

Perseverance and Recognition: The Struggle of JAGI Church in Establishing its Unitarian Christian Identity

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Abstract: This article aims to examine the development, challenges, and dynamics of the JAGI Church concerning religious freedom in Indonesia. This research seeks to answer fundamental questions about the identity of the JAGI Church, its mission, its influence in Indonesia's social and religious realms, and the various challenges it faces in the form of discrimination. The research methodology applied to the JAGI Church study uses a qualitative descriptive approach. This research methodology also integrates a historical contextualization approach, which aims to provide a different understanding by placing these events in Indonesia's broader historical, social, and religious context. The results of this research demonstrate a deep understanding of the dynamics of religious freedom and the challenges faced by the JAGI Church in achieving official recognition, as well as describing their efforts in fighting for interreligious dialogue and creating an environment of mutual respect and tolerance. This article also links the JAGI Church case study with the thinking of religious freedom experts, thus providing new insight into the complexities of protecting and promoting religious freedom in the context of a multicultural society like Indonesia.

Keywords: JAGI Church, Unitarian, Persecution, Recognition, Religious Movement

A. Introduction

Various issues related to religious freedom and freedom of belief have become a major concern throughout the world and have become the focus of study and documentation by various trusted organizations and institutions, as stated by the Pew Research Center¹ and the UN Human Rights Council.² Some of

¹ Pew Research Center, "Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly, but Social Hostilities Involving Religion Increase Significantly," 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/23/global-restrictions-on-religion-rise-modestly-but-social-hostilities-involving-religion-increase-significantly/>.

² United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief," 2011, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/AnnualReports.aspx>.

these challenges include: religion-based discrimination and abuse; restrictions in religious practices or beliefs; abuse of law to suppress religious freedom; and limited protection for minority or marginalized religious groups. The JAGI (Jemaat Allah Global Indonesia) Church as Unitarian Church is the result of an amalgamation of two fellowship groups led by different religious figures, with the aim of fully exploring the essence of the teachings of Jesus Christ. This merging process reflects liminal stages in changes in religious identity and understanding, as well as efforts to bridge the gap between existing religious traditions and the idealism of the teachings of Jesus Christ.³

This church phenomenon gave rise to a deep reflection on the complexity of the history of the formation of dogma in the Christian realm, especially as a result of the great influence of Hellenistic-Roman culture which changed the direction of the focus of Christian teaching from the initial tradition that had its source in Jesus Christ and his followers.⁴ In a spirit of openness and respect for diverse views within the Christian community, the founders of the JAGI church conducted in-depth exploration and critical examination of fundamental doctrines in the Christian tradition. This action was carried out with the aim of bridging the gap between the existing understanding of Christian teachings and the idealism of the teachings of Jesus Christ, as if re-exploring the pure roots of this religion.⁵ Even though it is faced with various challenges, such as controversy and tests of various beliefs, the JAGI church remains steadfast in its determination to deepen understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ and make significant contributions to the diverse religious panorama in Indonesia. With a strong vision, JAGI church defines itself as "a place of worship that recognizes Divine truth, lives according to the example of Jesus Christ, brings light to the world, and prepares the congregation to live a holy life welcoming the coming of Jesus Christ." The existence of this church, with its center in Semarang, Central Java, as well as

³ Alfred Eduard Wajabula, "A Critical Study of Victor Turner's Liminality, Religion, and Nationality," *Jurnal Theologia*; Vol 34, No 2 (2023) DO - 10.21580/Teo.2023.34.2.17798, April 22, 2024, <https://journal.walisongo.ac.id/index.php/teologia/article/view/17798>; Stephen Bigger, "Victor Turner, Liminality, and Cultural Performance," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 30, no. 2 (2009): 209–12.

⁴ Abdon Arnolus Amtiran, "Memetakan Mazhab Teologi Di Dalam Kekristenan: Sebuah Catatan Sejarah," *Asian Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2022): 59–72.

⁵ Herry Sonya Corneles, Jefry Yopie Afner Suak, and Veydy Yanto Mangantibe, "Analisis Kritis Terhadap Konsep Kristologi Penganut Kristen Tauhid," *TELEIOS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 1, no. 2 (2021): 130–43.

branches in several other areas, shows the increasing influence and acceptance of JAGI church teachings in various levels of Indonesian society. Through its three core missions, the JAGI church aims to build and maintain the unity of the congregation's faith, preach Biblical truth, and make a real contribution to the community, nation and country where the church is located. In carrying out its mission, the JAGI church shows a unique approach by prioritizing spiritual renewal and community service. On July 26 2000, in the era of President Abdurrahman Wahid, the JAGI Church succeeded in obtaining approval for registration as a church entity from the Directorate General of Christian Community Guidance, Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, which is famous for its pluralistic thinking that respects diversity, including ethnicity, religion, culture, etc.⁶

The purpose of writing this article is to describe the development, challenges and contributions of the JAGI church in Indonesian society. This research aims to respond to essential questions regarding the identity of the JAGI church, its missions, its influence in the social and religious realms in Indonesia, as well as the various challenges it faces in the form of discrimination. The research results found that the JAGI church carries a unique approach in carrying out its mission, by focusing on spiritual renewal and community service. Apart from that, personal diplomacy efforts have also been made to obtain recognition from the government. The hypothesis is that even though the JAGI church has been given recognition by the state, society does not simply accept and agree with the decision, but there are dynamics that require a more personal approach in the real world, which goes beyond just formal recognition from the government.

B. Literatur Review

Evangelical missions have complex principles, involving in-depth education, consistent living example, sincere sincerity, and lifelong learning for evangelists. In the context of religious expression in virtual media, it is important to ensure that evangelism is carried out with a holy purpose, the content of the message is pure in accordance with the teachings of Christ, the delivery method is in

⁶ Naffa Isyafa Iskandar et al., "Dinamika Kehidupan Umat Beragama di Kota Semarang: Telaah Peran Gus Dur Dan Gus Durian," *TOLERANSI: Media Ilmiah Komunikasi Umat Beragama* 15, no. 1 (n.d.): 60–68.

accordance with Christian values, and there is conformity between words and actions.⁷ Additionally, the Unitarian Church faces pressure from fellow Christians and Muslims due to their differing views on the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ, as well as disputes regarding the use of the word "Allah" or "tauhid" in different contexts.

Unitarianism often faces persecution, as happened in Maryland, United States when the Jewish Bill was proposed, playing an important role in the debate on religious rights because unitarians do not receive certainty of legal status or political rights.⁸ Allegations that the teachings of the JAGI Church are Christian deflections and Christian impurity also arise from within Christianity itself.⁹ In addition, the majority of Christians are also opposed to the Christian beliefs of Tauhid or the JAGI Church.¹⁰ In fact, there is a view that oneness or unitarianism as adhered to by the JAGI Church is heresy.¹¹ This conflict is not only limited to theological aspects, but is also related to the method used by the JAGI Church in finding followers. The door-to-door approach used by the JAGI Church in their mission has led to a struggle for sheep.¹²

Persecution against the Unitarian Church does not only come from Christians, but also from Muslims because they use the same monotheistic symbols. In Malaysia, some Christian leaders are fighting for the right to use the word "Allah" in the context of the Trinity and the translation of the word "God" in

⁷ Carolina Etnasari Anjaya, "Fenomena Persekusi Ekspresi Beragama Dalam Perspektif Pendidikan Kristen," *Jurnal Lentera Nusantara* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1–12.

⁸ Eric Eisner, "'Suffer Not the Evil One': Unitarianism and the 1826 Maryland Jew Bill," *Journal of Religious History* 44, no. 3 (2020): 338–55.

⁹ Corneles, Suak, and Mangantibe, "Analisis Kritis Terhadap Konsep Kristologi Penganut Kristen Tauhid."

¹⁰ Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, "Amanat Kasih Sebagai Ciri Bersama Islam-Kristiani: Sebuah Tanggapan Teologis Kontekstual Protestan," *Gema Teologi* 39, no. 1 (2015): 57–72.

¹¹ Hanny Setiawan and Joseph Christ Santo, "Kajian Historis Teologis Oneness Pentecostalism: Studi Kasus," *MAGNUM OPUS: Jurnal Teologi Dan Kepemimpinan Kristen* 2, no. 1 (2020): 13–26.

¹² Syaiful Arif, "Pandangan Pemimpin Gereja Tentang Pengaturan Organisasi Gereja Di Kota Semarang, Jawa Tengah," in *Pemimpin Gereja Moratorium Organisasi Gereja Dan HAM*, ed. Nuhriason M. Nuh (Jakarta: Puslitbang Kehidupan Keagamaan Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2015), 167–206.

the Malay Bible.¹³ However, different understandings of the word "Allah" between Christians and Muslims create sensitive conflicts in multicultural societies. Even though they share the same words, the meanings and concepts contained in them can vary according to the beliefs and teachings of each religion. This is interesting even though ancient Christian anti-Trinitarian traditions and Unitarian theology were once the policy of the Ottoman Empire regarding pan-Islamism as a response to secularism.¹⁴

One of the main challenges in dealing with the issue of freedom of religion in Indonesia is the lack of adequate legal recognition for religious minorities¹⁵. In this context, the importance of interfaith dialogue that respects and understands differences in beliefs and provides opportunities to share views about God honestly and openly becomes increasingly apparent.

C. Methods

The research methodology adopted for this study of the JAGI Church uses a qualitative approach to comprehensively examine its historical trajectory, with particular emphasis on the challenges it faced during its founding, the factors that contributed to its eventual recognition, and the ongoing ones. Problems of discrimination in the Christian church community. This research methodology also integrates a historical contextualization approach that aims to provide a different understanding by placing these events in a broader historical, social and religious context in Indonesia. By examining the political climate, religious landscape, and prevailing social attitudes during key periods, this study seeks to uncover the external influences that shaped the development of the JAGI Church. In-depth interviews with key figures including Elder/Priest Tjahjadi Nugroho and Elder/Priest Aryanto Nugroho serve as primary data sources to capture the diverse perspectives and motivations behind the creation of this foundation, from

¹³ R Mohd Ramly and Muhammad Khairi Mahyuddin, "Kalimah Allah: Tinjauan Ringkas Terhadap Maksud Dan Penggunaannya Dalam Kalangan Pemimpin Kristian," *Jurnal Sains Insani* 04, no. 2 (2019): 2–27.

¹⁴ Wael Abu-Uksa, "Heterodox Christianity, Unitarianism and the Harmonization of Monotheism: The 'Heresy' of Khriṣṭufūrus Jibāra in Nineteenth-Century Syria," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 32, no. 4 (2021): 361–82.

¹⁵ Zainal Abidin Bagir and Renata Arianingtyas, "Limitations to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Indonesia: Norms and Practices," *Religion & Human Rights* 15, no. 1–2 (2020): 39–56.

JAGI Church. These interviews are supplemented by official government resolutions, historical records and internal church publications, which form a comprehensive data set for thematic analysis. This analysis identifies and interprets patterns in the data and highlights important turning points and key events in the history of the JAGI Church. Despite possible limitations such as retrospective bias and sensitivity to religious issues, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of religious pluralism and interreligious dynamics in contemporary Indonesian society.

D. Result and Discussion

Jemaat Allah Global Indonesia, previously known as Christian Tauhid, has experienced serious challenges, especially in the context of persecution by several Muslim groups. This conflict mainly arises due to differences in interpretation of the meaning of monotheism, which is a core concept in Islam, but is adopted differently by JAGI as a unitary Christian church. This difference in understanding underscores the complexity and challenges faced in achieving tolerance and interreligious dialogue in multicultural societies.

Persecution against JAGI did not only come from Muslim groups, but also from within the Christian church itself. Accusations that JAGI's teachings constitute a deviation from Christianity and Christian impurity highlight internal tensions within Christian denominations towards divergent thought. In fact, most Christians oppose JAGI beliefs, viewing them as heretical. This conflict is not only related to theological aspects, but also to the da'wah methods used by JAGI, such as the door-to-door approach, which is considered controversial and causes inter-religious competition.

JAGI leader, Pastor Aryanto Nugroho, shared the bitter experience of the church during 1994-1998 when it was still known as Christian Tauhid. During this period, the church faced rejection from other Christian denominations, even being accused of spreading heresy. The church's journey to get official recognition from the government was also not easy. Their request to be recognized as a new church denomination met resistance due to the strict requirements of existing Christian bodies.

Despite facing resistance from various parties, JAGI continues to strive for dialogue with other Islamic and Christian groups. However, these efforts are often

seen as attempts to mislead or hide one's true identity. Nevertheless, in 2000, the JAGI Church succeeded in obtaining official recognition from the Indonesian government, especially thanks to support from President Abdurrahman Wahid who prioritizes pluralism. Even though receiving official recognition, JAGI still faces various forms of discrimination from various parties, including from the Christian community itself. Accusations that their worship on Saturdays resembled Jewish practices, as well as their habit of avoiding certain foods, became a source of discrimination and negative judgment from outside. This shows that a lack of understanding of the teachings and beliefs held by the church causes discomfort for its members and makes it difficult for them to practice their religion freely.

1. Challenges Related to Religious Freedom at the Global Level

In contemporary society, issues related to religious freedom have emerged as an important issue throughout the world, taking the form of discrimination, oppression, and violence against individuals and groups based on their religious beliefs. These challenges are complex, involving both state and non-state actors as oppressors. The complexity of this challenge highlights the need for a thorough examination of the factors contributing to the erosion of religious freedom globally.

One of the most pressing challenges is the widespread prevalence of discrimination, oppression, and violence targeting individuals and communities because of their religious beliefs. Such acts of oppression can take various forms, including physical violence, social exclusion, economic marginalization, and legal discrimination. State-sponsored repression, as well as violence perpetrated by non-state actors such as extremist groups or communal factions, exacerbates the vulnerability of religious minorities and undermines the principle of religious freedom upheld in international human rights instruments.

Another significant challenge relates to the imposition of restrictions on the free exercise of religious practice by some individuals or groups. These restrictions may stem from legislative measures, government policies, or social norms that limit religious freedom and inhibit individuals from freely expressing and manifesting their religious beliefs. Physical barriers, such as denial of permits to build places of worship or hold religious ceremonies, further impede individuals' ability to practice their beliefs without interference or restriction.

While seemingly designed to protect religious freedom, some laws and regulations can be manipulated or misused to justify discrimination or oppression against certain religious groups. Abuse of this legal framework creates a climate of injustice and impunity, where individuals or communities are unjustly targeted and given their rights under the guise of legal legitimacy. The reversal of laws intended to protect religious freedom emphasizes the need for greater accountability and oversight to prevent their abuse for discriminatory purposes.

Religious minority groups, because of their marginalized status and limited political influence, are especially vulnerable to discrimination and oppression. Their small size and lack of institutional support make them vulnerable to targeted violence and abuse, often carried out with impunity due to inadequate legal protections and social indifference. The systematic disregard for the rights of religious minorities reflects broader societal attitudes towards religious diversity and emphasizes the urgency of addressing structural inequalities to ensure fair access to religious freedom for all individuals, regardless of their religious affiliation.

2. A New Understanding of Religious Freedom

In the context of a new understanding of religious freedom, especially in relation to the case of the Jemaat Allah Global Indonesia (JAGI) church, the views of Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Bielefeldt provide a relevant point of view. The JAGI case highlights the complexity of protecting and promoting religious freedom in Indonesia, especially for non-trinitarian minority communities like JAGI.

According to Hurd, it is important to understand that religious freedom is not only an individual right protected by the state, but is also closely related to social and political dynamics within the country.¹⁶ This is related to the fact that religion is not only a personal matter, but also has broad implications in terms of identity, community and power. In the case of JAGI, this view can be seen in the context of the rejection and oppression faced by JAGI from various parties, both from the

¹⁶ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "The Limits of Religious Freedom," *Journal of Law and Religion* 30, no. 1 (2015): 107–121; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Religious Freedom as a Problem of Political Theory," *Political Theory* 42, no. 1 (2014): 3–31; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Religious Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Muslim and Christian communities, which reflects the complex social and political dynamics in Indonesia.

On the other hand, Bielefeldt's perspective emphasizes the need for protection for individuals and communities from all forms of discrimination based on religion or belief.¹⁷ In the JAGI context, this is related to the challenges faced by JAGI in gaining official recognition and support from the government and the general public. Discrimination against non-trinitarian communities such as JAGI not only impacts the rights of individuals to carry out their religious practices, but also threatens their continued existence as part of Indonesia's religious diversity.

By relating the JAGI case to the concept of religious freedom presented by Hurd and Bielefeldt, we can see that solving the problems faced by JAGI is not only limited to the individual level, but also requires a holistic approach that takes into account complex social, political and legal factors. . This highlights the importance for the government and international institutions to develop a comprehensive and inclusive policy framework in promoting and protecting religious freedom for all individuals and communities in Indonesia.

3. Case Study: JAGI Church's Struggle to Gain Official Recognition

In the case study of the struggle of the Indonesian Global Church of God (JAGI) to gain official recognition, we can see how the dynamics of religion and religious freedom operate in the context of a multicultural society. The church previously known as Christian Tawhid faced oppression from Muslims due to differing interpretations of the meaning of tawhid, which is traditionally considered an exclusively Muslim concept. This conflict highlights the importance of understanding and respecting various religious beliefs and teachings in a multicultural society.

Even though it has succeeded in obtaining official recognition from the government, the JAGI Church still faces various forms of discrimination which is a challenge for its congregation. Accusations against the JAGI Church, such as their

¹⁷ Heiner Bielefeldt, "Religious Freedom as a Human Right: A Conceptual Analysis," *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2019): 992–1019; Heiner Bielefeldt, "The Future of Religious Freedom: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of Law and Religion* 33, no. 1 (2018): 1–26.

Sabbath worship being seen as resembling Jewish practices, as well as their habit of avoiding pork and dog food, have often been a source of discrimination and negative judgment from outsiders. JAGI Church members also frequently hear negative statements identifying them as heretics.

Despite facing oppression and suspicion from radical Islamic groups as well as accusations from trinitarian Christian groups, the JAGI Church continues to strive for dialogue with various Islamic figures and communities, from moderate to radical groups. However, these dialogue efforts do not always run smoothly and are often misinterpreted by other parties. Internal conflict within society and between major religions continues to be a challenge in efforts to achieve understanding and tolerance between religious groups. Nonetheless, these efforts demonstrate the importance of open communication and interfaith dialogue in creating an environment of mutual respect and tolerance.

By digging deeper into the case of the JAGI Church, we can see that the challenges faced in achieving official recognition were not only legal or administrative in nature, but also included complex social and political aspects. Discrimination against the JAGI Church reflects broader tensions in society related to religious identity and plurality of beliefs. Therefore, resolving this problem not only requires appropriate legal steps, but also requires broader efforts to promote understanding and tolerance between religions in a multicultural society like Indonesia.

4. Perspective on Religious Freedom in the City of Semarang: Challenges and Dynamics in the Context of Religious Plurality

Views regarding religious freedom in the city of Semarang, as classified by Arif, reflect a diverse spectrum of understanding among church leaders and religious communities. Pastor Tjahjadi Nugroho, as leader of JAGI, adhered to the view of "total freedom". For him, the state has no right to limit or prohibit religious people from organizing, worshiping or developing their beliefs, because according to him, citizens' rights to believe and socialize have been guaranteed and protected by the 1945 Constitution.

Meanwhile, the second view, called "selective freedom", states that religious people have the right to establish church organizations, but with the caveat that they must remain within the three major traditions of Christianity, namely Pure

Protestant, Pentecostal and Charismatic. This view refers to the use of standard Christian theology, especially regarding beliefs about the Trinity. This means that the new sect or church must be in line with the theological views that are widely accepted in that tradition.

The third view, which is the general view adopted by many church leaders in the city of Semarang, is "protective freedom". This view emphasizes respect for freedom of religion and the church, but still within the framework of state protection. In other words, the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag) must establish "theological requirements" as standard Christian theology to legitimize a church. If a church does not meet the established theological standards, the Ministry of Religion has the right to prohibit or refuse recognition of the church.

These views reflect the ongoing debate regarding the limits of religious freedom and its relationship to government regulation and protection. While one view emphasizes total freedom as a right guaranteed by the constitution, another view further limits religious freedom by appealing to certain theological traditions and the need for government protection in the process of recognizing new churches. Discussions about religious freedom in Semarang reflect the complexity of this issue in the context of Indonesia, which is religiously and culturally diverse.

D. Conclusion

The conclusion of this paper is that Jamaat Allah Global Indonesia (JAGI) faces serious challenges in its efforts to gain official recognition, both from the government and the wider community. Even though it has succeeded in obtaining official recognition from the government, the JAGI church still faces various forms of discrimination which is a challenge for its congregation. Accusations against the JAGI church, such as their Sabbath services being perceived as resembling Jewish practices, as well as their habit of avoiding certain foods, are often a source of discrimination and negative judgment from outsiders. JAGI church members also frequently hear negative statements identifying them as heretics.

Despite facing oppression and suspicion from radical Islamic groups as well as accusations from Trinitarian Christian groups, the JAGI church continues to strive for dialogue with various Islamic figures and communities, from moderate to radical groups. However, these dialogue efforts do not always run smoothly and are often misinterpreted by other parties. Internal conflict within society and

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By digging deeper into the JAGI church case, we can see that the challenges faced in achieving official recognition were not only legal or administrative in nature, but also involved complex social and political aspects. Discrimination against JAGI churches reflects broader tensions in society regarding religious identity and the plurality of beliefs. Therefore, resolving this problem not only requires appropriate legal steps, but also requires broader efforts to promote understanding and tolerance between religions in a multicultural society like Indonesia. []

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