

THE DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOSITY IN CONVENTIONAL, DIGITAL, AND METATHEATRE IN EASTERN CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines religious practices in contemporary performance through a sociological approach grounded in the Eastern cultural context of Indonesia. The study focuses on how monologue theatre *Amir Nasution*, *Topeng Monyet* (the monkey show) performances, theatrical livestreams of online commerce, and digital stages within WhatsApp groups function as social arenas where religious values are produced, negotiated, and reflected. Religious experience is not understood as fixed doctrine but as a social construction that is symbolic, theatrical, and performative. The sociology of religion provides the framework to interpret how rituals, symbols, and religious practices emerge within the everyday life of Indonesian society, which is shaped by collectivist values and the spiritual ethos of Eastern culture. The meaning of religiosity in performance is layered and dynamic, shaped by social interaction, local traditions, and symbolic actions that emphasize harmony and solidarity. WhatsApp groups, as digital spaces of interaction, are understood as spontaneous forms of metatheatre that embody dramatic structure, performative awareness, and fluid spiritual moments, reflecting religious practices in Eastern communities in the digital era. This article argues that theatre—whether conventional, digital, or metatheatrical—constitutes a social space relevant to contemporary life and offers religious experiences that resonate with the inclusive, collective, and tradition-rooted character of Indonesian Eastern culture.

Keywords: Performative Religiosity, Theatre, Metatheatre, Sociology of Religion

INTRODUCTION

Religiosity is an existential dimension that not only accompanies human life from birth but also shapes how individuals understand reality, values, and meaning. In the context of neurotheology, Newberg argues that “*we are born to believe*” because the human nervous system is biologically designed to form and sustain beliefs, whether religious or secular. He states that “*beliefs give meaning to the mysteries of life. They motivate us, provide us with our individual uniqueness, and ultimately change the structure and function of our brains*” (Newberg & Waldman, 2007, p. 3).

Religiosity, in this sense, is not confined to doctrine or ritual but constitutes an active search for meaning that may be expressed through diverse cultural and social forms. One such space is theatre. As a performative practice, theatre is not limited to aesthetic presentation but also serves as a reflective medium for spiritual values,



identity, and transcendence. Historically, conventional theatre has often been rooted in religious ritual, while modern and postmodern theatre has opened new spaces beyond the physical stage in the pursuit of meaning (Bouchard, 2020, p. 98).

The history of theatre across civilizations such as ancient Greece, India, Japan, Indonesia, and the Christian tradition of Europe demonstrates its deep roots in religious ritual. In ancient Greece, tragedy and comedy emerged from festivals dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy, presenting mythological narratives as collective acts of reverence and contemplation on life and death (George, 2020). In India, classical forms such as *Kutiyattam* and *Kathakali* developed from Vedic ritual and the Bhakti tradition, where performance functioned as worship and the transmission of spiritual values through movement, music, and epic narration (Barba, 2021). In Japan, forms such as *Noh* and *Kabuki* integrated Zen and Shinto elements, transforming the stage into a space of transcendence and collective meditation (Pinnington, 2019). In the Indonesian context, performances such as *wayang kulit*, *wayang wong*, and *ketoprak* served as vehicles of religious instruction, moral education, and the preservation of local mythologies (Varela, 2020).

Within the Christian tradition of Europe, biblical theatre or medieval mystery plays dramatized stories from the Bible. During the Middle Ages, the church employed theatre as a pedagogical tool to communicate the Gospel to lay audiences who were unable to read (Sponsler, 2020). In this context, theatre was not merely entertainment but part of liturgy and collective spiritual experience. Over time, however, theatre underwent a significant transformation. Modern theatre no longer confined itself to religious messages but became a space for critique of dogma, exploration of the body, and artistic freedom. It began to challenge religious institutions and probe existential conflicts, paving the way for postmodern theatre, which more radically deconstructs spirituality, relativizes meaning, and explores transcendence beyond dogmatic structures (Sulistiyo, 2024).

The transition from modern to postmodern theatre demonstrates that performance practices are no longer confined to the physical stage but have expanded into new spaces shaped by technology and digital culture. While modern theatre emphasized critique of dogma and exploration of the body, postmodern theatre broadened its scope by reflecting on its own theatricality, blurring the boundaries between reality and representation, and opening possibilities for transcendence beyond traditional structures. This transformation marked the emergence of performances that address not only narrative content but also the medium of delivery, rendering religious practice in theatre increasingly fluid and contextual.

Within this framework, digital theatre can be understood as a manifestation of postmodern performance, arising from technological and cultural developments and presenting theatrical acts in online spaces such as livestreams. The actor's body is mediated by cameras and screens, interaction with audiences occurs in real time yet remains fragmented, and spiritual narratives appear in fluid, reflective, and often metatheatrical forms. Although the medium and format have changed, the spiritual dimension of theatre persists as symbolic heritage, a contemplative space both physical and digital, and a site for new meaning-making through social and technological interaction.

In general, theatre performers confront not only artistic demands but also complex spiritual and ethical dynamics. Individuals engaged in theatre experience and interpret their religiosity through creative processes shaped by the forms of performance they practice, whether conventional, digital, or metatheatrical. These forms influence how they understand spirituality, creating spaces for reflection, negotiation, and tension between artistic expression and religious values. The body, script, and performance space function as media of transcendence that enable spiritual experience, yet under certain conditions may distance individuals from the sacred values they hold, depending on context, intention, and performative response.

Within Eastern cultural contexts, particularly Indonesia, these dynamics are enriched by the collective traditions in which theatre is embedded, carrying spiritual and social significance. Folk performances such as *wayang kulit*, *ketoprak*, and *topeng monyet* illustrate how religious and moral symbols appear in fluid and communicative forms, linking performers and audiences through ritual, prayer, and narratives rooted in local wisdom. Even in digital spaces, such as livestream stages or WhatsApp groups, religious expression continues to find form, affirming that spirituality in Indonesian theatre remains inseparable from values of community, harmony, and the search for meaning. Thus, theatre in Indonesia, whether traditional or contemporary, endures as a reflective arena that reinforces Eastern cultural identity while opening contemplative spaces for society to celebrate religiosity in ways responsive to the present age.

In examining the dynamics of religiosity within theatrical practice, the sociology of religion emphasizes that religious experience is not solely personal but is always embedded in social contexts, interactions, and cultural structures. Theatre—whether conventional, digital, or metatheatrical—can be understood as a social arena in which religious values are produced, negotiated, and performed through the actor's body, script, symbols, and engagement with the audience. Wach (1947) reinforces this framework by asserting that "*religion is rooted in experience, but it expresses itself in doctrine, cult, and social organization.*" Within theatre, theoretical expression appears in narratives and dramatic texts that convey religious teachings or values; practical expression is manifested in rituals, gestures, and symbols enacted on stage; and sociological expression is evident in theatrical communities and digital spaces that serve as sites of religiosity. Theatre, therefore, is not only an aesthetic or critical space but also a social arena that enables spiritual reflection and negotiation of religious values in contemporary cultural contexts, affirming that religion as a social phenomenon persists through interaction, symbolism, and organization that shape collective experience.

When the body becomes the primary medium in the search for meaning, performers face tensions between artistic freedom and commitment to spiritual values held personally and communally. In this context, the exploration of the body, emotion, and narrative often becomes a site of spiritual testing, particularly when artistic representation intersects with or challenges established religious beliefs. Performers engaged in works of transcendence, or those staged within religious institutions, frequently encounter dilemmas between aesthetic demands and spiritual awareness. From a sociological perspective, theatre can be understood as a space where religious experience is expressed not only through symbols and communities but also concretely embodied in the performer's body as the center of performance. The body is not merely

an artistic instrument but a locus of spiritual experience that negotiates religious values with aesthetic demands. Theatre thus demonstrates how religiosity moves from abstract doctrine and organization into practical expression, with the human body serving as both a medium of transcendence and a site of conflict between creative freedom and spiritual commitment.

The body presented on stage, whether physical or digital, does not automatically function as hierophany but may become a profane space that challenges boundaries of the sacred. In such situations, performance can provoke renewed reflection on the meaning of religiosity, opening contemplative spaces that are not always comfortable. Theatre as performative practice therefore operates not only as a vehicle of expression but also as a site of spiritual negotiation requiring sensitivity, resilience, and reflective awareness from performers in relation to personal and cultural values.

In Indonesian society, the spiritual dynamics of theatre are intensified by the country's religious diversity. Theatre often intersects with spiritual values embedded in daily life, not only during religious moments such as Ramadan, Vesak, Christmas, or *Nyepi*, but also in everyday practices rich with symbols and rituals. Educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, including Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist universities, maintain theatrical traditions used as media for religious instruction, social reflection, and spiritual expression among students. In these spaces, theatre becomes a means of negotiating religious identity creatively while testing the boundaries between artistic expression and sacred values upheld by communities.

This article aims to examine the dynamics of individual religious experience in three forms of theatre—conventional, digital, and metatheatrical—through the sociology of religion, which emphasizes the interrelation between religious expression and social context. The analysis focuses on visual symbols and performative expressions that emerge in the interaction between performers, audiences, and communities. Specifically, the study highlights Amir Nasution's monologue theatre, *topeng monyet* performances, theatrical livestreams, and digital stages within WhatsApp groups. By analyzing these forms, the article seeks to reveal how religiosity is practiced, negotiated, and reflected through diverse theatrical media, both physical and digital, and how spiritual experience persists in fluid and contextual forms within contemporary Indonesian culture.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative sociological approach to examine the dynamics of religiosity in theatrical practice as a social phenomenon rooted in religious experience. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the approach emphasizes exploration of symbols, gestures, narratives, and social interactions that emerge in performance. The aim is to reveal how artistic expression functions as a medium for religious experience manifested in social forms, including doctrine, ritual, and the organization of artistic communities.

The theoretical framework is drawn from Joachim Wach's sociology of religion, which asserts that religion is grounded in transcendent experience but consistently seeks social expression through three primary forms: theoretical, practical, and sociological. Theoretical expression appears in teachings, doctrines, and narratives

embedded in dramatic texts or discourses; practical expression is evident in rituals, gestures, and symbols enacted through the actor's body, stage atmosphere, and audience interaction; sociological expression is reflected in theatre organizations, communities, and digital spaces such as WhatsApp groups that serve as social arenas of religiosity. Within Wach's framework, theatre is understood not only as aesthetic expression but also as a social arena where religious experience is articulated, negotiated, and sustained. This perspective suggests that performances, whether conventional or digital, can serve as mediums for authentic spiritual experience while fulfilling social functions. Erving Goffman's theory further illuminates theatre as a social space structured by roles, rituals, and transformations of identity, where the body operates as a medium of negotiation between artistic expression and religious values.

The study will analyze dramatic texts across genres—conventional, digital, and metatheatrical—alongside theoretical literature on religiosity and spirituality in the arts. It will also examine supporting documents such as performance posters, programs, production notes, and community regulations. Public commentary on social media responding to performances during religious occasions will be reviewed to capture perceptions, critiques, and reflections of religiosity from audiences and practitioners. Textual analysis will be employed to uncover both explicit and implicit meanings, while situating religion as a social phenomenon rooted in transcendent experience, as emphasized by Wach.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conventional and Modern Theatre:

(1) Monologue performance of *Amir Nasution* by Teuku Rifnu Wikana



Figure 1. Lighting and Property

Conventional theatre is a form of stage performance that follows traditional structures and elements, including a physical stage, live actors, a present audience, and the use of tangible properties and lighting (Figure 1). Its focus lies in direct interaction between actors and spectators, with a clear boundary separating the performance space from the audience. An autobiography monologue of *Amir Nasution* represents a strong example of conventional theatre, relying on physical presence, narrative strength, and expressive delivery to convey meaning (Figure 2). Teuku Rifnu Wikana as an actor employs these elements to present Amir Nasution's story with depth and resonance. This performance was selected not only because it is publicly accessible through YouTube (Indonesiakaya, 2019), but also because it contains dimensions of religious experience expressed through artistic elements and reflected in audience responses within the comment section.

At minute 00:16:48, the character Amir Nasution imitates the voice of his younger brother Aan:

"Bang, bangun, bang...sembahyang, lah, bang. Abang tak mau kan, Ayah sama Mamak dipukuli Tuhan?"

"Brother, wake up...pray, brother. You do not want Father and Mother to be punished by God, do you?"



Pertunjukan Teater Monolog "Amir Nasution" oleh Teuku Rifnu Wikana

Figure 2. Teuku Rifnu Wikana in the monologue of *Amir Nasution*

This scene illustrates Aan's affection for his brother by reminding him to pray. It is followed by a sequence in which Aan returns home in the late afternoon, causing his brother concern, and then brings him a pomelo. The researcher interprets this episode as a representation of religious values embedded in the script.

Additional elements reinforce this dimension: a sarong hanging as stage property and repeated utterances by Amir Nasution such as *Astagfirullahalazim*, *Assalamualaikum*, and *Alhamdulillah*.

In conventional theatre, the presence of the audience functions not only as spectatorship but also as active participation. Audiences contribute by appreciating the actors' performance and influencing rhythm, intensity, and even improvisation. Beyond appreciation, the audience assumes a reflective role, serving as a social mirror by engaging with representations of life and values enacted on stage.



@musikkuaku6607 1 month ago



Saya terharu , bahagia, rasa berupa-rupa, INDONESIA ku, Alhamdulillah Allah mentakdirkan aku menjadi bangsa ini.

Terima kasih Abang, Nona dan Kakak semua ❤️

Translate to Indonesian



Reply



@MbokDarmi-y6c 2 years ago



Orang lain menangis karena bawang. Aku menangis karena jeruk bali. Dan jangan tanya konsepnya gimana.



7



Reply

Figure 3. The Comments Section

The two audience comments above (Figure 3) toward Amir Nasution's performance reflects both spiritual and emotional awareness. The statement "Alhamdulillah, Allah has destined me to be part of this nation" expresses gratitude to God as an act of devotion, while the emotional response of "crying" during the scene in which Aan brings Amir Nasution a pomelo illustrates how a simple gesture of kindness can evoke moral resonance.

From a sociological perspective, meaning in theatrical performance is shaped through social interaction and collective interpretation rather than fixed or purely textual structures. Audience responses to Amir Nasution's performance illustrate how theatre becomes a site where religious values and moral sentiments are socially articulated. These responses demonstrate that performance operates as a medium through which audiences negotiate spiritual identity and moral reflection in relation to everyday cultural contexts.

The emotional reaction of crying at Aan's gesture indicates that small acts within the narrative can generate moral resonance, reinforcing shared values of compassion and solidarity. In sociological terms, such responses reveal how theatre functions as a social institution that reproduces and communicates collective norms, while also allowing individuals to experience religiosity through embodied and emotional participation.

Amir Nasution's monologue exemplifies how conventional theatre provides a stage for the articulation of spiritual consciousness. The actor's solitary presence, voice, and bodily expression transform the performance into a social event where religious identity and moral values are negotiated between performer and audience. The stage, in this sense, becomes a social arena in which transcendence is not understood as metaphysical revelation but as a lived experience mediated through interaction, symbols, and collective reflection.

(2) Monkey Show in Car Free Day (CFD)



TOPENG MONYET LUCU SHOLAT PART 34



TOPENG MONYET LUCU SHOLAT PART 34

Figure 4. The Monkey Show

The researcher selected the *topeng monyet* (the monkey show) performance at Car Free Day (CFD) moment as an example of conventional drama. Although staged in an open space without a clearly defined physical stage, the performance demonstrates a coherent dramatic structure. On the YouTube channel *Main Terus*, which specifically features *topeng monyet*, the performances are presented in various locations with theatrical elements that adhere to conventional dramaturgy, including props, costumes, music, and narrative progression. The subjects under analysis are not limited to the monkey as the principal performer but also include the *saron* player and the trainer, who function as artistic directors and stage managers. The narrative structure in the video is divided into segments characteristic of conventional drama: an introduction accompanied by opening music, a series of attractions forming the core conflict and entertainment, and a closing scene involving prayer, which underscores the religious and moral dimensions of the performance.

From Figure 4, the *Topeng Monyet* performance illustrates the absence of distinction between stage and other dramatic elements such as lighting, costume, and makeup. The trainer does not wear formal or theatrical attire but appears in everyday clothing, including sandals. Stage properties are reserved exclusively for the principal performer, the monkey.

The religious dimension of the performance culminates in the prayer scene. Audiences, particularly those accompanied by children, often interpret the monkey's act of prayer as an educational value, presenting it as moral instruction. Children, who constitute the majority of spectators, frequently offer donations as a gesture of reciprocity toward the performing monkey, regardless of the trainer's tattooed body. Within Indonesian culture, epistemological and sociocultural tensions emerge in the reception of tattooed individuals in religious contexts. Tattoos are frequently associated with deviance, criminality, or moral transgression, which conflicts with norms of purity, obedience, and bodily aesthetics upheld in certain religious traditions. In this context, tattoos function not only as personal expression but also as social markers that may undermine spiritual legitimacy in the eyes of religious communities. Consequently, tattooed individuals often experience symbolic or practical exclusion from rituals, communities, or roles deemed "pure" or "appropriate." This tension is

sometimes expressed through ironic remarks such as, “The monkey is taught to pray, but does the trainer pray?”

This phenomenon reflects the normative and exclusionary construction of the body and morality in religion, and demonstrates how visual symbols such as tattoos become sites of interpretation between identity, stigma, and spirituality. Even in theatrical practice, as Goffman suggests, the representation of tattooed individuals reinforces societal assumptions about conditions perceived as deviant from dominant norms.

Digital Theatre: Livestream Online Commerce

In the landscape of contemporary digital theatre, live-streamed clothing sales can be interpreted as performances that integrate dramatic, performative, and spiritual elements. The host assumes layered roles as vendor, entertainer, and atmosphere

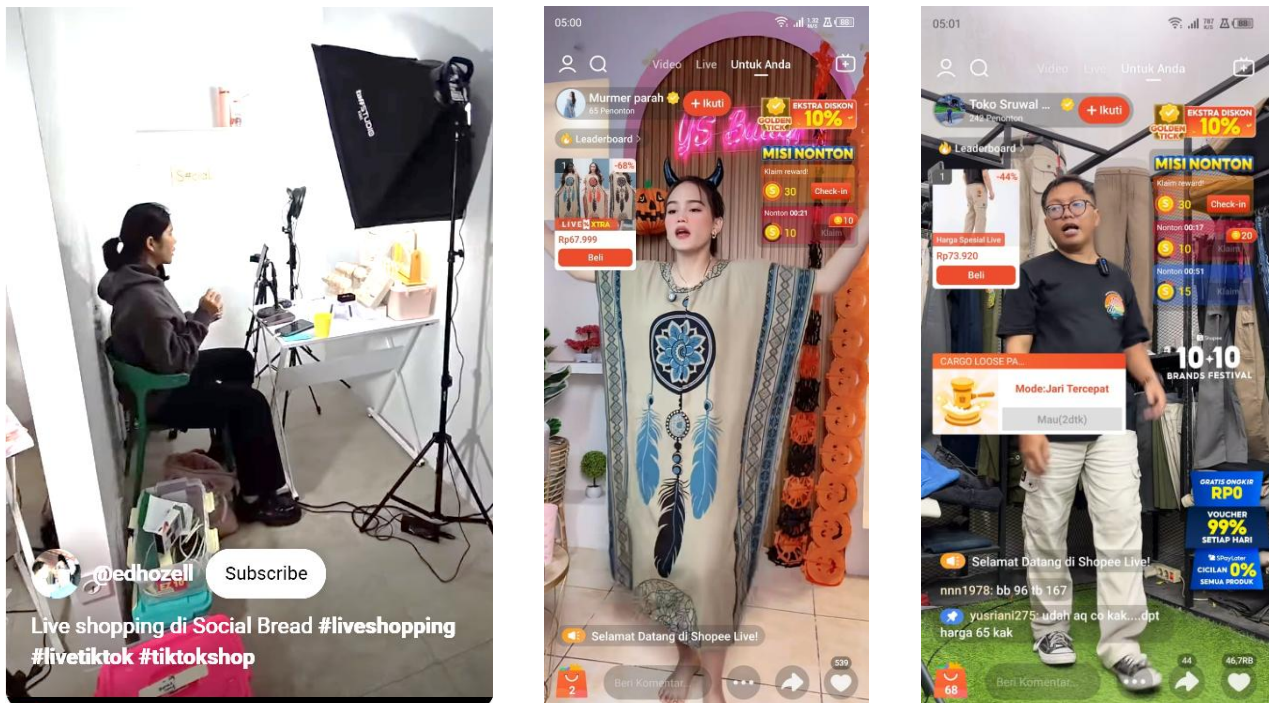


Figure 5. Livestream online commerce

creator. The performance begins with a theatrical greeting—“Assalamualaikum, welcome to our live today!”—followed by the introduction of stage “properties” such as clothing racks, store backgrounds, and lighting that construct a visual aesthetic (Figure 5). Each product functions as a character with its own narrative: “This is a premium *gamis*, made of cool fabric, suitable for study circles or social gatherings. *Masya Allah*, the color is beautiful.” Audience interaction occurs in real time, forming dialogues reminiscent of conventional theatre responses: “*Alhamdulillah, tabarakallah, thank you for checking out!*”

The dramaturgical structure of the broadcast is clearly articulated: an opening, product introduction, climax through promotional offers (discounts, bonuses), and closure with expressions of gratitude. Spiritual moments emerge organically, as when the host remarks, “May this be a blessing, may the clothing be useful,” or when viewers

offer prayers for the host's recovery. Live-streamed sales thus extend beyond commercial exchange, becoming performative spaces that merge aesthetics, spirituality, and social interaction within fluid and reflective digital enactments. From a textual analysis perspective, meaning does not reside permanently in visual symbols but arises through contextual and dialogical interpretation. The phenomenon of digital hosts employing religious expressions such as *Masya Allah* or *Alhamdulillah* without conventional religious attributes (e.g., the veil) demonstrates that religious performance is no longer contingent upon symbolic alignment between verbal expression and physical appearance.

Meta Theatre: *Whatsapp Group*

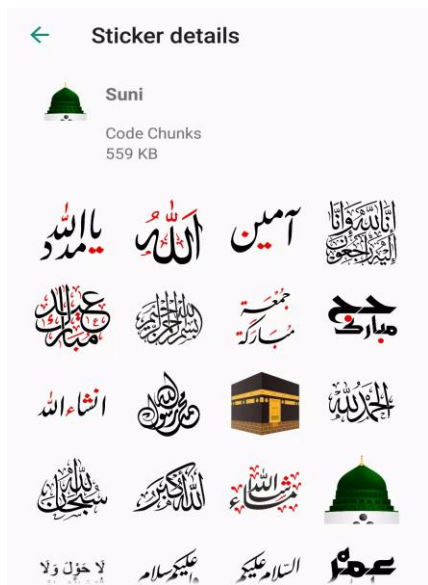


Figure 6. 'Spiritual' stickers on Whatsapp Group

Within the landscape of metatheatrical performance, WhatsApp groups can be interpreted as contemporary digital stages that embody dramatic structure, conflict, and social performativity. As fluid and interactive communication spaces, these groups generate dynamics akin to theatrical

enactments: distinct characters, episodic narratives, and audience responses—here represented by group members—that shape plot and dramatic tension. When conversations extend beyond the informative to encompass emotional, rhetorical, and theatrical dimensions, the digital space functions as a performative arena that blurs the boundary between lived reality and representation.

In a metatheatrical framework, WhatsApp groups operate as reflective media that not only contain drama but also recognize themselves as drama. Members assume roles as observers, provocateurs, mediators, or informal "directors" guiding the flow of discussion. Conflicts over ideology, emotion, or misunderstanding unfold as unscripted yet structurally coherent performances. Religious stickers appear (Figure 6), spiritual dialogues intermittently surface, prayers are offered when illness is reported, and condolences are expressed in moments of loss.

Such instances reveal the group as both social and spiritual space, engaging collective consciousness. Even stickers are subject to divergent interpretations, functioning as ambiguous symbols charged with emotional resonance. Here, digital metatheatre takes shape: everyday communication becomes performance, evoking

reflection and reanimating the search for meaning beyond the limits of physical stagecraft.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that religiosity in conventional, digital, and metatheatrical forms of theatre does not manifest as fixed doctrine but as fluid, symbolic, and performative consciousness. In conventional theatre, spirituality emerges through explicit narrative, religious properties, and audience responses that reflect transcendental values. Digital theatre, such as live streaming, presents religiosity detached from conventional visual symbols yet infused with spiritual diction and interactive connections. Metatheatre, exemplified by *topeng monyet* and WhatsApp groups, illustrates how social and digital spaces can become spontaneous spiritual stages where symbols, conflicts, and social roles generate authentic numinous experience.

Collectively, these forms deconstruct spirituality by releasing it from institutional and formal symbols, relativizing religious meaning through layered and contextual interpretation, and exploring transcendence beyond dogmatic structures through the body, narrative, and social interaction. Through the lenses of sociology of religion, and performance theory, this study affirms that theatre is not merely an aesthetic domain but a contemporary spiritual arena that accommodates anxiety, search, and negotiation of religious meaning within an evolving cultural landscape.

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