

Art and Interreligious Dialogue: Knitting Harmony in the Indonesian Context



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Abstract

This article is an interreligious theological reflection of the author's eleven-year pastoral experience as Chair of the Commission on Interreligious Relations of the Archdiocese of Semarang, Indonesia. In that position, one of my tasks was to knit harmony and fraternity in diversity, especially among Catholics and Muslims, where art was chosen as one possible medium. I thereby discovered how art has contributed to interreligious dialogue and helped maintain a harmonious life in diversity. *Nostra Aetate 2* encourages Catholics and Muslims to train themselves to understand each other sincerely and jointly defend and promote social justice for all, moral values, peace, and freedom. In this article, I first explain art's role in establishing interreligious dialogue, especially in the Catholic and Islamic traditions. After that, I highlight the phenomenon of the use of art to engage in religious harmony in the Archdiocese of Semarang Indonesia, specifically between myself, as a Catholic priest, and Muslim figures. I suggest, through the lens of theological aesthetics and in the Indonesian context, that art has significantly promoted interreligious dialogue for a harmonious and peaceful life in diversity.

Keywords

art, diversity, harmonious life, interreligious dialogue, Catholics, Islam, theological aesthetics

It is essential for the reader to understand that Indonesia is a vast archipelago with more than 13,000 islands stretching 3,000 miles from east to west.¹ The country is known as a country of religious diversity and with the largest majority Muslim population in the world.² According to the Indonesian Population Census in 2010, a total of 207,176,162 residents in Indonesia were Muslims (87.18%). The Protestant Christian population was 16,528,513 (6.96%) and Catholics

¹ Fitria Fitriani, Bert Hofman and Kai Kaiser, "Unity in Diversity? The Creation of New Local Governments in a Decentralising Indonesia," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 41, no. 1 (2005): 57.

² Maksimus Regus, "Interreligious Conflicts in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: Assumptions, Causes, and Implications," *Jurnal Politik* 5, no. 2 (2022): 199–219.

were 6,907,873 (2.91%). Meanwhile, the Hindu population was about 4,012,116 (1.69%) and Buddhists were about 1,703,254 (0.72%). Further, the “youngest religion” recognized by the Indonesian government, i.e., Confucianism, was embraced by 117,091 people (0.05%). The other categories consist of 299,617 people (0.13%), 139,582 people (0.6%) who did not declare their beliefs, and about 757,118 (0.32%) people who were not asked.³ This reality has a double impact. On the one hand, there are positive facts about an inclusive, harmonious, and peaceful life.⁴ On the other hand, there are frequent interreligious tensions.⁵

According to research by Patrick Barron, Sana Jaffrey, and Ashutosh Varshney, after the fall of the New Order in 1998, Indonesia experienced “a peaceful phase”. What is meant by the “peaceful phase” after the collapse of the New Order regime under the authority of President Suharto is about how large-scale violence and conflicts subside and how the pattern of post-conflict violence emerges afterward. It cannot be denied that after the New Order regime, violence and conflict occurred massively in Indonesia with a period of high violence lasting until 2003.⁶ However, after that, the intensity and scale of violence decreased. Aggregately, conflicts have decreased, although old conflict locations still show relatively high levels of small-scale violence. Notwithstanding, Indonesia has entered a new post-conflict phase in which large-scale violence is rare, although small-scale violence remains unabated, often taking new forms, as for example in Ambon and Poso.⁷ Nevertheless, interfaith leaders in the related areas could handle this conflict properly with a dialogue approach, bearing in mind that the conflict is more of a socio-political nature than a conflict due to religion. Some disputes still occur, such as conflicts between Muslims and Christians (for example, the conflicts in Ambon and Poso as already mentioned) and tensions between Chinese and *Pribumi* (indigenous people).

That is what is called the “peaceful phase” after the New Order regime. In this phase, various movements are able to carry out a dialogue between religious adherents, even in areas experiencing conflict, as researched by Wening Udasmoro and Rahel Kunz.⁸ In this sense, violence can arise at any time, even in a seemingly benign condition.⁹ Most Indonesian Muslims are generally tolerant of other religions and beliefs; they are congenial and open-minded. These Muslims appreciate arts and local culture and prioritize social devotion while still adhering to mainstream Islamic teachings.¹⁰ Only a tiny part of Indonesian society is labeled as “radical” or “hardline.”¹¹ As spearheaded by the Islam Nusantara movement, most Muslims in Indonesia can

³ Central Bureau of Statistics, *Indonesian Population SP2010 Result - Population of Indonesia Result of Population Census 2010*, Central Bureau of Statistics - Statistics Indonesia, Jakarta, 2012, 113–130.

⁴ Gary D. Bouma, Rod Ling, Douglas Pratt, *Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia and the Pacific National Case Studies* (New York: Springer, 2010): 59–67.

⁵ Patrick Barron, Sana Jaffrey, and Ashutosh Varshney, “When Large Conflicts Subside: The Ebbs and Flows of Violence in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 191–217.

⁶ Barron, Jaffrey, and Varshney, 191

⁷ Mohammad Takdir, M Mushthafa, and Rozinah AS, “The Dynamics of Religious Conflict in Indonesia: Contestation and Resolution of Religious Conflicts in The New Order Age,” *Al-Adyan: Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (December 2021): 103–121

⁸ Wening Udasmoro and Rahel Kunz, “Art-for-Peace in Ambon: An Intersectional Reading,” *International Development Policy | Revue internationale de politique de développement* 13 (2021), <http://journals.openedition.org/poldev/4630>

⁹ Barron, Jaffrey and Varshney, 210.

¹⁰ Leonard Chrysostomos Epafra and Alan Brill, “Graduate Teaching in Indonesia as a Means of Interreligious Engagement,” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies*, 31 (Nov. 2020): 6.

¹¹ Maksimus Regus, 199–219.

meet face-to-face peacefully in one unitary Indonesia as a pluralist country and with Bhinneka Tunggal Ika as a framework for living together.¹²

In the Indonesian context, the Archdiocese of Semarang is one of thirty-eight dioceses representing the Indonesian Catholic Church in the Central Java province. As of 2021, the number of Catholics in Semarang Archdiocese was only 354,576 out of 36,516,035 residents of the province.¹³ As formulated in the Master Plan of the Archdiocese of Semarang 2016–2035 (*Rencana Induk Keuskupan Agung Semarang*, known as RIKAS 2016-2035), the Church of the Archdiocese of Semarang aspires to “always consistently present itself as a presence that remains relevant and meaningful to everyone, including in conducting interreligious dialogue.”¹⁴ This aspiration is seen in the vision of “the realization of a civilization of love in a prosperous, dignified, and faithful Indonesian society.”¹⁵ Such a vision can be realized, among others, by creating a harmonious and peaceful life through interreligious dialogue. In RIKAS 2016–2035, the use of art to create a *bonum commune* is also mentioned.¹⁶ As a comparison, the dream of realizing a *bonum commune* by using art for a peace-building movement is not impossible in Indonesia, as the research conducted by Udasmoro and Kunz on the role of art for interreligious peace and harmony in Ambon notes.¹⁷ Even amid ongoing conflicts, art can be an entry point for dialogue and realizing peace as one of the important aspects of the *bonum commune* to which RIKAS aspires.

In this context, I initiated a program to use art for interreligious dialogue, as I had done before the RIKAS was formulated. The program started when I was assigned as Chair of the Commission on Interreligious Relations of the Archdiocese of Semarang in 2008, where one task was making art an entry point to bring harmony in diversity. After eleven years of working with several Islamic clerics, youth, and adults across religions for dialogue, I found that art was one of the best ways to strengthen cooperation, harmony, and peace. I was increasingly convinced of the power of art to present a harmonious and peaceful life.

This study discusses art and Catholic-Islamic dialogue to strengthen a harmonious life in diversity. It also offers a new perspective on the relationship between the two based on true stories in light of interreligious dialogue and theology, especially in Catholic teachings. I first explain the role of art in interreligious dialogue—that is, between Catholic and Islamic traditions. Then, I attempt to portray how art can build interreligious dialogue in Indonesia, especially between Catholics and Muslims, from my own experience. Further, I reflect on the facts about interreligious dialogue according to the teachings of the Catholic Church. In this theological reflection, I focus on the importance of art for interreligious dialogue to establish a harmonious and peaceful life. Further, this study reflects on this artistic interreligious experience through the

¹² Rahma Fitria Purwaningsih and Doli Witro, “Islam Nusantara in Slogan Bhinneka Tunggal Ika: Al-Quran Perspective,” *Cakrawala: Jurnal Studi Islam* 15, no. 1 (2020): 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31603/cakrawala.v15i1.330>

¹³ Mgr. Dr. Robertus Rubiyatmoko, *Presentasi Temu Pastoral 2021 (Pastoral Meeting Presentation 2021)*. Unpublished.

¹⁴ Dewan Karya Pastoral Keuskupan Agung Semarang, *Rencana Induk Keuskupan Agung Semarang (Pastoral Council Team of the Semarang Archdiocese, The Master Plan of the Archdiocese of Semarang) 2016–2035*, (Semarang: DKP, 2015), 8.

¹⁵ Dewan Karya Pastoral, 55.

¹⁶ Dewan Karya Pastoral, 81.

¹⁷ Wening Udasmoro and Rahel Kunz.

lens of theological aesthetics.¹⁸ Theologically, such a life cannot be separated from God's will, as taught in all religions, including Catholicism and Islam. What is the role of the Beautiful, as a transcendental, in interreligious dialogue? Finally, this study will emphasize some conclusions and recommendations concerning the use of art in interreligious dialogue.

Role of Art in Catholic-Islamic Interreligious Dialogue

This paper is concerned with Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue, with the main focus on the significance of art as a medium for knitting a harmonious and peaceful life. In this section, I explore the Catholic Church's teachings on interreligious dialogue and the role of art as a medium to engage in it. In principle, at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Catholic Church officially taught the importance of Catholic-Islamic dialogue through the documents *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 2–3.¹⁹

In general, the Vatican II shift is considered more conducive to mutual understanding and collaboration between followers of different religions.²⁰ Vatican II has sparked the Church's enthusiastic desire to replace the confrontational attitude, between the Church and other religions, with a dialogical attitude. From my experience in the field, turning suspicion, hostility, and aggressive attitudes into dialogue can be done, among others, by using art media. However, there are always obstacles as explained in the next section.

How do we place the role of art in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue? First, it is taking place amid various cultures and religions. John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Beginning of the New Millennium) emphasized that “in the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism, which is expected to mark the society of the new

¹⁸ I am grateful to Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D, for his ideas and suggestions regarding this theological aesthetics lens.

¹⁹ *Lumen Gentium* 16 explicitly and respectfully mentions Muslims in the sentence: “In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind.” Indeed, later, the document continues: “Whatever good or truth is found amongst [those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God] is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel” (LM 16) as a basis for building dialogue and not confrontational attitude. *Nostra Aetate* (NA) is one of the most critical turning points in the history of Catholic-Muslim relations. According to Pope Benedict XVI, NA is the Magna Carta of the Catholic Church in terms of Muslim-Christian relations. NA articles number 2 and 3 are important for this paper as the theological basis for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue and the role of art in the dialogue process. In NA 2, it is taught, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, often reflect a ray of that Truth that enlightens all men... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve, and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” Meanwhile, NA 3 explains the attitude of the Catholic Church towards Muslims, “The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems [sic]. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth.” The combination of these teachings becomes a solid and essential basis for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue, including in terms of the importance of art as a medium.

²⁰ Tom Jacobs, “Gagasan-Gagasan Pokok Konsili Vatikan II (Main Ideas of the Second Vatican Council)”. *Spektrum*, XIV, no. 1–2 (1986): 23–53.

millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace.”²¹ Catholic-Islamic dialogue must include reciprocity and respect between the two parties to promote peaceful coexistence through loving one another in diversity.

Second, as Hans Küng maintained,²² intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a means for integration, exchange, harmony, and peaceful coexistence among people and various religious traditions is an urgent call. Religions must communicate and share wisdom between generations to guide humanity in overcoming socio-cultural gaps and filling the void of fragmentation to realize a peaceful and harmonious life. Art is one of the cultural products that can connect many parties, including those with different religious backgrounds,²³ and develop interreligious dialogue.

Third, the role of art in interreligious dialogue can be clarified as follows. Art can increase empathy and encourage more fruitful encounters between Catholics and Muslims. Effective Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue requires self-awareness of beliefs and a commitment to being considerate, responsive, and inclusive. The dialogue must involve mutual transformation for the benefit of all and positive changes that promote harmonious coexistence. Steadfast youth involvement in interreligious dialogue is considered imperative for sustainable harmony and peace in the future.²⁴

Fourth, the first three things that have been mentioned can be confirmed by the positive attitude of the Catholic Church based on the teachings of Vatican II, especially *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 2–3. The basic attitude of looking positively at other religions, including Islam, is even stated with the most important teaching: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions” (NA 2). Furthermore, “The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons (and daughters) that, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve, and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men” (NA 3).

Art has a vital role as a medium to realize these teachings in that context. Both the Catholic and Islamic traditions view art as a spiritual expression.²⁵ The role of art can be traced historically, spiritually, and contemporarily in religions, including Catholicism and Islam. Each religion has a history concerning the role of art in spiritual practice; in fact, contemporary artists link art and religion in the modern world.²⁶ The opportunity and space for Catholic-Islamic

²¹ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the beginning of the New Millennium), January 6 2001, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html (accessed February 29, 2024).

²² Hans Küng, “Replacing clashes with dialogue among religions and nations: toward a new paradigm of international relations,” in *War or Words? Interreligious Dialogue as an Instrument of Peace*. eds. Donald W. Musser and D. Dixon Sutherland (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 7–21.

²³ Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God—The Earliest Christians on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Pavlos E. Michaelides, “Interfaith Dialogue in Global Perspective and the Necessity of Youth Involvement”, *Asia Eur J*, 7 (2009): 449–62

²⁵ Michaelides, 458

²⁶ Caitlin Brosious, Emma Burgin, Andrea Dyer, and Maggie Knobbe, *Art Making to Inform Dialogue Across Spiritual Otherness in the Therapeutic Space*, (LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations. 908, 2020), 17. <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/908> (accessed February 29, 2024).

interreligious dialogue are becoming more evident through the example of the Popes—for example, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. Pope Francis’ initiative for dialogue with Muslims is a valuable contemporary example.²⁷

I strongly agree with Anand Amaladass, who argues that art has a mediating role among people of all cultures and religions.²⁸ Fundamentally, art always crosses boundaries. It plays a vital role because it has the potential to appeal to people of all tastes and beliefs. That is why art is a powerful medium for bringing people together and acting as a peacemaker, even amidst conflict in diversity. Art and religion undeniably need each other to bring about a harmonious and peaceful life. Hence, dialogue between Catholic-Islamic religions through art undoubtedly supports harmony in life. Below, experiences are explored to construct the significance of art in knitting inter-religious harmony in the Indonesian context.

Looking at the Indonesian Context from the Author’s Experiences

There are three critical studies on the facts of art and interfaith dialogue in Indonesia.²⁹ As stated by Fatimah Husein, the reflection of activists in addressing the most pressing issues related to the management of diversity in Indonesia connects art with tolerance to develop interreligious relations in a local context that involves the youth.³⁰

I seek to knit interfaith dialogue in diversity to promote harmony and peace in these areas and involve young people and adults. I engaged in interreligious dialogue as a true story, one which focused on art as a medium. In this sense, I combined music, Sufi dance, and educational films. Those media have become tools and played an essential role in my service as Chair of the Commission on Interreligious Relations of the Archdiocese of Semarang. The following are some examples of interreligious dialogue with art to knit harmony carried out by actors and groups from Catholic and Muslim communities. Here, art to promote a harmonious life between Islam and Catholicism has become a catalyst in developing cooperation, mutual understanding, and love. I describe three crucial experiences related to art used as a medium for conducting interreligious dialogue for harmony in diversity. All three included Sufi music and dance, music and poetry, and documentary films.

²⁷ Salih Yucel and Tahir Muhammad, “Pope Francis’ Dialogue Initiatives with Muslims: Opportunities and Challenges.” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 3 (2021): 56–68.

²⁸ Anand Amaladass, “Christian Muslim Dialogue through Art Forms”, in *Lord the Air Smells Good: Felicitation volume in honor of Fr. Paul Jackson S.J.*, eds. Amaladass & Victor Edwin (Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2018): 130–45.

²⁹ For example, David Harnish, “Music, Identities, and Interreligious Relationships at the Lingsar Festival in Lombok, Indonesia,” *Interreligious and Intercultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 2019); Claudia Seise, “Reflecting on Religion in a Plural Society: Artistic Perspectives from Indonesia,” *www.ias.asia*, 2022; Diane Butler, “Peace and Harmony in the World Based on Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity),” *Harmoni: Jurnal Multikultural & Multireligius*, 15, no.2 (2016).

³⁰ Fatimah Husein, “Youth Expressions of Religiosity through Dialogue in Indonesia,” *International Journal of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies (IJIIS)*, 2 no. 2 (2019): 1–17.

First, in developing interreligious dialogue through music and Sufi dance, I collaborated with KH. Amin Maulana Budi Harjono, an Islamic leader in Indonesia.³¹ Kiai Budi, as popularly known, is the founder of Pesantren Al-Islah Tembalang Semarang. He collaborates often in interreligious dialogue programming through the medium of Sufi Dance. Based in Semarang City, Kiai Budi has traveled to various regions in Indonesia to promote harmony and peace with that dance.³² He has thousands of Sufi dancers scattered throughout Indonesia. According to him, the teachings of Sufism are the needs of modern society.³³

However, my meeting and acquaintance with Kiai Budi, who, together with his students, developed Islamic da'wah through Sufi dance, has changed the way I create interreligious dialogue. He combines Sufi music and dance as a means of dialogue. I can play guitar and baby saxophone even though I am not very professional at playing them. Nevertheless, such a skill seems adequate to become an entry point in conducting interreligious dialogue through Sufi music and dance. Next, the collaboration continues in various interfaith events and activities. I play my guitar or saxophone, and the Sufi dancers dance to my song. Usually, Sufi dances are performed to accompany Islamic music, such as a tambourine. However, my Catholic hymn did not stop them from performing Sufi dances. This point is where the beautiful phenomenon through art as a medium to build interreligious dialogue begins.

My first performance in collaboration with Kiai Budi took place in the public space "Taman Wonderia" Semarang, when we held a joint Christmas celebration in 2010. The performance has been a beautiful phenomenon, though it may be seen as controversial from a conservative Islamic perspective. In Indonesia, wishing Merry Christmas to Christians from Muslims can create controversy within the Muslim community itself.³⁴ Some Muslim leaders even prohibit Muslims from wearing Christmas attributes, as stated in the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) fatwa number 57 of 2016 concerning the use of non-Muslim religious attributes.³⁵ Therefore, in my reflection, attending Christmas celebrations, especially with Sufi dances as part of the celebration, is a unique and beautiful choice amid controversy. In such an atmosphere, I suggest that the presence and dance of Sufis at Christmas celebrations is an example of positive action that breaks down the dividing wall, especially between Muslims and Catholics.

After the first experience of collaborating on music and Sufi dance in a public place, there were other beautiful yet controversial moments. I collaborated with the Sufi dancers in the courtyard and inside the Church. At least four collaborative performances took place on the Church grounds. The first was a Catholic and Muslim woman meeting in the courtyard of

³¹ Izul Adib, "Islam Mazhab Cinta": *Pemikiran Tasawuf Kiai Amin Maulana Budi Harjono dan Penyebarannya di Semarang, 1990-2011*, (Semarang: Fakultas Ilmu Budaya. Universitas Diponegoro, 2017) ["Islam of the School of Love": *The Sufism Thoughts of Kiai Amin Maulana Budi Harjono and Its Spread in Semarang, 1990-2011*, (Semarang: Faculty of Cultural Studies. Diponegoro University, 2017)], xx.

³² Ninik Wijayanti, "Kesenian Tari Sufi: Studi Nilai Budaya dan Potensinya Sebagai Sumber Pembelajaran Antropologi di MAN 1 Magetan", *Gulawentah: Jurnal Studi Sosial*, 4, no. 2 (2019): 102–113; See also Abdullah Alawi, "999 Penari Sufi Masuki GBK Sambil Bernyanyi Ya Lal Wathon," January, 26, 2019.

³³ Ahmad Naufa and Zulus, "Kiai Budi dan Ajaran Sufisme sebagai Kebutuhan Masyarakat Modern" July 10, 2017, <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/kiai-budi-dan-ajaran-sufisme-sebagai-kebutuhan-masyarakat-modern-HT7Yt> (accessed February 29, 2024).

³⁴ Hans A. Harmakaputra, "Say "No" to Christmas? An Analysis of the Islamic Fatwa on the Prohibition against Wearing Non-Muslim Symbols in Indonesia", *The Muslim World*, 110, Issue 4: (20 September 2020): 502–517.

³⁵ Hans A. Harmakaputra, 502–517.

“Gereja Kristus Raja” (Christ the King Church), located in Ungaran, Semarang Regency.³⁶ The second was the art and cultural performance on the twenty-first anniversary of the author’s ordination as a priest in the same place.³⁷ The third was during a Ramadan iftar in the courtyard of the Church of St. Francis Xavier Kebon Dalem of Semarang City with Mrs. Sinta Nuriyah Abdurahman Wahid (former First Lady of the Republic of Indonesia, wife of the fourth President of the Republic of Indonesia named President Abdurahman Wahid).³⁸ The fourth happened at the Maria shrine in Ambarawa, Semarang Regency, on the 50th anniversary of Nostra Aetate.³⁹ The Institute for the Study of Society and Religion, which is an Islam-based non-governmental organization, called this moment a step toward being more open to conducting interreligious dialogue through art.⁴⁰ I played the saxophone at all these events while the Sufi dancers danced collaboratively.

Later, the most controversial moment occurred when Kiai Budi himself performed a Sufi dance inside the cathedral in front of thousands of people. This event happened on November 12, 2015, when the people paid their last respects to the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Semarang who passed away on November 10, 2015. At my request, Kiai Budi performed a Sufi dance beside the coffin to the accompaniment of “Ndherek Dewi Maria” (literally means following in the footsteps of the Virgin Mary), a viral traditional Javanese Catholic song.⁴¹

Why did I ask Kiai Budi to dance beside Bishop Johannes Pujasumarta? First, after I brought them together, they accepted, respected, and befriended one another. Second, every Eid, I took Mgr. Johannes to visit the Kiai Budi’s pesantren. Third, when Mgr. Johannes was critically ill due to lung cancer, he always asked about Kiai Budi and his Sufi dancers. Those were the reasons why, when Mgr. Johannes passed away, I informed Kiai Budi and asked him to dance beside the coffin as a last sign of respect to Mgr. Johannes. Kiai Budi agreed and granted my request. Even though he was in another city, he immediately returned to Semarang to dance

³⁶ Syahrul Munir, “Ketika Tausiah Kiai Diiringi Lantunan Saksofon Seorang Romo (When Tausiah Kiai is Accompanied by a Father’s Saxophone Chanting),” *Kompas.com*, March 10, 2016; see also BBC, “Ketika perempuan berkerudung Muslim dan Kristiani menyerukan persahabatan dan toleransi (When Muslim and Christian veiled women call for friendship and tolerance),” *bbc.com*, March 11, 2016.

³⁷ Syahrul Munir, “Saat Budayawan Lintas Iman Meriahkan Imamat Seorang Pastor Katolik,” *Kompas.com*, July 12, 2017.

³⁸ Lukas Awi Tristanto, “Shinta Nuriyah Wahid Melihat Wajah Indonesia Seutuhnya di Kebon Dalem (Shinta Nuriyah Wahid Sees the Full Face of Indonesia at Kebon Dalem),” *penakatolik.com*, June 30, 2015; see also Cahyono, “Shinta Nuriyah: Sahur Bersama Sebagai Ungkapan Persaudaraan Sesama (Shinta Nuriyah: Sahur Together as an Expression of Brotherhood),” 2015.

³⁹ Anik Sulistyawati, “FOTO PENTAS BUDAYA: Saat Tarian Sufi Tersaji di Pelataran Gua Maria dalam Pentas Lintas Agama (PHOTOS OF CULTURAL PERFORMANCES: When Sufi Dances are Presented in the Court of the Maria Caves in Interfaith Performances),” *Solopos.com*, October 19, 2015; see also Munif, “Indahnya Tarian Jiwa Lintas Iman” (The Beauty of the Inter-Faith Soul Dance),” 2015 in <https://elsaonline.com/indahnya-tarian-jiwa-lintas-iman> (accessed February 29, 2024).

⁴⁰ In Indonesian, this institution is called *Lembaga Studi Sosial dan Agama* (eLSA).

⁴¹ The author’s reportage narration about this event with some photos was published by *Sesawi.net*, November 12, 2015; see also “Kiai Sufi Penari di Gereja Kirim Jenazah Uskup Semarang, (Kiai Sufi Dancer at the Church Sending the Body of the Bishop of Semarang),” November 14, 2015, <https://assunnahbuntok2013.wordpress.com> (accessed February 29, 2024).

in the Sufi manner in the Cathedral Church where the body of Mgr. Johannes was placed before his funeral in Yogyakarta.⁴²

This moment showed the beauty of harmony in diversity for the said religious followers and society in general. However, for a small number of certain groups in Islam, the moment was seen negatively. It was even seen as an extreme action and not following Islamic *aqeedah* (theological creed).⁴³

Second, still with Kiai Budi, I got space to practice interreligious dialogue through a documentary film. The film was produced by the Education and Culture Policy Research Center, Research and Development, Research and Development Agency, Ministry of Education and Culture.⁴⁴ The film's purpose is to promote interreligious dialogue in society in general and in students in particular. The film was titled "Merajut Persaudaraan Sejati (Knitting the True Brotherhood)." In this film, Kiai Budi and I became the main characters who move to build true brotherhood through interreligious dialogue. The film, just over 25 minutes, showed a friendship through interreligious dialogue where Kiai Budi and I represented Islam and Catholicism. The film also featured another figure named Harjanto Halim, a culturist and humanist of Chinese ethnicity.

Third, I collaborated for interreligious dialogue using music media and poetry reading. At least two appearances can be described in this study. First, I had the opportunity to collaborate with a great and influential Indonesian Islamic cleric named KH. Ahmad Mustofa Bisri (known as Gus Mus). He is an inclusive figure in working together to build harmony through poetry. Gus Mus is the caregiver for Pesantren Raudhatut Thalibin Rembang, Central Java, Indonesia. In an event broadcasted by national television (Metro TV), the author and Gus Mus collaborated through art media. At the moment, Gus Mus read his poem entitled "Sajak Atas Nama" (Poem in the Name), and I accompanied him with the saxophone strains. While Gus Mus was reading his poem, I sang an instrumental Islamic song called "Tamba Ati" (Cure of Heart) and closed the performance with a Catholic song called "Kasih" (love).⁴⁵ Next, in front of Gus Mus and poets gathered at the University of Semarang, I musicalized Gus Mus's poem entitled "Dhikr" (remembrance).⁴⁶ Gus Mus and I made *dhikr* together through his poem accompanied by the saxophone. There, I invited all participants—consisting of students, poets, and other guests—to sing the poem according to the tune I sang. In both events, it became apparent that music and poetry served as interreligious dialogue. The dialogue occurred not only

⁴² Paul C Pati (PCP), "Tari Sufi oleh Kiai Budi Harjana untuk Pemberangkatan Jenazah Mgr. Pujasumarta (Sufi Dance by Kiai Budi Harjana for the Departure of the Burial of Mgr. Pujasumarta)", *penakatolik.com*, November 12, 2015. Data about Kiai Budi Harjono dancing near the coffin of Mgr. Johannes, at my request, was also featured in the headlines on the front page of *Koran Pagi Wawasan*, a local Central Java newspaper. Wawasan, November 15, 2015: 1.

⁴³ Aliya Najwa, "Keblabasan, Kiai Menari Sufi di Gereja berangkatkan Jenazah Pendeta (Exaggerated, Kiai Dancing Sufi in the Church sends the Pastor's Coffin)", November 13, 2015.

⁴⁴ The full film could be watched at this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6FfhDc96N8> (accessed February 29, 2024).

⁴⁵ Mahbib, "Ketika Romo Katolik Mencium Tangan Gus Mus" (When the Catholic Priest Kissed Gus Mus's Hand), April 14, 2016, *nu.or.id*, <https://nu.or.id/nasional/ketika-romo-katolik-mencium-tangan-gus-mus-RsAZs> (accessed March 1, 2024).

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6BTPkawELg> (accessed March 1, 2024).

between me and Gus Mus but also among audiences to experience a harmonious life through music and poetry.

Theological Reflections: Lessons Learned

I now offer my theological reflections on the experiences of knitting a dialogue between Catholic-Islamic religions for the realization of harmonious and peaceful life. Interreligious dialogue through art confirms some basic theological principles. First, my experience is the practice of the Church's approach to Islam according to Vatican II theology. Both *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 3 teach and encourage Catholics to respect Muslims. *Nostra Aetate* contains a schema for building a relationship with Islam and other religions and demands that the Catholic Church respect Muslims and details central to Islamic teaching. It also emphasizes characteristics common to both religions, such as referring to God, who is living and eternal, merciful and omnipotent, and creating the earth and heaven.⁴⁷ In particular, collaboration through artistic performances helps show that the teachings on the universality of God's saving will and the sacramental nature of life are not mere teachings but can be put into practice.

Second, my experiences confirm that art can play a crucial role in bringing disparate groups together in a constructive way, including in interreligious dialogue. Art can break down the dividing walls and barriers of religious differences. In this regard, the term "interreligious dialogue" refers to positive and cooperative interactions between people of different religious backgrounds to increase their understanding so that they may accept each other. Through cooperation, they will have mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance.⁴⁸

Third, according to Ephrat Huss, art has reduced tension, opened dialogue, and facilitated smooth communication for anyone involved in the activity.⁴⁹ Like therapy, it allows everyone involved in interfaith dialogue to contribute to creating harmony. This value is important for facing complex diversity challenges and understanding different faith traditions.⁵⁰ It is undeniable that there are challenges from various parties regarding this harmony in diversity due to rigid political rhetoric, stereotypes, and misunderstandings about different religious expressions. However, in general, art can fulfill people's needs for understanding and awareness to live together with mutual respect.

Fourth, by referring to Pope Francis' teachings in the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), there is an "architecture" of peace, in which different institutions of society contribute according to their area of expertise.⁵¹ The "art" of peace also involves all of us. Through art, "we have learned that these ways of making peace, of placing

⁴⁷ Anthony O'Mahony, "Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam at the Second Vatican Council," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1016 (2007): 385–98.

⁴⁸ See Academy for Cultural Diplomacy Research Historical, "Examples of Inter-faith Dialogue Achievements, Examples of Interfaith Dialogue that Contribute Toward the Understanding of Global Religious Traditions", https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en_historical-examples

⁴⁹ Ephrat Huss, *A Theory-Based Approach to Art Therapy* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁵⁰ Debra Linesch, "Imagery in Interfaith Dialogue: Informed by the Practices of Art Psychotherapy," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 53, April (2017): 23–27.

⁵¹ Pope Francis, *The Encyclical Fratelli Tutti*, (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 1

reason above revenge, of the delicate harmony between politics and law, cannot ignore the involvement of ordinary people” (FT 231).

Artistic Interreligious Experiences in Theological Aesthetics Lens

In this section, I further examine my artistic interreligious experiences through the lens of theological aesthetics. What role does the Beautiful, as a transcendental, have in interreligious dialogue? First, I believe that the Beautiful is the only source of art and is an important element that answers the need to create peace and live together in diversity. Secondly, the author’s experiences of synergizing art in the context of interreligious dialogue between Catholicism and Islam to knit harmony can be a gateway to worship God as the Beautiful in the framework of theological aesthetics. As already reflected in the previous section, collaboration through artistic performances helps show that the teachings on the universality of God’s saving will and the sacramental nature of life are not mere teachings but can be put into practice. Basically, art and religion have similarities in several aspects. Religious and artistic spaces, the use of religious elements in art, and vice versa, allow an understanding of art through theological aesthetics, even aesthetic theology.⁵²

Theological aesthetics has experienced a revival from the late 20th century to the present, largely due to the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar argues that Christianity is a religion of Beauty that speaks par excellence in the frame of theological aesthetics. Theological aesthetics is a powerful discipline offering multiple perspectives, each seeking to explain how God, faith, and theology relate to human perception, beauty, and art.⁵³

Balthasar presented the most systematic conceptualization of theological aesthetics. Theological aesthetics seeks to show that aesthetics expresses a core “truth.” Fundamentally, the source of all human experience is the same. So instead of reducing all traditional truths and ethics to aesthetics, we can also show how all aesthetics points to basic truths and ethical principles. Theological aesthetics can be seen as an attempt to show how one arrives at some fundamental principles aesthetically—by demonstrating a fundamental unity, or at least an analogy between aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical principles.⁵⁴ Balthasar explains that the Christian notion of beauty, especially divine beauty, must cover everything else, including worldly aesthetics. Beauty is an aspect of truth that cannot be matched by any definition. Beauty always exerts its gravitational pull on truth. Beauty is in essence always a gift that encompasses every truth in so far as it is an expression of its original being.⁵⁵

According to Kathryn B. Alexander, “theological aesthetics seeks to affirm the human capacity to know and love God as Beauty through the experience of beauty.”⁵⁶ There is a religious aspect to the revelatory and redemptive experience of beauty we experience through

⁵² Sixto J. Castro, “Beyond Theological Aesthetics: Aesthetic Theology.” *Religions* 13: 311 (2022): 3.

⁵³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics*. Translated by Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil; edited by John Riches (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982–1991).

⁵⁴ Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor, *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008): xii–xiii.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, 124, 143.

⁵⁶ Kathryn B. Alexander, *Saving Beauty, a Theological Aesthetics of Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014): 6.

sensory events. That is why, as Hans Urs von Balthasar concludes, we can know God through our senses. Thus, the experience of worldly beauty can deepen our knowledge of the Divine.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Having learned from real-life experiences, I argue that art has played an essential role in encouraging interreligious dialogue for a harmonious, brotherly, and peaceful life in diversity. The teachings of the Catholic Church have also confirmed this notion. Art is one possible way of establishing Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue.

Art as a cultural component is vital in knitting harmonious and peaceful life. This statement is true and supported by my experience as an actor in the use of art in interreligious dialogue in the Archdiocese of Semarang, Indonesia. It also confirms the significance and effectiveness of art as a medium for building Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue to bring about a harmonious, brotherly, and peaceful life. Through this reflection, the author attempts to understand art as a starting point for studying interreligious dialogue, especially between Islam and Catholicism. From that point, we can obviously confirm a view and foothold that art is essential in encouraging interfaith dialogue for a harmonious, brotherly, and peaceful life in diversity.

Faced with the diversity in Indonesia, some people try to escape reality, while others react to it with destructive violence. The author recommends that art be used to knit Catholic-Islamic dialogue for the realization of harmonious and peaceful life. This recommendation also applies to all other religions. A harmonious and peaceful life develops when constructive dialogue occurs between the many components of art and culture; these two can be used as a medium for this purpose.

Dialogue using art can even become a space for developing deeper theological reflections on theological aesthetics. In this reflection, experiences of knitting harmony through dialogue based on art and culture bring together all people regardless of their religion and belief in God as the source of beauty, truth, and justice.

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