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When the Communists Found Christ: Religious Conversions and the Missionary Landscape of Post-Coup Indonesia

Komünistler İsa'yı Bulduğunda: Darbe Sonrası Endonezya'da Dinî Dönüşümler ve Misyonerlik Manzarası

Mohammad Muafi Himam*

Abstract

This article examines the mass Christian conversions in Indonesia following the 1965 G30S/PKI coup attempt, analysing them not as isolated expressions of faith but as strategic responses to intense socio-political pressures. Using Anthony Giddens' structuration theory as a framework, this study explores how state policies, ideological realignments, and individual agency co-constructed new religious identities in the volatile aftermath of anti-communist purges. Focusing primarily on Java between 1965 and 1971, the research reveals that many conversions—particularly among Abangan Muslims—were influenced by a mix of survival instincts, religious practicalities, and the humanitarian outreach of Christian missionaries. Prisons became key microcosms where structural coercion intersected with strategic agency, often resulting in collective religious shifts. The study further explores Muslim responses, including rising interreligious tensions and violent backlash, as well as the Suharto regime's evolving stance—from implicit support to tighter regulation of missionary activities. Ultimately, the paper argues that mass conversions were embedded in a broader state project to reconstruct national identity through religious conformity, positioning Christianity as both a tool and a symptom of New Order ideological engineering. This study contributes to broader discussions on religion, power, and identity formation in postcolonial states experiencing ideological rupture and sociopolitical reconfiguration.

Keywords: Religious Conversion, Christian Mission, Communism, New Order Regime, Structuration Theory

Öz

Bu makale, 1965 G30S/PKI darbe girişiminin ardından Endonezya'da yaşanan kitlesel olarak Hristiyanlığa geçme vakalarını, yalnızca bireysel inanç ifadeleri olarak değil, yoğun sosyo-politik baskılara verilen stratejik tepkiler olarak ele almaktadır. Anthony Giddens'ın yapılaşma teorisini kuramsal çerçeve olarak kullanan çalışma, devlet politikalarının, ideolojik yeniden yapılanmaların ve bireysel edimlerin, anti-komünist tasfiyelerin ardından nasıl dinî kimlikler inşa ettiğini incelemektedir. Araştırma, özellikle 1965-1971 yılları arasında Cava adasına odaklanarak, birçok Abangan Müslümanının din değiştirme kararlarında hayatta kalma içgüdüsü, ibadet pratiklerinin zorluğu ve Hristiyan misyonerlerin insani yardımlarının etkili olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Hapishaneler, bu yapısal baskının bireysel stratejilerle kesiştiği ve toplu din değiştirmelerin gözlemlendiği mikrokozmoslar hâline gelmiştir. Çalışma ayrıca Müslüman kesimlerin bu gelişmelere verdiği tepkileri, artan mezhep gerilimlerini ve şiddetli karşılıkları da incelemektedir. Suharto rejiminin misyonerliğe yönelik tutumu ise örtük destekten sıkı denetimlere doğru evrilmiştir. Sonuç olarak makale, bu toplu din değiştirmelerin Yeni Düzen rejiminin ulusal kimliği yeniden inşa etme projesinin bir parçası olduğunu ve Hristiyanlığın hem bir araç hem de bu ideolojik mühendisliğin bir göstergesi hâline geldiğini savunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, ideolojik kırılma ve sosyo-politik yeniden yapılanma süreçleri yaşayan postkolonyal devletlerde din, iktidar ve kimlik oluşumu üzerine daha geniş tartışmalara katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Değiştirme, Hristiyan Misyonerliği, Komünizm, Yeni Düzen Rejimi, Yapılaşma Teorisi

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Introduction

The second half of the 20th century witnessed not only ideological but also significant social and religious transformations in Southeast Asia. One of the most dramatic and controversial examples of these transformations was the attempted coup known as the G30S/PKI[1] in Indonesia in 1965, followed by a period of intense chaos and upheaval. This event is regarded not merely as a change in political power but as a multifaceted rupture that reshaped the social fabric of the country. This period in Indonesian history is remembered in both national memory and references for the systematic purge targeting communist identities and for the far-reaching impacts of this purge on various segments of society. In particular, the shifts in religious identity that emerged on the island of Java were not limited to the level of individual belief; rather, they unfolded within a broader context in which collective belonging, political legitimacy, and the relationship between the state and society were fundamentally redefined.

The phenomenon of mass religious conversions following the 1965 events in Indonesia should not be interpreted solely as an expression of spiritual transformation. A growing body of scholarly work has shown that these conversions were shaped by political repression, ideological realignment, and strategies of survival during systemic violence. For many political detainees—particularly those accused of leftist affiliations—conversion provided access to social protection and a way to navigate the intense stigmatisation imposed by the New Order regime.[2] Military coordination of the anti-communist massacres contributed to an atmosphere of fear that restricted personal and religious autonomy,[3] while state intervention extended into religious life, pressuring minority and Indigenous groups towards

1 G30S/PKI refers to the failed coup attempt that occurred on 30 September 1965. Suppressed by a counter-offensive led by Suharto, the incident was blamed on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), triggering widespread anti-communist purges in which hundreds of thousands were killed. Robert Cribb, ed., The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali (Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), 12.

2 Vannessa Hearman, "The 1965–1966 Violence, Religious Conversions and the Changing Relationship Between the Left and Indonesia's Churches," *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics and Legacies,* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 179–95, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71455-4_9; Jerson Benia Narciso, "Christianisation In New Order Indonesia (1965-1998): Discourses, Debates And Negotiations," *MELINTAS* 24, no. 3 (2008).

3 G. Leksana, "Collaboration in Mass Violence: The Case of the Indonesian Anti-Leftist Mass Killings in 1965–66 in East Java," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 58–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1778612.

affiliation with state-approved religions.[4] Nugroho's thesis work, *Menyintas dan Menyeberang*, offers detailed testimonies from former leftist sympathisers in Java who converted to Christianity under duress.[5] This literature situates Christian missionary activity within broader structures of power, interpreting conversion not only as an adaptation but also as a socio-political repositioning. Mujiburrahman underscores Muslim anxieties over shifting religious demographics,[6] while Madinier and Shihab emphasise the ideological role of state policy and humanitarian outreach.[7] Collectively, these works frame post-1965 religious conversion as an integral component of Suharto's anti-communist ideological engineering, where affiliation with Christianity was often tied to security, legitimacy, and the reconstruction of identity.

While the above scholarship has effectively mapped the socio-political dimensions of mass conversions in post-1965 Indonesia—emphasising coercion, survival, and ideological pressure, this article introduces a new analytical lens by applying Anthony Giddens's structuration theory to examine how these conversions also served to reproduce, adapt, and sometimes reshape the very structures that constrained them. Instead of treating conversion solely as an act of submission or escape, the article traces how individuals, especially within prison systems and rural *Abangan* communities, actively negotiated their positioning under structural duress. Focusing on the *Santiaji* program, missionary outreach in carceral settings, and state-driven religious engineering, this study interprets religious conversion not only as a response to political and ideological pressure but also as a performative strategy of reintegration, identity reconstruction, and participation in new symbolic orders sanctioned by the state. In doing so, it offers a conceptual contribution to the study of religious transformation by revealing the mutual constitution of structure and agency within a politically turbulent context.

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4 Ade Jaya Suryani, "Indigenous Peoples, Religious Conversion, and the Politics of Religion in Indonesia," *Jurnal Penelitian* 21, no. 2 (October 15, 2024): 195–205, https://doi.org/10.28918/jupe.v21i2.8738.

5 Singgih Nugroho, *Menyintas Dan Menyeberang: Perpindahan Massal Keagamaan Pasca 1965 Di Pedesaan Jawa* (Syarikat, 2008).

6 Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened : Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.5117/9789053569382.

7 Rémy Madinier, "From 'Mystic Synthesis' to 'Jesuit Plot': The Society of Jesus and the Making of Religious Policy in Indonesia," *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 2 (March 11, 2023): 409–34, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000731; Alwi Shihab, *Membendung Arus: Respons Gerakan Muhammadiyah Terhadap Penetrasi Misi Kristen Di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1998).

Methodologically, this study draws upon interpretive historical analysis, relying on existing scholarly literature, census records, and publicly available testimonies. While it does not present new field data, the article offers a theoretical synthesis that connects Giddens's structuration theory with the dynamics of religious transformation in post-coup Indonesia. By interpreting prisons as microcosms and state intervention as a mode of ideological engineering, the study situates religious conversion as a critical mechanism through which individuals navigated and redefined their position within the emerging social and political order. This argument is developed through close engagement with historical records, demographic data, and prior empirical studies, all reframed through a structurations lens.

1. Historical Background: The G30S/PKI Coup and Its Aftermath

On the night of September 30, 1965, a group of military officers abducted and killed six Indonesian generals in Jakarta, an event widely known as the *Gerakan 30 September* (G30S). The Indonesian Army, led by Major General Suharto, quickly attributed the incident to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), marking the beginning of a nationwide anti-communist purge.[8] While the PKI denied involvement, the party was declared illegal, and a coordinated campaign targeting its members and sympathisers ensued.[9] Between late 1965 and 1966, mass killings occurred across the country, with particularly high casualties in Central and East Java, as well as in Bali. Death toll estimates vary widely, but most scholars agree that hundreds of thousands of people were killed during this period.

Following the failed coup, large-scale anti-communist purges occurred between late 1965 and 1966. The campaign targeted individuals associated with the PKI, resulting in mass killings, arbitrary detentions, and the outlawing of the party. Estimates of those killed vary widely, ranging from several hundred thousand to over one million people. These events were most intense in regions such as Central Java, East Java, and Bali. Various social groups—including local militias and religious youth organisations—collaborated with military forces in identifying and executing suspected communists. In addition to the killings, a large number of individuals were detained—often without trial or due process. According to Robert Cribb, the total number of political detainees during this period—excluding those

8 M. Eickhoff, G. van Klinken, and G. Robinson, "1965 Today: Living with the Indonesian Massacres," *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 449–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2017.1393931.

9 Robert Cribb, ed., *The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990); *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

who were executed before arrest—may have ranged between 600,000 and 1.7 million, underscoring the sheer scale of state repression and the deep penetration of anti-communist suspicion across Indonesian society.[10]

During the same period, the Provisional People's Consultative Assembly (MPRS) issued a decree mandating that every Indonesian citizen be affiliated with one of five officially recognised religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. This policy effectively marginalised individuals without formal religious identification, including many suspected communists and those associated with non-institutional belief systems. Thus, religious affiliation became a critical marker of political legitimacy and national belonging in the New Order's ideological framework.[11]

These structural pressures extended beyond rural villages and detention centres into broader society. In the years following 1965, Indonesia experienced a significant rise in religious conversions, particularly to Christianity. Between 1966 and 1968, approximately two million individuals—mostly ethnic Javanese from syncretic backgrounds—embraced various branches of Christianity.[12] This surge marked a dramatic shift when compared to earlier decades: in Central Java, Christians accounted for just 0.1% of the population in the 1930s, but by 1971 this figure had risen to 2.1%. Similarly, in East Java, the proportion increased from 0.4% to 1.7%. Urban centres showed more concentrated growth: in 1971, 11.6% of Central Java's urban population identified as Christian; in Yogyakarta, the figure was 14.9%, while Surakarta and Magelang both recorded 15.1%.[13] Although a portion of these new adherents were of Chinese-Indonesian descent, the majority were native Javanese, particularly those from communities with weak institutional ties to Islamic orthodoxy.[14]

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10 Cribb, *Robert Cribb, Ed., The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali*, 78–79.

11 Robert W. Hefner, "The 1965–66 Violence in Upland East Java: A Reflexive Reassessment," *Indonesia* 116, no. 1 (August 2023): 87–102, https://doi.org/10.1353/ind.2023.a910151.

12 M. A. Humaedi, "Konversi Keagamaan Pasca 1965, Mengurai Dampak Sosial Budaya Dan Hubungan Islam Kristen Di Pedesaan Jawa," *Harmoni* 16, no. 2 (January 1, 2018): 218–40, https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v16i2.16.

13 Susanne Rodemeier, "Emergence and Establishment of a Charismatic Church within the Framework of Javanese Self-Perception in Surakarta, Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 45, no. 131 (January 2, 2017): 66–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2017.1268447; Johny Alfian Khusyairi, "The Formation Of A Javanese Reformed Christian Settlement In Yogyakarta Urban Area 1939-1959," *Al-Qalam* 29, no. 1 (June 17, 2023): 163, https://doi.org/10.31969/alq.v29i1.1213.

14 M.C. Ricklefs, Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

This historical context underscores the need to move beyond descriptive accounts and examine how individuals and communities responded to the structural realignment of religion and politics after 1965. While state decrees and mass violence defined the broader contours of this transformation, the lived experience of groups such as the *Abangan* reveals a more complex negotiation of identity under pressure. To explore this dynamic, the following section applies Giddens's structuration theory as an analytical lens to understand how religious affiliation, particularly among the *Abangan*, was both shaped by and contributed to the reproduction of emerging social structures in the New Order period.

2. The Reproduction of Social Structure: Religious Identity Construction among the *Abangan* after 1965

This state-mandated religious alignment placed particular pressure on communities whose religious practices were not easily categorised within the formal religious frameworks endorsed by the state. Among them were the *Abangan*—a segment of Javanese society whose spiritual orientation blended Islamic identity with syncretic, locally rooted rituals. Before 1965, many Abangan identified nominally as Muslims but maintained religious practices influenced by Javanese mysticism and ancestral traditions. Their engagement with formal religious institutions was minimal; mosques and prayer houses were seldom frequented, and religious observance was often subsumed within broader Javanese cosmological and ancestral practices.[15] In the aftermath of 1965, however, Abangan religious practices became increasingly conflated with communist sympathies, casting suspicion over their spiritual ambivalence. This perceived association subjected them to intense scrutiny and social pressure, rendering their syncretic traditions politically perilous in a regime that demanded clear religious affiliation as a marker of loyalty and ideological conformity.[16] Henceforth, the appearance of affiliation with an official religion became a matter of urgent necessity—an essential means of evading the perilous stigma of being labelled a communist or an unbeliever. As a result, particularly in the latter months of 1965 and throughout 1966, mosques and churches that had long stood largely empty in rural areas suddenly filled with congregants. Even those who had previously maintained a cautious distance from formal religious practice found themselves compelled to participate in acts of worship—not as a revival of faith, but as a strategy for survival in an increasingly repressive and

15 Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (University of Chicago Press, 1976).

16 Robert W. Hefner, "The 1965–66 Violence in Upland East Java: A Reflexive Reassessment," *Indonesia* 116, no. 1 (August 2023): 87–102, https://doi.org/10.1353/ind.2023.a910151.

ideologically charged landscape.[17]

The harsh campaign against the communists evolved into a profound existential crisis for Abangan Muslims, particularly in rural areas where the PKI influence had been most deeply rooted. In many regions, individuals suspected of being PKI members or sympathisers were arrested en masse and dispatched to so-called rehabilitation camps—institutions designed less for reintegration than for ideological purification. For the Abangan, whose spiritual ambivalence and leftist associations rendered them doubly suspect, this period marked a harrowing confrontation with the demands of a new political and religious orthodoxy.[18] The purpose of these camps—known as *Santiaji*—was to instil in detainees a religious identity deemed acceptable by the state and to ensure their allegiance to Pancasila, the ideological cornerstone of the regime. Operated through a coordinated effort between the military authorities and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, these programs began with interrogations aimed at determining the detainees' religious affiliation. In this setting, religious identity was not treated as a matter of private conscience but as a political declaration, a prerequisite for reintegration into a society now governed by the strictures of ideological conformity.[19]

The absence of religious affiliation was, in itself, deemed sufficient grounds for being labelled a communist or a traitor to the nation. Detainees who failed to declare adherence to a recognised faith were swiftly coerced into selecting one of the state-sanctioned religions. Embracing Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, or Buddhism—those five deemed legitimate by the state—became not merely a personal decision, but a precondition for survival and social reintegration. In this climate, religion was transformed into an instrument of political loyalty, a compulsory badge of belonging in a society gripped by ideological purgation.[20] This situation posed a profound dilemma for the Abangan masses, who were largely unfamiliar with the formal practices of Islamic worship. Confronted with the

17 Eickhoff, van Klinken, and Robinson, "1965 Today: Living with the Indonesian Massacres"; Dita Kirana and Endi Aulia Garadian, "Religious Trend in Contemporary Indonesia: Conservatism Domination on Social Media," *Studia Islamika* 27, no. 3 (December 23, 2020): 615–22, https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v27i3.18823.

18 Alexander Nikolayevich Melnik, "Memory and Mass Killings: How Oppenheimer's The Act of Killing Engages with Indonesia's Collective Memory of the 1965 Tragedy," *Southeast Asian Media Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, (2020): 86-100.

19 B. Muhtadi, "Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: Threats and Opportunities for Democracy Ed. by Chiara Formichi (Review)," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 44 (2022): 157–59.

20 L. Pedersen, "Religious Pluralism in Indonesia," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 17, no. 5 (October 19, 2016): 388, https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2016.1218534.

imperative to adopt an explicitly religious identity, they were effectively presented with two stark options: either embrace the rituals and lifestyle of devout Islam, often alien to their syncretic traditions, or declare conversion to another officially recognised faith. In either case, religious affiliation had ceased to be a matter of spiritual conviction—it had become a coerced performance of conformity, enacted under the shadow of political survival.

3. The Strategic Agency of Actors: A Causal Mapping of Religious Conversion

It was precisely in this moment of crisis that Christian missionaries and churches emerged as significant actors on the national stage. In the aftermath of 1965, churches across Indonesia—particularly those attuned to the plight of individuals ostracised through their perceived association with communism—began to open their doors to the marginalised. Beyond offering spiritual refuge, they extended humanitarian aid and social services to those rendered vulnerable by the sweeping purges.[21] In doing so, the churches positioned themselves not merely as religious institutions but as lifelines in a society fractured by ideological violence and existential uncertainty. For many, the church became a rare space of refuge amid a landscape marked by fear, suspicion, and ideological cleansing—offering not only material relief but also a sense of dignity and belonging denied to them elsewhere. [22]

Thus, a space was carved out—albeit cautiously—within the ranks of those deemed loyal to Pancasila, where former leftists who had embraced Christianity could be accommodated. The regime, in its crusade against communism, perceived Christian groups as less ideologically threatening than their Islamic counterparts. As a result, Christianity offered a politically safer refuge for those seeking to distance themselves from their past affiliations and to realign with the state's reconfigured

21 Six notes that Christian churches initiated support programs for victims of anti-communist purges, including food relief, psychological support, and educational sponsorship for the children of ex-political detainees. See Clemens Six, "Christian Agency in Anti-Communist Persecution? British-Malaya and Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s," in The Palgrave Handbook of Anti-Communist Persecutions (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 245–61, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54963-3_11.

22 Hearman, "The 1965–1966 Violence, Religious Conversions and the Changing Relationship Between the Left and Indonesia's Churches," 179-95.

moral and ideological order.[23] Many individuals suspected of having ties to the PKI came to believe that even if they returned to a Muslim identity, they would still be regarded as untrustworthy. For them, embracing Christianity emerged as the most viable path towards social reintegration.[24] Particularly during the years 1965–66, a significant number of children and close relatives of those who had been killed or discredited later converted to Christianity.[25] Although many of these individuals had never previously established direct contact with Christian missionaries, they began to identify themselves as Christians—less as a result of theological conviction than as a strategic declaration to demonstrate that they were not Muslim, and therefore not communists or atheists.[26]

According to Giddens, individuals are not passive subjects moulded solely by social structures; rather, they are active agents who, even as they are shaped by those structures, simultaneously participate in their reproduction and transformation.[27] In the Indonesian context, the decisions of Abangan Muslims to convert cannot be understood merely as passive submission to the pressures exerted by the state and military-backed structures. Rather, they emerged as strategic responses—choices aimed at survival, social legitimacy, and a renewed sense of belonging. The individuals involved in this process did not simply conform to existing structures; they also actively contributed to the reconfiguration of those very structures,

23 In the village of Ngampel, Salatiga, a local elder named Bekel Prawito advised Abangan villagers—fearful of the anti-communist purges—to convert to Christianity as a protective strategy. His recommendation spread quickly and led to a dramatic rise in conversions: by 1966, Christians had become 82% of the local population, a shift later remembered as *baptist basal* (mass baptism). Beyond spiritual affiliation, conversion granted access to economic and educational support, including transmigration programs to South Sumatra and Lampung organised by the Trukajaya Foundation and church-funded scholarships for Christian youth. These interventions helped improve the living standards of Christian converts in Ngampel relative to non-Christian residents. See Nugroho, *Menyintas Dan Menyeberang: Perpindahan Massal Keagamaan Pasca 1965 Di Pedesaan Jawa*, 190.

24 Testimony from Brotosemedi Wiryotenoyo, a church administrator, recounts the case of a former political prisoner affiliated with the PKI who, upon release, approached a local church requesting employment. Despite concerns raised by Christian educators about the individual's background, Wiryotenoyo chose to appoint him as the administrative staff. The former prisoner served faithfully until retirement and eventually brought his entire family into the church, where they became active and devout members. See Nugroho, *Menyintas Dan Menyeberang: Perpindahan Massal Keagamaan Pasca 1965 Di Pedesaan Jawa*, 221.

25 Humaedi, "Konversi Keagamaan Pasca 1965, Mengurai Dampak Sosial Budaya Dan Hubungan Islam Kristen Di Pedesaan Jawa," 231.

26 Timo Duile, "Atheism in Indonesia," *South East Asia Research* 26, no. 2 (June 18, 2018): 161–75, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828X18770481.

27 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (University of California Press, 1986), 5-6.

particularly in terms of religious identity and state policy. For this reason, religious conversion cannot be reduced to a matter of personal belief alone; it must be seen as a dynamic social process in which both structure and agency are mutually transformative.

In this context, a complex constellation of factors drove the mass religious conversions that occurred between 1965 and 1967. From a Diddensiae perspective, the decisions of individuals to convert can be interpreted as strategic actions undertaken by agents operating under intense structural pressures. Concerns for personal safety, preferences for more accessible forms of religious practice, access to social and material support, and alignment with prevailing ideological currents all played a role in steering individuals towards Christianity. Yet this turn was not merely an act of escape—it was also a response to the dominant order. In adapting to the system, these individuals not only conformed to the existing structure but also emerged as active participants in reshaping the religious and ideological architecture of the regime itself.

4. Religious Identity Under Structural Pressure: Practices of Transformation in Prisons

One of the most striking manifestations of the mass conversion phenomenon occurred within the prison system. As part of the ideological rehabilitation program implemented during the New Order regime, detainees were subjected to a systematic program known as *Santiaji* (Pancasila-oriented mental purification). This program consisted of two distinct forms: general and special. The general santiago focused on indoctrinating Pancasila values, promoting national resilience, and cultivating ideological loyalty. The special santiago, by contrast, aimed to reform prisoners who were presumed to be atheists or religiously deviant by reintegrating them into a recognised faith tradition. The military's spiritual development division, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, oversaw the operational implementation of this component. It was within this framework of institutionalised religious re-education that religious identity took on a new political significance.[28]

Within the prison system, religious personnel—Islamic, Protestant, and Catholic—were assigned in coordination with the military intelligence units. Every inmate was compelled to actively participate in the religious practices of the faith to which they claimed to belong, transforming religious observance into a mechanism

28 Melnik, "Memory and Mass Killings: How Oppenheimer's The Act of Killing Engages with Indonesia's Collective Memory of the 1965 Tragedy," 86-100.

of ideological discipline rather than spiritual devotion.[29] Prisoners who declared themselves Muslim were obliged to perform specific religious duties such as reciting the Qur'an, observing the fast, and attending Friday prayers, while those identifying as Christian were required to participate regularly in church services. To ensure strict compliance, a so-called "religious monitor" was appointed within each cell block to oversee the spiritual conduct of fellow inmates. Those who failed to fulfil their assigned religious obligations faced disciplinary measures, further reinforcing the regime's use of religion as a tool of control and ideological conformity.[30]

When examined through the lens of Giddens's structuration theory, this system lays bare the disciplining power of structures over individual agency. Muslim inmates with Abangan backgrounds—largely unfamiliar with the ritual obligations of Islam—experienced a profound identity crisis under this regime of enforced religiosity. While the structure constrained and shaped the field of possible action, the individual did not remain passive; instead, they responded to the pressure by seeking alternative paths. In this context, religious conversion emerged not merely as a matter of belief, but as a calculated act of survival—a strategic manoeuvre within a system that equated piety with political rehabilitation.

Within this environment of religious enforcement, additional dynamics emerged, particularly in relation to the institutional logistics of spiritual supervision. In several detention camps, religious identity was not merely a matter of spiritual affiliation but also a mechanism for administrative categorisation and control. When a particular religion lacked sufficient adherents in a given camp, prison officials occasionally pressured detainees—particularly nominal Muslims and Abangan—to switch to another faith so that official religious personnel could be assigned to oversee their spiritual compliance. In such cases, coercive structural logic intersected with ritual unfamiliarity and linguistic alienation. Many Abangan detainees, already struggling with the unfamiliar demands of formal Islamic practice, found the daily rituals—such as praying in Arabic and fasting for a full month—intimidating and inaccessible. Protestantism, by contrast, was often perceived as less demanding and more culturally approachable due to its use of the Indonesian language and emphasis on musical worship. This combination of institutional pressure and personal disorientation led many detainees to reorient their religious identity in favour of Protestant Christianity.[31]

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29 Hearman, "The 1965–1966 Violence, Religious Conversions and the Changing Relationship Between the Left and Indonesia's Churches," 179-95.

30 H. Patra, A. Anatona, and Y. Narny, "The Ex-PKI Political Prisoners Motive to Produce the Memories of 1965/66 Mass Violence in West Sumatra," *Jurnal Socius: Journal of Sociology Research and Education* 8, no. 2 (December 31, 2021): 125, https://doi.org/10.24036/scs.v8i2.365.

31 Ahmadi Moestahal, *Dari Gontor Ke Pulau Buru* (Yogyakarta: Syarikat Indonesia, 2003), 256.

In addition, the compassionate attitude displayed by the Christian clergy rendered the process of conversion meaningful not only on a practical level but also on an emotional one.[32] As Giddens emphasises, structures are not merely sets of rules but also realms of meaning.[33] Tangible forms of assistance—such as providing medicine to inmates or delivering letters to their families—reinforced the perceived functionality of the new structure in the eyes of the individual.[34] In this way, prisons became microcosmic laboratories in the post-1965 period, where missionary activity operated at the most intimate level and where the interplay between structure and agency unfolded with clarity. Inmates, while navigating the confines of a repressive system in search of ways to sustain their existence, simultaneously identified with new religious frameworks, thereby contributing to their consolidation. This dynamic stands as a concrete manifestation of one of the structuration theory's central claims: that agents actively reproduce—and reshape—the very structures in which they are embedded.

In conclusion, the practices of religious conversion within prisons represent a multidimensional process shaped not only by coercion but also by individual strategies, emotional renewal, and the emergence of alternative structures. This transformation served as both a precursor and a prototype for the mass conversions occurring beyond the prison walls. The identity reconstruction experienced by the inmates reverberated outward, influencing societal perceptions and provoking significant unease within Muslim communities. The tensions born of conflicting structures and the reorientation of agency mark this process as a site of ideological friction—one that will be explored in the following section through the lens of Islamic groups' reactions.

5. Structural Response: The Struggle for Control over the Religious Sphere

The wave of mass Christianisation between 1965 and 1967 generated a profound sense of threat within Islamic circles in Indonesia. While Muslim and Christian groups had initially acted in concert against their common enemy—communism—the post-purge surge in religious conversions gave way to a growing atmosphere of mutual suspicion. As the ideological alliance dissolved, concerns over religious boundaries and influence took centre stage, transforming former collaborators

32 Hearman, "The 1965–1966 Violence, Religious Conversions and the Changing Relationship Between the Left and Indonesia's Churches," 179-95.

33 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 17.

34 Nugroho, *Menyintas Dan Menyeberang: Perpindahan Massal Keagamaan Pasca 1965 Di Pedesaan Jawa*, 118–19.

into uneasy rivals within the contested terrain of the nation's religious landscape.[35] Islamic organisations began to interpret these conversions not as isolated personal choices but as the outcome of a systematic missionary campaign—perhaps even as part of a state-backed agenda. Islamic modernist groups such as Muhammadiyah were particularly vocal in asserting that the New Order regime had provided tacit support to Christian missionaries, thereby facilitating and legitimising the wave of conversions. This perception further deepened the sense of betrayal and fed growing anxieties over the loss of religious influence and the shifting balance of power within the nation's spiritual and ideological fabric.[36]

Considered through the lens of Giddens's structuration theory, this section illustrates how structures respond reflexively to perceived threats to preserve their continuity. Muslim groups perceived the growing influence of Christianity not merely as a theological divergence, but as a structural threat to their religious and sociopolitical authority. In response, they launched efforts at social mobilisation and counter-discursive campaigns aimed at reasserting their position within the religious field. Here, the structure is no longer simply a force acting upon individuals; it becomes an adaptive mechanism, actively reconstructed to defend and expand its domain of legitimacy. The Islamic reactions to the Christianisation wave can thus be understood not only as ideological resistance but also as a process of structural reproduction—an attempt to recalibrate the balance of power within the religious sphere.

Within this framework, the incidents in Makassar and Meulaboh represent critical turning points at which conflicts in the religious sphere escalated from symbolic contestation to physical violence. In Makassar, the allegation that a teacher had insulted Islam sparked street protests and attacks on churches. While individual emotional responses played a role, the influence of pre-existing discourses propagated by Islamic structures—through radio broadcasts, organised agitation, and institutional rhetoric[37]—was equally significant in shaping the trajectory of the

35 Humaedi, "Konversi Keagamaan Pasca 1965, Mengurai Dampak Sosial Budaya Dan Hubungan Islam Kristen Di Pedesaan Jawa."

36 S. Mansur, "Pemikiran Intelektual Muslim Tentang Kristenisasi Di Indonesia 1966-1998," *Alqalam* 31, no. 1 (June 30, 2014): 162, https://doi.org/10.32678/alqalam.v31i1.1109.

37 Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316344446.

unrest.[38] According to Giddens's understanding of structural power, this process is not merely a public reaction, but a reproduction effort undertaken at the moment when the structure perceives its own existence to be under threat.

Similarly, the church protests in Meulaboh[39] can be interpreted as an attempt by the local Islamic structure to delineate the legitimate boundaries of the religious sphere. Structures are composed not only of norms and rules but also of symbolic domains that define the limits of legitimacy, belonging, and representation. Consequently, an initiative such as the establishment of a church in a predominantly Muslim area was perceived by local Islamic structures not merely as a religious issue but as a structural violation. This perception set in motion a chain of events that ultimately led to state intervention and the decision to relocate the place of worship.

As concerns and pressure from Islamic circles intensified, the state was compelled to adopt a structural position of its own. While the New Order regime declared its commitment to maintaining equal distance from all religions in accordance with Pancasila principles, it introduced new regulations aimed at calming rising tensions. However, although these measures appeared neutral in theory, they were in practice designed to curtail Christian missionary activities. Legal instruments such as the 1969 decree on places of worship and the 1978 proclamation on religious propagation became mechanisms that complicated conversion and restricted the public visibility of Christians.[40] In this way, the structure was reshaped in response to perceived external threats, recalibrating power relations in a manner that served its own interests.

These developments demonstrate that the structure is not only a force that shapes individuals but also an entity that acts reflexively to preserve its own domain and boundaries. The responses of Islamic groups during this period manifested through the establishment of alternative structures, the formulation of counter-structural strategies, and efforts to involve the state in regulating the religious sphere. In this way, the struggle for control over the religious domain and the contest for

38 Yosephine Wastu Prajnaputri, "Representation Of Social Actors In The Jakarta Post And Tempo About Makassar Cathedral Church's Suicide Bombing Case And Peace Journalism," *International Journal of Humanity Studies (IJHS)* 5, no. 2 (March 23, 2022): 195–206, https://doi.org/10.24071/ijhs.v5i2.3704

39 M. Mujiburrahman, "State Policies on Religious Diversity in Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 46, no. 1 (June 27, 2008): 101–23, https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2008.461.101-123.

40 Amos Sukamto et al., "Impacts of the Religious Policies Enacted from 1965 to 1980 on Christianity in Indonesia," *Mission Studies* 36, no. 2 (July 10, 2019): 191–218, https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341649.

ideological dominance became the central features of the clashing agendas of competing structures.

In conclusion, this period marked a phase in which religious structures operated not merely as theological entities but as socio-political actors engaged in intensified struggles for mutual legitimacy. Muslim-Christian relations reached a new threshold of polarisation, and religious identities came to signify not only personal belief but also structural affiliation. For this reason, the dual-interaction framework offered by Giddens proves indispensable for analysing the complexities of this transformative era.

6. The Structuring Power of the State: The Religious Engineering of the New Order Regime

Although the New Order regime under Suharto initially appeared to form an alliance with Islamic circles within the broader anti-communist front, it quickly redefined and limited this partnership in favour of its own pragmatic agenda. During the 1965–66 period, the collaboration of Islamist groups with the military in leading the purge of communists generated significant expectations among Muslim constituencies regarding their future role in the state. However, Suharto and his administration, viewing ideological radicalism as a threat to national unity, moved to curtail Islamist demands.[41] In this context, religion was reconfigured as a tool of governance—something to be regulated and instrumentalized rather than empowered.

The New Order's religious policies vividly illustrate how the state actively constructs and directs social structures. According to Giddens, structures are not static or inert patterns, but systems shaped and continually reproduced through the deliberate choices of agents[42]—in this case, the state elite. The Suharto regime restructured the religious sphere to establish an ideological balance that served its own interests. Here, the structure is not merely a set of social norms but a product of deliberate engineering. The state sought to promote religion's presence in public life while simultaneously depoliticising it—ensuring its utility as a tool of governance without allowing it to emerge as an independent force in the political arena.

41 Abbas, "Indonesia. Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present. By M. C. Ricklefs. Singapore: NUS Press, 2012. Pp. 576. Maps, Bibliography, Index."; C. W. Watson, "Muslims and the State in Indonesia," in *Islam, Muslims and the Modern State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1994), 174–96, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14208-8_8.

42 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society,* 25

One of the central pillars of this restructuring was the production of individuals who possessed a religious identity but remained politically inert. To that end, in the post-1966 period, it was made compulsory for every citizen to affiliate with one of the officially recognised religions.[43] This mandate was not merely a matter of belief but a structural intervention. To neutralise the sociopolitical instability created by the vacuum left in the wake of communism, the state initially adopted a tolerant stance towards Christian missionary activity. Christianity was perceived as capable of producing individuals who would be loyal to the state, and for this reason, the conversion of former PKI members to Christianity was tacitly encouraged. At this juncture, the structure became a field of legitimacy strategically shaped and directed by agents—namely, the state—within the logic of political consolidation.

The New Order regime also sought to curtail the influence of Islamic groups, preventing them from becoming the dominant actors within this restructured religious sphere. Policies such as the banning of Masyumi, the reassignment of Islamist military officers to marginal or passive roles, and the forced unification of Islamic political parties under a single umbrella all exemplify the state's direct intervention in shaping the structure.[44] These measures underscored the regime's intent to monopolise control over the religious domain, subordinating all competing forces to its central authority. The appointment of Christian elites to strategic positions further illustrates how the structure was not only guided but also actively employed as a political instrument.[45] While these developments fostered a widespread perception among Muslim communities that the state was forming an alliance with Christians,[46] they in fact reflected the state's broader strategy of shaping the structure in accordance with its own equilibrium logic. Rather than favouring a particular religious group for its own sake, the regime recalibrated the religious landscape to serve its objectives of control, stability, and ideological containment.

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43 Sobari, A., "Religious Obligation in Indonesia," *International Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies* 2, no. 1 (June 10, 2022): 31–37, https://doi.org/10.32996/ijcrs.2022.2.1.4.

44 G. Barton, I. Yilmaz, and N. Morieson, "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (August 13, 2021): 641, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080641.

45 Several state officials with Christian backgrounds included Admiral Sudomo, General Maraden Panggabean (Commander of the Armed Forces), General T.B. Simatupang, and Dr J.B. Sumarlin (Minister of Finance). See Fatimah Hussein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia: The Exclusivist and Inclusivist Muslims' Perspective* (Bandung: Mizan, 2005), 116–19.

46 Narciso, "Christianisation In New Order Indonesia (1965-1998): Discourses, Debates And Negotiations," 407-28

By the 1970s, the state structure had introduced new regulations aimed at bringing missionary activities under tighter control. The 1978 propaganda law and the restrictions imposed on the construction of places of worship constituted the legal embodiment of the state's intervention in this domain. Requirements for transparency regarding foreign missionary funding, along with the official discouragement of mass baptism ceremonies, were deliberate choices intended to regulate and contain the religious sphere.[47] These measures reflected the state's conscious effort to assert authority over the structure, transforming it into a managed space aligned with its broader political and ideological goals. The phenomenon central to Giddens's theory—namely, the agent's reproduction of structure—is clearly evident here as well: the state, by both encouraging and restricting missionary activity, actively constructed a new religious order.[48] Through this dual strategy, it did not merely respond to existing dynamics but redefined the boundaries and functions of the religious sphere to serve its own structural interests.

All these developments underscore the fluidity of the structure and the strategic agency of the actors. Suharto's renewed efforts in the 1980s to re-engage with Islamist circles were likewise part of the broader process of structural reproduction. Measures such as facilitating pilgrimage to Mecca and permitting the establishment of Islamic banks illustrate how the structure could be recalibrated in response to shifting political dynamics. The state's approach to religion was not rooted in a fixed ideology but functioned as a flexible engineering project—shaped and reshaped according to the regime's evolving political needs.[49] In this context, Christian missionary activity was not merely an effort to spread faith, but also a structural element instrumentalized by the state in its project of reshaping the religious sphere.

In conclusion, the New Order regime demonstrates how individuals actively reproduced the very structures that constrained them, illustrating the duality central to structuration theory. In this process, religious identities acquired not only spiritual significance but also political, institutional, and structural dimensions. Religion, therefore, came to occupy a central position not merely within the realm of belief

47 Sukamto et al., "Impacts of the Religious Policies Enacted from 1965 to 1980 on Christianity in Indonesia," 191-218

48 Giddens stated that "Society only has form, and that form only has effects on people, in so far as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do." Giddens, *The Constitution of Society,* 171.

49 Azyumardi Azra, "Contemporary Islamic Renewal In Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies,* no. 59 (1996):41-58. *https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.1996.3459.41-58;* Barton, Yilmaz, and Morieson, "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," 641.

but at the very heart of the state's ideological and administrative strategies.

The New Order's recalibration of its religious alliances—initially leaning on Islam to destroy communism, then later privileging Christian groups in administrative and military structures—generated a perception of partiality that altered the configuration of the religious field. The issuance of restrictions on church construction and missionary activities in the late 1970s was not merely regulatory; it reflected a reactive structuration process in which the state sought to contain interreligious friction by reshaping the symbolic and institutional boundaries of legitimacy. From a structurations perspective, these state interventions were not imposed in a vacuum but emerged in response to pressures exerted by Islamic actors who saw Christian proselytism as a form of structural encroachment. The reciprocal nature of this response exemplifies how macro-level structures—such as religious policy—are continuously reshaped through negotiations among agents embedded within them.

7. Structure–Agency Interaction Between Faith and Ideology

The Christian missionary activities and mass conversions that occurred between 1965 and 1967 had a profound impact on crystallising the religious and ideological fault lines within Indonesian society.[50] As the nation became increasingly polarised between two dominant structural camps—Pancasila-nationalist and Islamic—the phenomenon of missionary work functioned both as a catalyst and a consequence of this division.[51] This process exemplifies a dynamic in which individuals, confronted with structural pressures, responded with strategic actions that not only navigated but also actively reproduced and reshaped the very structures in which they were embedded.

Islamic groups perceived missionary activity not merely as a religious appeal, but as an ideological and structural threat. This perception was often framed compared to the colonial era, fuelling the widespread belief that Christian missionaries were establishing a new mechanism of domination. Conversely, Christian leaders legitimised their activities within the framework of religious freedom and humanitarian responsibility. These opposing positions reflect a confrontation between competing structures—each producing its own ground of legitimacy and vying for authority within the same sociopolitical space.

50 Alexander R. Arifianto, "Explaining the Cause of Muslim-Christian Conflicts in Indonesia: Tracing the Origins of *Kristenisasi* and *Islamisasi*," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 20, no. 1 (January 21, 2009): 73–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410802542144.

51 Hearman, "The 1965–1966 Violence, Religious Conversions and the Changing Relationship Between the Left and Indonesia's Churches," 179-95.

In this context, Islamic organisations like Muhammadiyah and DDII increasingly positioned themselves as counter-structures against what they perceived as the growing influence of Christian institutions.[52] These groups did not simply react discursively, but engaged in a process of structural reproduction—establishing da'wah infrastructures, launching media campaigns, and lobbying the state to regulate religious propagation. This was not a one-sided resistance, but a negotiation of symbolic and institutional space, where missionary expansion, church building, and aid-based evangelism were interpreted as threats to the Islamic sociopolitical order. From the perspective of structuration theory, the reactions of these Islamic groups exemplify how marginalised actors actively reproduce and reshape the structures they contest—constructing alternative systems of legitimacy to compete within the same political field.

The partiality of the data sources brings into focus the epistemological dimension of the structure. Missionary reports portrayed the mass conversions as spiritual triumphs,[53] while Islamic publications framed the same events as conspiracies and existential threats. This highlights that structures operate not only through material mechanisms but also through the construction of meaning. As Giddens notes, structure is reproduced not only through norms but also through symbols, narratives, and forms of knowledge.[54] In this context, post-1965 narratives of religious conversion became battlegrounds for competing structures engaged in the production—and contestation—of truth.

The multilayered nature of the conversion phenomenon aligns closely with the premises of the structuration theory. Individual decision-making—whether motivated by faith, security, belonging, interest, or coercion—is deeply embedded in structural positioning. Some genuinely embraced Christian teachings and gravitated towards a new identity, while others opted for alternative religions primarily to distance themselves from a Muslim identity. This diversity of motivations illustrates not only how individuals are shaped by structure but also how they are capable of negotiating, bending, and ultimately reproducing that structure in new and contingent forms.

The way the state instrumentalized the missionary phenomenon foregrounds the political dimension of the structure. Missionary activity became, in part, a vehicle for the new ideological architecture constructed by the state in the aftermath of

52 Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 149-50

53 Jan S. Aritonang, "Current Ecumenical Movement and Spirit in Indonesia," *CTC Bulletin* 25, no. 35 (2008).

54 R. Lippuner and B. Werlen, "Structuration Theory," in *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* (Elsevier, 2009), 39–49, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044910-4.00749-5.

the communist threat. However, this strategy, over time, generated new forms of polarisation and produced unintended consequences. At this juncture, the dual effect central to structuration theory becomes clearly visible: while the state—as an agent—shapes the structure, the repercussions of that structure, in turn, compel the state to revise and recalibrate its own strategies.

In conclusion, the post-1965 period of missionary activity and mass religious conversion represents a historical moment in which the reciprocal relationship between structure and agency intensified. While the missionaries' intent may have been a spiritual calling, that call became embedded at the heart of structural tensions; individuals' religious choices were transformed into expressions of structural positioning. Although the state sought to ensure ideological stability, it ultimately found itself entangled in strained relations with both Christian and Muslim constituencies. For this reason, the 1965–1967 period serves as a revealing laboratory for structuration theory—demonstrating how structures are constructed, how individuals respond to them, and how such interactions drive broader processes of social transformation.

Conclusion

This article has examined the phenomenon of mass religious conversion in post-1965 Indonesia through the lens of structuration theory, interpreting it not merely as a survival response to political repression, but as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints. By focusing on the experiences of *Abangan* communities, the role of prisons and *Santiaji* programs, and the broader ideological realignment pursued by the New Order regime, the study has demonstrated that religious identity during this period functioned as both a mechanism of conformity and a site of negotiation. Conversion to Christianity, particularly in carceral and rural contexts, often emerged as a strategic reorientation under pressure—motivated less by theological conviction than by the imperative to establish political legibility and social protection within a newly restructured state. Yet these acts of adaptation were not purely passive; they actively participated in reproducing and reshaping the emerging ideological and institutional order. By highlighting how religious affiliation operated as a form of structured agency, the study offers a conceptual contribution that extends beyond the descriptive accounts of fear and coercion. It positions religious conversion as a performative engagement with power—one that enabled individuals to survive, reposition themselves, and subtly redefine the contours of belonging within an authoritarian regime. In doing so, the article illustrates the analytical value of Giddens's structuration theory for understanding how faith, ideology, and identity co-evolve in times of systemic rupture.

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