



Religious pluralism in theoretical perspective: Exploring concepts, relevance, and challenges in Religious Studies

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the concept of pluralism within the study of religion, addressing both its theoretical foundations and practical applications across various countries. Religious pluralism is understood as the recognition of religious diversity as a social and theological reality that must be approached with openness, dialogue, and mutual respect. Employing a qualitative approach through literature review, this study analyzes key works by Paul F. Knitter, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Alwi Shihab, while also presenting case studies from Indonesia, India, the United States, and Western Europe. The findings reveal that pluralism is not merely a moral ideal but also a necessary framework for promoting peaceful coexistence amid difference. Despite facing challenges such as fundamentalism, discrimination, and identity politics, pluralism remains relevant as a foundation for inclusive and transformative religious studies. The article recommends strengthening interfaith education, supporting diversity-oriented policies, and encouraging religious leaders to foster interreligious dialogue.

Contribution: The study offers actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing interfaith education, supporting policies that encourage diversity, and promoting interreligious dialogue, thereby enriching both academic discourse and practical efforts toward inclusive and transformative religious engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly connected by globalization, religious diversity is no longer a local phenomenon, but a global reality that demands in-depth understanding and an open attitude (Saada, 2023). Major religions and local belief traditions now interact within the same space, creating complex social, cultural, and even political dynamics (Hutabarat, 2023). Amid this diversity, religious pluralism has become a crucial concept in understanding healthy and productive interfaith relations. Religious pluralism is not only about recognizing the existence of other religions, but also about building dialogue and cooperation without sacrificing one's own beliefs. In this context, pluralism is an approach that seeks to avoid the dominance of exclusivism or a single claim to truth, without falling into absolute relativism (Race, 2023). Pluralism plays a crucial role in shaping tolerant societies, especially in multicultural and multireligious countries like Indonesia, India, and the United States (Alam & Pradhan, 2021). Theoretically, pluralism in religious studies has developed in response to the theological and social challenges

posed by religious diversity. Figures such as Paul F. Knitter and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have made important contributions to establishing the foundations of religious pluralism. Knitter proposes a pluralist framework open to "comparative theology," while Smith emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between "religion" as a system and "faith" as a dynamic personal experience (Smith, 2016). This approach has been further strengthened by Muslim thinkers such as Alwi Shihab, who promotes an inclusive and pluralistic Islam (Shihab, 2017).

However, although pluralism offers a way out of interreligious conflict, this concept is not without criticism and challenges. Some consider pluralism a form of relativism that obscures fundamental differences between faiths. On the other hand, pluralism also faces structural obstacles, such as discriminatory regulations, the politicization of religion, and resistance from conservative groups (Eisenberg, 2021). Therefore, it is important to reexamine the theory and concept of pluralism in the contemporary context, both philosophically and practically. Previous studies have addressed pluralism from various perspectives. For example, Schmidt-Leukel offers a "parallel theology" approach that seeks to bridge interfaith doctrines through comparative methods (Schmidt-Leukel, 2017). Meanwhile, Noor & Hedges distinguish between epistemological and normative pluralism in religious studies (Noor & Hedges, 2023). In Indonesia, research by Mazya shows how narratives of pluralism in Islam still face cultural and political resistance. However, most of these studies focus on theoretical approaches and have not included many comparative cross-national empirical case studies (Mazya et al., 2024).

In practical contexts, religious pluralism finds its concrete form in everyday societal interactions. For example, in Indonesia, the concept of "tolerance in diversity" has become part of public discourse and state policy, although its implementation remains uneven (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). In the United States, pluralism is protected by the principles of secularism and religious freedom, but continues to face challenges from growing conservative currents (Wuthnow, 2021). These contexts demonstrate that pluralism is not merely a theory but also a complex and dynamic field of practice. Therefore, this article aims to review the theory and concept of pluralism in religious studies while exploring its challenges in the contemporary era. Utilizing a qualitative approach based on literature, the author will analyze the thoughts of key figures, examine existing criticisms, and present case studies of religious pluralism from several countries. It is hoped that this study will enrich the discourse on pluralism in both academic and socio-religious practice (Volf, 2021).

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method, which aims to analyze the theory and concept of religious pluralism and its challenges in contemporary religious studies. The main data sources come from the works of leading theorists such as Knitter *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Smith *The Meaning and End of Religion*, and Shihab *Islam Inclusive*, and supported by the latest scientific literature relevant to the context of global pluralism. The analysis technique used is descriptive-analytical with a hermeneutic approach, in order to interpret the text and the thoughts of the figures contextually and critically. This study also adopts a comparative approach in examining the practice of religious pluralism in various countries, such as Indonesia, India, the United States, and Western European countries, to capture the complexity of the implementation of pluralism at the practical level. Data validity is obtained through source triangulation, namely by comparing theories, previous research results, and the socio-political context in which pluralism develops (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theory and concept of pluralism in Religious Studies

Religious pluralism is a concept that has developed in religious studies in response to the increasing interaction between religious communities in the modern world. In its basic sense, pluralism refers not only to diversity, but also active involvement in interfaith dialogue, recognition of the spiritual validity of other traditions, and openness to interfaith theological learning (Krimi, 2025). In an academic context, pluralism is defined as a paradigm that rejects the exclusive view of a single truth within a particular religion and opens up discussion for the possibility that truth can exist within various religious traditions (Hashas, 2021). Knitter systematically divides theological approaches to pluralism into three broad models: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (Knitter, 2003). Exclusivism emphasizes that salvation is found only in one particular religion; inclusivism opens up space for salvation outside one's own religion, but still considers its own religion to be the most complete; while pluralism recognizes that all religions can be valid paths to transcendent reality. Knitter emphasizes that pluralism does not intend to standardize all religions, but invites their adherents to dialogue within a framework of openness, without

losing commitment to their respective faiths (Knitter, 2014). Meanwhile, Wilfred Cantwell Smith criticized the understanding of religion as a static and institutionalized system. He distinguished between faith (personal faith) and religion (institutional structures), emphasizing that a person's religious experience cannot always be boxed into the formal categories of a religion. This view opens up space to appreciate the plurality of expressions of faith without rigidly defining religious boundaries. Smith also emphasized that the study of religion must go beyond an objective approach and prioritize empathy for the beliefs being studied (Smith, 1991).

In the context of Islamic thought, Shihab proposed an inclusive concept of Islam that does not view truth as belonging to only one group. He sought to reconstruct the religious attitudes of Muslims to be more open to interfaith dialogue, while adhering to universal Islamic values such as justice, compassion, and humanity (Shihab, 2017). This concept is highly relevant in a pluralistic society, where strengthening social cohesion must be done without sacrificing the integrity of each religion's teachings (Hutabarat, 2023). Pluralism must also be distinguished from mere tolerance. Tolerance often means "putting up with" differences, while pluralism presupposes active engagement, mutual learning, and spiritual growth through interfaith interaction (Volf, 2021). In this context, pluralism is not merely an academic discourse, but also a social and spiritual practice that fosters personal and collective transformation. This concept is increasingly relevant as the world faces global challenges such as religious fundamentalism, radicalism, and intensifying identity conflicts.

However, pluralism is not without its challenges. In practice, pluralism is often perceived as a threat to established religious identities. Conservative groups from various religions often reject pluralism on the grounds of preserving the purity of teachings. Furthermore, pluralism is also accused of being a form of moral and theological relativism, blurring the principled differences between religions (Race, 2023). Therefore, it is important to clarify that pluralism is not relativism, but rather an effort to live together meaningfully in diversity. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the concept of pluralism, both theoretically and practically, is crucial for building a just and peaceful society. In the following section, the author will discuss how pluralism is practiced in various countries and the extent to which this concept is able to address the complex social and religious challenges of the contemporary era.

Indonesia: Pluralism in the shadow of majoritarianism

Pluralism in Indonesia is often praised as a mosaic of harmony between religious, cultural, and ethnic groups. However, behind this ideal facade lies a complex dynamic that cannot be ignored (Mazya et al., 2024). Secara historis, Indonesia memang tumbuh di atas fondasi keberagaman, baik yang bersifat spiritual, etnis, maupun linguistik. Pancasila, sebagai dasar negara, dirancang sebagai perekat kebangsaan yang memberikan ruang hidup bagi semua ekspresi keagamaan tanpa memihak secara absolut pada salah satunya (Sulaiman et al., 2022). However, over time, the meaning of pluralism in Indonesia has actually eroded, particularly when faced with the reality of increasingly strong majoritarianism, both in political practice, institutional structures, and public policy orientations. This phenomenon creates tension between the idealized values of pluralism and the reality of increasingly dominant religious exclusivism.

In this context, it is important to highlight that pluralism is not simply the existence of diverse religious groups, but rather the active recognition of the existence of "others" in an equal and balanced manner (Bajpai, 2022). However, this principle seems to be lacking affirmation in various state policies, which, both subtly and overtly, show a tendency to favor the majority group. While the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and upholds human rights, in practice, minority religious groups such as the Ahmadiyah, Shia, and adherents of other faiths are often victims of institutional and social discrimination (Mohiuddin, 2024). In fact, in several cases, the state appears ambiguous between being a protector of religious freedom and simultaneously acting as an actor that limits the space for expression of minority groups through discriminatory regulations. One concrete manifestation of the state's ambivalence is the existence of legal products such as Joint Decree (SKB) No. 3 of 2008 between the Ministers of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs, which restricts the activities of the Ahmadiyah community (Cerdikwan, 2025). This type of policy demonstrates how legal mechanisms can become a tool to restrict pluralism rather than a safeguard of religious freedom. Under these conditions, majoritarianism not only becomes a social tendency but is also standardized within the state's normative framework. This creates a systematic form of exclusion for groups outside the dominant mainstream of Sunni Islam.

When religion is politicized in the electoral sphere, the threat to pluralism becomes increasingly serious. This process is evident in several regional and national elections, where religious issues are used as a tool to mobilize political support. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election is the most striking example, where blasphemy was used as a political weapon to oust a non-Muslim incumbent (Tyson, 2021). This incident demonstrates how religion

is not only an instrument for shaping identity but is also used to systematically exclude those who differ from the public sphere. At this point, the democratic space that should guarantee freedom has instead become an arena for identity conflict that erodes the substance of pluralism. Furthermore, the dominance of this majoritarian narrative is reinforced by the rise of conservative Islamic groups that advocate the importance of "purifying" Islamic teachings. This movement not only reproduces rigid and exclusive religious ideas but also reduces the value of pluralism as a threat to the purity of religious teachings. In many cases, these groups not only impose a singular understanding of Islam but also reject interfaith dialogue, even suspecting any form of inclusive approach as a form of liberalism that contradicts sharia (Ashadi et al., 2025). This is where pluralism is narrowed not only socially but also epistemologically, becoming something considered to pollute religious orthodoxy.

This situation presents a dual challenge. On the one hand, the state seeks to maintain social cohesion and harmony between religious groups, but on the other, it succumbs to political pressure from the majority group, which rejects diversity as a principle of equality (Hossain, 2024). This tension creates policy ambiguity that leaves minority groups in a persistently vulnerable position. They must contend not only with social prejudice but also with state policies that do not fully protect their rights fairly. Here, majoritarianism is not simply about the quantity of domination, but also about narrative power to define who deserves a place and who should be marginalized (Abizadeh, 2021).

Delving deeper, this phenomenon cannot be separated from the long history of the relationship between religion and state in Indonesia. Since the beginning of independence, the issue of the relationship between Islam and the state has been a persistent debate. Although Indonesia has not made Islam its official religion, various political compromises from the early days of independence through the Reformation era demonstrate how the power of the Islamic majority has significantly influenced the formulation of national identity (Jung, 2007). The 1998 Reformation opened the floodgates of civil liberties, but also opened up space for religiously based political expression that does not always align with the spirit of pluralism (Gulel, 2022). In this context, pluralism is often on the defensive, constantly having to defend itself from ideological attacks that reject diversity. This situation is exacerbated by social media and digital algorithms, which reinforce identity polarization. Exclusive narratives in the name of religion spread more quickly and are more easily accepted by a public lacking adequate critical literacy (Gasser et al., 2022). In such a situation, pluralism often loses its resonance, being overshadowed by simpler and more emotional narratives of symbolic piety. Thus, today's challenges to pluralism stem not only from the state and political actors, but also from the digital landscape, which reinforces majoritarian-based religious populism (Yilmaz & Shukri, 2024).

However, it is important to note that pluralism in Indonesia has not been completely eliminated. In various grassroots communities, diverse practices remain vibrant and thriving. For example, in many regions, interfaith celebrations still demonstrate strong forms of cultural tolerance, such as the traditions of *sedekah bumi* (earth offerings), *slametan* (celebration), or *ngaruwat desa* (village offerings), which incorporate elements from various local beliefs and official religions (Wati et al., 2025). The tradition of mutual cooperation in the construction of mosques, churches, or temples also persists in several regions (Muthoifin et al., 2023). This indicates that pluralism is still alive at the local level, even though it is facing severe pressure at the national level. The role of civil society and religious organizations in maintaining the flame of pluralism cannot be ignored. Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and various interfaith organizations have undertaken numerous initiatives to strengthen interfaith dialogue and create safe spaces for diversity (Fitri et al., 2025). These efforts demonstrate that there are still forces committed to the ideals of pluralism, despite facing a growing tide of conservatism. In this regard, pluralism is not merely an ideology, but also a social practice championed from below by communities that refuse to submit to the logic of exclusion (Žuk & Žuk, 2022).

Theoretically, this situation emphasizes the importance of viewing pluralism not as a static condition, but as a constantly changing and negotiated arena of social struggle. From Antonio Gramsci's perspective, what is happening in Indonesia is a struggle for hegemony in the ideological realm, where the majority group seeks to consolidate its symbolic power through state institutions, education, media, and religious discourse (Rakhmani & Sakhiyya, 2025). Pluralism in this context must be understood as a counter-hegemonic project that seeks to challenge the sole dominance of the meaning of nationhood and religiosity. In the context of socio-political science, this also demonstrates that formal democracy does not automatically give rise to substantive democracy (Wegscheider et al., 2023). Indonesia does have a functioning electoral democracy system, but this democracy often fails to guarantee protection for minority groups. This is where the importance of rediscovering deliberative democracy, which places dialogue as the basis of socio-political relations, rather than the dominance of the

majority over the minority, becomes crucial (Seal, 2019). Without it, pluralism will remain an empty slogan that fails to materialize in everyday life.

It is important to emphasize that pluralism in Indonesia currently stands at a crossroads. It can survive if there is a strong commitment from the state, civil society, and religious communities to maintain an inclusive and equitable public space. However, it could also collapse if the narrative of majoritarianism continues to dominate social, political, and cultural spaces. Pluralism is not merely an idea, but a political and ethical choice that must be continuously fought for. In the shadow of majoritarianism, pluralism requires the courage to speak up for the underprivileged, defend the marginalized, and strive for a just living space for all (Omoigberale, 2025).

India: Tensions between legacy pluralism and identity politics

India is a country with perhaps the most complex spiritual and ethnic mosaic in the world. From the Himalayas to the Gangetic Plain, from the Indus Valley to the southern coast of Tamil Nadu, India has been home to a multitude of belief systems that have coexisted for millennia. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were not simply born from the womb of Indian civilization, but developed in a long dialectical relationship of mutual influence, conflict, and compromise (Sun, 2024). Pluralism in India is not a social project artificially constructed by the modern nation-state, but rather a historical legacy that has grown organically in the daily practices of society (Nayak, 2022). It is embedded in the architecture of ancient cities that house temples, mosques, and churches within a single area; in the custom of celebrating interfaith festivals like Holi and Eid; and in language and art that often absorb elements from various spiritual traditions.

However, in recent decades, the foundations of pluralism have been seriously shaken by the rise of religion-based identity politics, most prominently represented by the Hindutva ideology, a Hindu nationalist ideology that places Hinduism as the primary and essential identity of the Indian nation (Gill, 2022). Hindutva is not only a political project, but also a cultural and ideological one that seeks to rewrite the narrative of Indian nationalism. Under the influence of organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), this ideology has gained institutional legitimacy and massive popular support, especially since Narendra Modi's leadership dominated the national political scene (Jaffrelot, 2024). Hindutva not only shifts the position of religion from the private to the public sphere, but also transforms religion into a tool of exclusion that endangers coexistence (Shani, 2021). The conception of India as a "Hindu holy land" creates a dichotomy between insider and outsider that places Muslims, Christians, and Dalit communities in subordinate positions (Roux, 2024). The supposedly inclusive national narrative has become exclusive, with only the majority group considered authentic and worthy of being the rightful owners of the land. This process directly contradicts the spirit of Indian secularism enshrined in the constitution, which guarantees equal protection for all religions.

The impact of this ideological transformation is concrete. Religious-based violence has increased sharply, particularly against Muslim and Christian communities. Cases of lynchings of Muslims accused of consuming or selling beef are one of the most glaring indicators of how religious identity has become a justification for public violence (Shankar, 2023). In several incidents, the state not only failed to protect the victims but also appeared to be permissive towards the perpetrators of violence, who were often affiliated with Hindu right-wing groups. This marked a serious shift from a religiously neutral state to one that actually favored the majority religion. At this point, identity politics is no longer merely a symbolic game but has become a systemic project that undermines pluralism from within (Drozdewski & Matusz, 2021). What was happening in India also shows how secularism can experience a crisis when used manipulatively. The Indian version of secularism, unlike the Western model, does not emphasize the absolute separation of state and religion, but rather the equal treatment of all faiths. However, in contemporary political practice, secularism is often scapegoated by Hindutva groups as a colonial legacy that is seen as hindering the rise of Hindu nationalism (A. Singh, 2024). In this discourse, secularism is positioned as a threat to Hindu identity, not as a national principle that guarantees equality (K. Singh, 2024). This shows how an ideology that was originally intended for inclusion can actually be represented as a tool of exclusion, depending on who controls the narrative.

Ironically, Hindutva-based identity politics are flourishing within the world's largest democracy. This creates a profound paradox: democracy, which should guarantee diversity, has instead become a fertile ground for the emergence of exclusivism. Within this framework, democracy without the ethics of pluralism will lose its substance and could become an arena for the domination of the majority over the minority (Piroddi & Nwaneri, 2025). Alexis de Tocqueville once warned about the "tyranny of the majority" in a democratic system, and India today is a living representation of that warning (Naresh, 2024). When the majority voice is equated with absolute truth, the rights of minority groups become vulnerable to being violated in the name of democratic legitimacy. However, not all

public spaces in India succumb to the pressures of identity politics. In various parts of India, interfaith movements are still growing, striving to maintain the spirit of pluralism through dialogue, social cooperation, and moral solidarity (Rosario, 2024). Interfaith forums, student activism, progressive intellectuals, and civil society groups continue to advocate for coexistence and reject all forms of religion-based violence. In many cases, this resistance extends beyond discourse to concrete actions, such as protecting threatened minority communities, defending victims of violence legally, and campaigning against hate speech. This demonstrates that pluralism still has room to thrive, despite the challenges it faces amidst significant structural and cultural pressures (Takkinen & Heikkurinen, 2024).

India's experience also demonstrates the importance of preserving the collective memory of its history of pluralism as an indelible legacy. Figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Jawaharlal Nehru have long emphasized that diversity is India's strength, not its weakness. They rejected the idea that India could be reduced to a single, narrow religious identity (Kundra, 2024). Unfortunately, however, this political memory is increasingly being displaced by new narratives that attempt to construct Indian history selectively, emphasizing Hindu dominance while erasing the contributions of other communities (Dubey, 2021). In this context, the struggle to maintain pluralism is also a struggle against the erasure of history and memory.

Moreover, India's case provides an important lesson for other multireligious countries, including Indonesia, about how pluralism can be eroded not by external attacks, but by internal ideological transformations. When the state or majority group attempts to dominate the definition of nationalism and identity, pluralism no longer has a safe haven. In this framework, pluralism is not simply about coexistence, but about the equitable distribution of power, equal recognition of differences, and institutional protection of minority rights (Cavalcanti, 2024). Therefore, the challenges facing India today concern not only religious diversity, but also the future of democracy itself. If democracy loses its pluralistic spirit, all that remains is electoral competition based on the mobilization of hatred and exclusion (Deitelhoff & Schmelzle, 2023). In this situation, the voice of the people is no longer a representation of the general will, but the result of divisive identity engineering (Dunlap & Tornel, 2023). Therefore, maintaining pluralism is not just a moral matter, but also a gamble on the integrity of democracy.

Amidst this onslaught, one thing that remains India's strength is its people's ability to adapt and resist violence through cultural channels. Film, literature, music, and theater often serve as media for symbolically expressing pluralism. Many works by progressive filmmakers and writers address issues of interfaith, discrimination, and peaceful resistance. This demonstrates that while political structures may limit the space for pluralism, cultural imagination remains a significant field of resistance. Pluralism, in this form, is not only a political narrative, but also a form of aesthetic and spiritual expression (Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2014).

United States: Pluralism within the framework of constitutional secularism

The United States is often positioned as an ideal model of religious pluralism within a modern democratic framework. Based on the strong principle of constitutional secularism, the country guarantees the institutional separation of church and state, while guaranteeing religious freedom as a fundamental right of every individual. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution serves as a crucial marker that states have no authority to establish an official religion or to impede freedom of worship. Historically, this principle emerged as a reaction to the European experience of war and religion-based discrimination. Therefore, pluralism in the United States is not merely tolerance of diversity, but an ideological commitment to a legal framework that guarantees the equality of all religious expressions in the public sphere (Suryani & Muslim, 2024).

The success of pluralism in America cannot be separated from the flexibility of its political and social system which provides wide room for movement for religious groups, both large and minority (Dennen & Djupe, 2023). Churches, synagogues, mosques, Hindu temples, Zen centers, and even non-traditional spiritual communities like Unitarian Universalists and New Age groups thrive openly and receive legal recognition. This is evident not only in their physical presence but also through participation in public discourse, the media, education, and even the legal system. In this sense, American pluralism demonstrates a more dynamic cultural dimension than simply religious differences; it exists as a social landscape in which religious identity is not an obstacle but rather part of the construction of legitimate citizenship (Suryani & Muslim, 2024).

However, constitutionally institutionalized pluralism is not without its challenges. Since the 9/11 tragedy, for example, the rise of Islamophobia has dealt a serious blow to the principle of religious equality. American Muslims, previously relatively integrated into society, have suddenly been positioned as "the other," their allegiances questioned, their places of worship monitored, and even targets of verbal and physical violence (Kazi, 2021). Media discourse and domestic security policies reinforce this stereotype, making Muslim identity a national

security threat. This is where pluralism in the US is tested: when the universal principle of religious freedom is challenged by collective emotional sentiment and domestic political pressure (Stewart et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the rise of evangelical Christianity in American politics has also created its own paradox. Although the state is formally separated from religious institutions, in political practice, evangelical support for certain parties, particularly the Republican Party, has turned religion into an instrument of identity politics (Cremer, 2022). This form of politicization of religion shifts religion from the realm of public morality to the realm of electoral power. Issues such as abortion, LGBTQ rights, and educational curriculum often become battlegrounds between conservative evangelical values and the pluralistic principles of American secularism (Travis, 2023). In this context, American pluralism faces a dilemma: how to maintain state neutrality while simultaneously accommodating religious expressions that actively seek to dominate public discourse and state policy?

This challenge is further complicated by the rise in the number of non-traditional religious groups. The growing population of adherents to Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the emergence of new spiritual groups not based on conventional religions (such as those "spiritual but not religious"), depict America as an increasingly multireligious society, but also one that is increasingly fragmented in terms of values (Enstedt, 2023). This fragmentation has not always been positively received, particularly by conservative groups who see it as a threat to the nation's moral identity. This tension has given rise to a debate between two visions of pluralism: the first is inclusive pluralism, which celebrates diversity, and the second is exclusive pluralism, which accepts diversity only as long as it does not undermine the dominance of certain values.

Nevertheless, various initiatives from both grassroots and educational institutions demonstrate that American pluralism is not merely a constitutional principle, but is actively championed in practice. One notable example is the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), an organization that promotes interfaith dialogue among young people across campuses (Waters, 2024). The collaborative approach used by IFYC does not stem from a desire to equate all religions, but from a desire to understand each other and build cooperation across theological boundaries. IFYC projects, such as interfaith leadership training, joint community service programs, and interfaith discussions, demonstrate that pluralism can be nurtured through interpersonal relationships based on empathy and a willingness to learn from others (Fields, 2020).

Furthermore, centers for religious studies at prestigious universities such as Harvard Divinity School, Georgetown University, and Claremont School of Theology serve as important examples of how pluralism can be maintained academically. These institutions serve not only as venues for religious study but also as social laboratories where diverse religious perspectives meet, engage in dialogue, and collaborate on projects related to humanity, sustainability, and social justice. In this context, education is a crucial pillar of pluralism because it fosters critical and reflective thinking, the foundation for peaceful coexistence in a multifaith society (Saada, 2022).

Sociologically, pluralism in the United States also draws strength from the principle of civil religion, which places universal values such as freedom, equality, and justice as the meeting point between faiths (Cho, 2025). In this sense, religion should not be absent from the public sphere, but its presence must be guarded by constitutional principles that guarantee that no religion is given a privileged position. This is what distinguishes American pluralism from other models of pluralism: the state may be open to religious expression, but it must not take institutional sides. This is where pluralism becomes not merely passive tolerance, but an active democratic project that requires the involvement of all citizens in maintaining a just and inclusive public sphere.

However, tensions between pluralism and nationalism have also begun to emerge in the American political landscape recently, particularly following the rise of right-wing populism. Anti-immigrant rhetoric, xenophobia, and the glorification of America's identity as a "Christian nation" pose serious challenges to the pluralistic spirit (de la Torre, 2025). In this context, pluralism is not only about interfaith relations, but also a narrative struggle over who is considered a "true American." In this situation, religious minority groups, immigrants, and non-white racial communities often experience symbolic and political exclusion. Therefore, the challenge of pluralism in the US is not only facing resistance from outside, but also from within the democratic system, which provides space for the mobilization of exclusion-based identity politics (Mariano et al., 2025).

However, the strength of American pluralism lies in its ability to continue to produce spaces of resistance and renewal (Kambunga et al., 2023). A strong constitution, relatively independent institutions, and a vibrant civil society are the three pillars that keep pluralism alive. Challenges continue to arise, but each challenge also generates creative and reflective responses from various groups, including religious leaders, academics, activists, and ordinary citizens. American pluralism, for all its paradoxes, remains a crucial example of how diversity can be maintained not because of the homogeneity of values, but rather because of democratic mechanisms that allow for fair management of these differences (Deitelhoff & Schmelzle, 2023).

Western Europe: Pluralism in the tensions of immigration and Islamophobia

Western Europe today serves as a highly complex contemporary stage in the global drama of religious pluralism. Once a center of secularization and modern Enlightenment projects, the region finds itself in a new tension between the legacy of secularism and the changing demographic realities of multicultural societies. Countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium experienced a major surge in migration since the mid-20th century, which then increased dramatically in the early 21st century due to conflicts in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa (de Haas & Frankema, 2025). Muslim immigrants, once seen as only a temporary workforce within the post-war economic framework, are now a permanent part of Europe's social landscape (Minkenberg, 2021). It is in this process that pluralism in Western Europe is being tested most sharply in both legal, cultural and political dimensions.

The principle of secularism in Western Europe has a wide spectrum of expressions, but France is the most extreme example of strict secularism that places religion entirely in the private sphere. Known as *laïcité*, the French model of secularism requires the public sphere to be neutralized from religious symbols (Cho, 2025). In practice, this principle is not always neutral, as it is often applied disproportionately against Muslim communities. The ban on headscarves in public schools, the ban on burkinis on beaches, and even the debate over the call to prayer are clear indicators of how *laïcité* operates not as a principle of equality, but as an instrument of regulation against certain religious expressions (Vazquez, 2022). The consequence is the delegitimization of Muslim cultural identity in the public sphere, which ultimately gives rise to a sense of alienation among the younger generation of Muslim immigrants, especially those who were born and raised in France but whose "Frenchness" is constantly questioned.

In other countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, the integration model, initially assumed to be linear, where immigrants would naturally adopt majority values, is in crisis. In reality, social integration cannot be forced through cultural assimilation alone. Many Muslim communities in major cities like Berlin, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam have formed strong communities, not only religiously but also economically, educationally, and socially (Sunier, 2021). However, this power is often misunderstood as a threat to "national identity," so that the pluralism that should be celebrated is instead seen as social fragmentation. Fears of "ghettoization" and a lack of loyalty to the state are narratives often mobilized by right-wing populists, who exploit these tensions for electoral gain (Kollias et al., 2025). The rise of right-wing populism and ethno-cultural nationalism in Western European politics has further exacerbated the situation of pluralism. Parties such as the National Rally in France, the AfD in Germany, and the PVV in the Netherlands have made Islam and immigration central issues in their campaigns (Van Den Broeke & Kunter, 2021). With rhetoric emphasizing the threat to "European values," this group promotes the symbolic and political exclusion of Muslims, associating them with radicalism, backwardness, or an inability to "adapt." As a result, pluralism becomes a victim in the game of identity politics that rejects diversity as the foundation of modern democracy (Kołoszyc, 2024). More than just social tensions, what is going on is a narrative battle: will Europe remain an inclusive cosmopolitan project or turn into a closed bastion of majority culture?

The phenomenon of Islamophobia in Western Europe is not only manifested in discourse, but also in direct actions: attacks on mosques, discrimination in the workplace, strict surveillance of Muslim communities by security forces, and media bias that systematically contains negative narratives against Islam (Najib, 2021). In fact, in many cases, states have reinforced these sentiments through policies dubbed the "war on terror," which often frame Muslim identity as a potential threat. This raises a serious dilemma: how can Western European states claim a commitment to pluralism when the religious participation of some of their citizens is constrained by institutionalized fear? However, amidst these tensions, many positive initiatives demonstrate the dynamics of resilient pluralism. Interfaith dialogue forums are emerging in major cities, often initiated by churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religious centers. This dialogue takes the form not only of theological discussions but also of joint social actions such as providing food aid, advocating for immigrant rights, and strengthening interfaith education programs. Multiculturalism study centers at universities such as Utrecht, Heidelberg, or Sciences Po Paris have also become important spaces for formulating theories and policies for more just integration based on recognition, not assimilation (Krisch, 2021).

More interestingly, in some places, churches and mosques have become partners in addressing urban social issues. In areas like Neukölln (Berlin) or the Paris banlieues, some churches offer temporary places of worship to Muslim communities that lack mosques (Becker, 2022). Such practices not only demonstrate interfaith solidarity but also illustrate that pluralism can be nurtured through concrete work that transcends ideological and bureaucratic barriers. In this case, religion becomes not a source of conflict, but rather a source of solutions and

real social peace. Furthermore, the younger generation of Muslim immigrants is emerging as a key actor in shaping Europe's new pluralistic outlook. They are bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, between faith and democracy, and between religious identity and citizenship. Public figures, activists, academics, and artists from Muslim backgrounds are beginning to articulate narratives that dismantle old stereotypes and affirm that being Muslim and being a European citizen are not incompatible (van Tilborgh, 2024). This is where pluralism acquires its most essential meaning: not as a false harmony, but as a full recognition of diversity in rights and voices.

However, for pluralism in Western Europe to truly thrive and thrive, political courage and cultural wisdom are needed from all actors, including the state, civil society, and religious communities. Pluralism is not simply guaranteed by law; it needs to be supported by a social ecosystem that rejects prejudice, opens up spaces for dialogue, and facilitates equal participation (Divetia & Chaudhary, 2023). When Muslim communities continue to be positioned as objects of integration rather than subjects contributing to the formation of a new national identity, pluralism will always be subordinated. Therefore, the path to mature pluralism requires a paradigm shift from "integration" to "equal coexistence".

Comparative reflection, theoretical and practical implications

The case studies above demonstrate that religious pluralism has no single form and is highly dependent on the socio-political context of each country. Indonesia and India demonstrate how historically rooted pluralism can be disrupted by the dynamics of identity politics. Meanwhile, the United States and Europe face new challenges in the form of resistance to religious expression within the framework of modern secularism. Nevertheless, in all four countries, there remains space and concrete efforts to nurture pluralism through education, interfaith activism, and inclusive policies (DeBaun et al., 2020). This confirms that pluralism is not a static condition, but rather a social and spiritual process that is continuously being fought for. Theoretically, religious pluralism challenges long-standing assumptions in religious studies, which tend to be normative and apologetic. Pluralistic religious studies encourages a more inclusive, dialogical, and hermeneutic approach, in which understanding other religions is not based on a desire to justify or judge, but rather on empathetic and critical understanding (Al-aaidroos et al., 2019). This has led to the emergence of a transformative model of religious studies, not only descriptive-sociological in nature but also addressing the spiritual and existential aspects of religious life. These implications are crucial for higher education, particularly in developing curricula that no longer position religion as a closed and exclusive entity, but rather as an interconnected cultural and theological dynamic.

Pluralism also changes our perspective on religious truth. Whereas previously truth was considered the exclusive property of a particular tradition, it is now understood as a relational and contextual experience. This does not mean that all religions are the same, but rather that each religion offers a legitimate path to transcendent reality, albeit through different means and narratives (Knitter, 2014). The implication of this approach is the birth of "pluralistic theology," which attempts to construct a framework for interfaith thought while maintaining the uniqueness of each tradition. The study of religion within this framework rejects the binary dichotomy of right and wrong, emphasizing instead an open dialogue and shared spiritual growth (O'Brien & Abdelhadi, 2020). In social practice, pluralism encourages the formation of an inclusive society capable of managing differences constructively. This is evident in various efforts to build social cohesion, such as interfaith dialogue, multicultural education, and advocacy for the rights of minority groups. In many countries, pluralism has proven to be a strong foundation for addressing religious conflict and building a peaceful civil space. A pluralist society is not one free from conflict, but rather one that has social and cultural mechanisms for resolving conflict peacefully and justly (Deitelhoff & Schmelzle, 2023).

Another significant implication is for the world of religious education. Educational institutions, both formal and non-formal, need to adopt a pedagogical approach based on pluralistic awareness. This includes teaching the history of religions from a just perspective, interfaith learning, and strengthening the values of inclusivity, empathy, and cooperation (Gilani & Waheed, 2025). Pluralistic education does not aim to weaken the faith of students, but to broaden their horizons and form a tolerant character in facing an increasingly complex and multicultural world. However, the implementation of pluralism also requires caution. In certain contexts, pluralism can be misunderstood as relativism, even syncretism, which mixes beliefs. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between theological pluralism and sociological pluralism. Theological pluralism emphasizes in-depth and reflective interfaith dialogue, while sociological pluralism aims to accept diversity in the public sphere without demanding theological integration (Ruiz Andrés & Sajir, 2025). Both need to be carried out simultaneously to achieve a balance between personal faith and social responsibility as a global citizen. Thus, pluralistic religious

studies open up space for more authentic and mature forms of religiosity. Religious believers are challenged not only to understand their own religion but also to learn from and with others. This is a long and challenging journey, not always easy, but indispensable in facing 21st-century challenges such as fundamentalism, identity crises, and social polarization. Thus, pluralism is not merely a concept but also a way of life that integrates faith, ethics, and solidarity (Volf, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

Religious pluralism is not simply a normative term demanding tolerance, but rather a perspective that recognizes diversity as a reality and an opportunity for shared growth. Within the framework of religious studies, pluralism presents both a challenge and an opportunity: how we understand religion not only within our own traditions but also in honest and open dialogue with other traditions. A pluralistic approach encourages the creation of a more inclusive academic and social space, without diminishing the uniqueness of each individual's beliefs. Various theories and approaches from figures such as Paul F. Knitter, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Alwi Shihab demonstrate that pluralism can be implemented theologically and sociologically. Pluralism has also been shown to have broad implications, both in developing more reflective and empathetic religious studies and in building peaceful and just societies. Through case studies in several countries, we see that pluralism cannot be separated from local political, cultural, and historical dynamics. Its practice is not always ideal, and sometimes even regresses. However, in many situations, pluralism remains a hope for a healthier and more civilized future of religious life.

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