacred text studies in undergraduate

theses may indicate a changing academic orientation in which students are increasingly drawn to religion as social practice, cultural expression, political reality, and lived experience. The issue, therefore, is not simply the decline of textual studies, but the need to critically examine how Religious Studies can maintain a productive balance between textual inquiry and the expanding socio-cultural study of religion.

This finding opens a critical question about epistemological balance within contemporary Religious Studies. If socio-cultural, political, anthropological, and lived-religion approaches are becoming increasingly dominant, how can sacred text studies be sustained without returning the discipline to a purely normative or theological framework? Contemporary scholarship suggests that this balance can be achieved by approaching sacred texts through critical, historical, hermeneutical, comparative, and interdisciplinary methods rather than through confessional claims or doctrinal validation (Elness-Hanson & Skarpeid, 2019; Law, 2012; Rogerson, 2009). Such an approach allows sacred texts to be studied as historical, cultural, material, and interpretive objects that continue to shape communities, identities, ethical imagination, and religious practices across different contexts (Anderson, 2020; Myrvold, 2010). At the same time, Religious Studies must remain reflexive about its own assumptions, avoiding both the reduction of sacred texts to theological authority and their marginalization within an overly sociological reading of religion (Kaufman, 2015; Jacobs-Vandegeer, 2022). The challenge, therefore, is to develop textual studies that are academically critical, historically grounded, culturally sensitive, and open to interdisciplinary dialogue.

The article is institutionally significant because it shows that study programs and academic departments do not merely produce graduates; they also shape the direction of knowledge about religion. Religious Studies programs influence what kinds of questions are considered relevant, what methods are introduced as legitimate, and what forms of religious knowledge are encouraged through curriculum, supervision, and academic culture. Scholarship on Religious Studies education emphasizes that departments play an important role in developing religious literacy, interdisciplinary competence, public engagement, and critical awareness of diverse religious and secular worldviews (Bramadat, 2025; Coward, 2006; Gray-Hildenbrand & King, 2019; Grelle, 2019). From this perspective, students' theses can be read as an institutional archive that reflects the intellectual priorities and methodological directions of a program. The article therefore offers more than a description of topic distribution; it provides material for curriculum evaluation, methodological development, and reflection on the future of Religious Studies in Indonesia.

This cluster argues that knowledge production is itself a crucial site of Religious Studies, because the ways religion is studied, classified, and represented in student research shape the future direction of the discipline. The underrepresentation of sacred text studies should therefore be understood not merely as a matter of quantity, but as an entry point for reflecting on the epistemological balance between textual inquiry, socio-cultural analysis, and interdisciplinary approaches to religion. In relation to the broader theme of this issue, *Religious Life between Symbolic Power, Sacred Space, Political Thought, and Knowledge Production*, the article demonstrates that modern religious life is also shaped within academic institutions, where curricula, student interests, supervisory practices, and methodological trends influence how religion is understood, taught, and developed. Its contribution lies in reminding readers that Religious Studies must continually examine not only religious phenomena themselves, but also the academic conditions through which knowledge about religion is produced, transmitted, and transformed.

5. Conclusion

The articles in this issue demonstrate the continuing relevance of Religious Studies in understanding how religion shapes symbolic power, sacred spatiality, political thought, aesthetic consciousness, and academic knowledge production. The five contributions show the breadth of contemporary Religious Studies: from religious extremism and socio-economic reconstruction in Sub-Saharan Africa, to sacred atmosphere and contemplative space in Portugal, illuminative ontology and political imagination in Khomeini's thought, eschatological aesthetics in Orthodox hymnography and

iconography, and the production of academic knowledge through student theses in Indonesia. Taken together, these studies affirm that religion must be examined multidimensionally as a social, political, spatial, aesthetic, historical, and academic phenomenon.

In this sense, Vol. 10 No. 1 (2026) contributes to the journal's mission of fostering critical, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural conversations on religion across diverse historical and geographical contexts. Rather than offering a single definition of religion, this issue opens further discussion on how religious life is mediated through power, space, thought, aesthetics, and scholarly formation. *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya* continues to serve as an academic forum for transregional dialogue and for the development of Religious Studies that is attentive to both local realities and global conversations. We extend our sincere gratitude to all authors, reviewers, members of the editorial board, and readers whose scholarly commitment and engagement have made the publication of this issue possible.

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