

SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF CAMPUS LIFE AMONG NON-MUSLIM STUDENTS AT TEUKU UMAR UNIVERSITY, MEULABOH, ACEH

*** Reni Kumalasari¹, Mirza Adia Nova², Muhammad Faisal³, Baihaqi Baihaqi⁴**

^{1,3,4}STAIN Teungku Dirundeng, Meulaboh, Indonesia

²Universitas Teuku Umar, Meulaboh, Indonesia

Email: renikumalasari@staindirundeng.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to explore the dynamics of campus life for non-Muslim students at Teuku Umar University (UTU). This study focuses on two main aspects, namely the challenges faced by non-Muslim students and the support available from the institution. This research uses a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach, which aims to understand and describe the phenomena experienced by the research subjects. The data collection techniques used were in-depth interviews. The main informants are non-Muslim students who are studying and employees in the academic department and student affairs at UTU. The findings of this study identify that non-Muslim students at UTU face various challenges. The challenges faced in social interaction are differences in social and cultural norms, limitations in access and facilities for worship, and the existence of negative stigma. In social integration, non-Muslim students face challenges in the process of adjusting to the academic environment. Related to the difficulties faced by non-Muslim students, the campus strives to provide support in the form of providing services in the religious aspect, access and equality, holding inclusive social activities, and support from the academic community. It is hoped that the results of this research can be used as study material to create a responsive and inclusive campus.

Keywords: *Campus Life, Non-Muslim Students, Teuku Umar University*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dinamika kehidupan kampus bagi mahasiswa non-Muslim di Universitas Teuku Umar (UTU). Studi ini berfokus pada dua aspek utama, yaitu tantangan yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa non-Muslim dan dukungan yang tersedia dari institusi. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis, yang bertujuan untuk memahami dan menggambarkan fenomena yang dialami oleh subjek penelitian. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan adalah wawancara mendalam. Informan utama dalam penelitian ini adalah mahasiswa non-Muslim yang sedang menempuh pendidikan serta pegawai di bidang akademik dan kemahasiswaan di UTU. Temuan dari penelitian ini mengidentifikasi bahwa mahasiswa non-Muslim di UTU menghadapi berbagai tantangan. Tantangan dalam interaksi sosial meliputi perbedaan norma sosial dan budaya dan keterbatasan akses dan fasilitas ibadah. Dalam integrasi sosial, mahasiswa non-Muslim menghadapi tantangan dalam proses penyesuaian dengan lingkungan akademik. Terkait dengan kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa non-Muslim, pihak kampus berupaya memberikan dukungan dalam bentuk penyediaan layanan di aspek keagamaan, akses dan kesetaraan, penyelenggaraan kegiatan sosial yang inklusif, serta dukungan dari komunitas akademik. Diharapkan hasil penelitian ini dapat dijadikan bahan kajian untuk menciptakan kampus yang responsif dan inklusif.

Kata Kunci: *Kehidupan Kampus, Mahasiswa Non-Muslim, Universitas Teuku Umar*

A. Introduction

Aceh is one of the provinces in Indonesia that has many universities with a total of 150 institutions, both state and private, spread across all districts and cities in the province. Of these 150 universities, 13 of them have the status of state universities and are almost evenly spread throughout the Aceh region (Ade, 2024). Teuku Umar University (UTU) is one of the higher education institutions located in West Aceh Regency, Aceh Province. UTU, as a leading university in the southwestern region, is open to accepting students from various regions in Indonesia, from North Sumatra to Papua, so that UTU has a variety of students from various religious and cultural backgrounds.

The presence of non-Muslim students in Aceh raises several challenges and dynamics in campus life. Although Aceh is known for its strict implementation of Islamic law (Nur et al., 2021), several public universities in Aceh have tried to create an inclusive and tolerant academic environment for all their students. However, the reality of campus life often shows tensions and differences that may disrupt comfort and harmony that are rooted in significant religious and cultural differences between them and the majority of Muslim students (Sanusi et al., 2021).

Previous studies have shown that the main problem faced by minority groups when entering a majority environment is the process of social adaptation. Labibah et al.(2024)explains that non-Muslims living in Banda Aceh need to adapt to the dominant culture, norms, and social demands in the Muslim majority environment. Research

conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2019) revealed that students from minority groups often face various challenges when entering a new environment. These challenges can be related to their academic environment as well as the social context they face (Rahmadani & Mukti, 2020). Generally, these challenges include institutional discrimination, social isolation, depression, language difficulties, adjusting to a new culture, homesickness, and so on (Setiawan, 2020). Research conducted by Sanusi et al. (2021) found that Non-Muslim students at Syiah Kuala University often face challenges in adapting to the norms and customs that apply in a predominantly Muslim campus environment (Istiqomah, 2017). Non-Muslim students studying in Aceh need to adapt for around 1 month to 1 year in a predominantly Muslim environment (Ade, 2024).

So far, studies on non-Muslim students in Aceh have generally focused on their adaptation process to the predominantly Muslim social and cultural environment. However, few studies have examined the dynamics of campus life, including social interactions, experiences in dealing with diversity issues, and institutional responses to potential tensions arising from differences in beliefs. The case of the Good Friday greeting posted by the Student Executive Board (DEMA) of Universitas Teuku Umar (UTU) in 2023, which sparked pros and cons, indicates that issues of tolerance and respect for religious differences still require serious attention within the campus environment.

Thus, the research gap lies in the lack of in-depth understanding of the real experiences of non-Muslim students in navigating social dynamics and diversity at UTU, as well as the forms of institutional support provided by the university to create an inclusive campus climate. The purpose of this study is to analyze the social and cultural challenges faced by non-Muslim students at Universitas Teuku Umar, to identify the forms of support and campus policies implemented to promote diversity and inclusivity, and to provide strategic recommendations for developing campus policies that are more responsive to issues of pluralism and interfaith tolerance.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological model that emphasizes individuals' subjective experiences (Masyhuri & Zainuddin, 2010). This model was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of non-Muslim students at Universitas Teuku Umar (UTU). The research was conducted at UTU, Meulaboh, with data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their involvement and relevance to the research focus. A total of eight informants participated in this study, consisting of four non-Muslim students from various faculties (Economics, Social and Political Sciences, Fisheries and Marine Sciences, and Public Health) who are active in academic and organizational activities, and are active students in the 5th semester or above; the chairperson and vice-chairperson of the UTU Christian Student Fellowship (KMK), representing the perspective of the campus religious community; and two staff members from the academic and student affairs divisions who understand

institutional policies and support for non-Muslim students. This study was conducted in accordance with ethical procedures, including obtaining informed consent from participants. The selection of informants aimed to obtain diverse and comprehensive data regarding the experiences, challenges, and forms of institutional support provided to non-Muslim students. Data analysis was carried out in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validation was conducted using source triangulation to compare information from multiple parties and member checking by asking informants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. (Sugiyono, 2011).

C. Results and Discussion

1. Research result

This study classifies the challenges faced by non-Muslim students into 2 aspects, namely social interaction and integration. The challenges faced by non-Muslim students in terms of social interaction are as follows: First, Differences in social and cultural norms: The campus life of UTU residents, influenced by strong Islamic values, is a challenge for non-Muslim students. For example, Islamic religious celebrations held on campus, such as the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, and others. Second, Limited access and facilities for worship: Non-Muslim students have difficulty finding facilities that support their religious needs, such as places of worship or spaces that can be used for religious activities. Third, the existence of negative stigma and prejudice: In some cases, non-Muslim students face stigma, both directly and indirectly, which can affect their college experience while on campus.

In addition to challenges in social interaction, non-Muslim students at Teuku Umar University (UTU) also face several challenges in the process of social integration in the midst of campus life, namely: First, Adjustment to the academic environment: Non-Muslim students need to adjust to academic policies and cultures that are influenced by Islamic values, such as certain times for prayer or religious activities that can affect academic schedules and other activities. Second, Limitations in Academic and Social Support: The available academic or social support does not fully meet the needs of non-Muslim students. For example, the implementation of religious courses is conducted outside the campus, the Christian Student Association has not received approval from the campus, and the case of the Good Friday greeting flyer, which caused pros and cons among the campus community.

Despite these challenges, UTU has tried to create an inclusive campus environment by providing several supports: First, providing services in religious aspects: UTU collaborates with the Military Resort Command (Korem) 012 Teuku Umar in providing buses for non-Muslim students who want to go to church on Sundays. Second, Access and equality: UTU non-Muslim students have equal access to scholarships, lectures, administrative services, and campus organization membership (DEMA, SEMA, etc.). Third, inclusive social activities include organizing inclusive social activities that

are not limited to one particular religion or culture. Such as holding celebrations or performances involving students from various religious and cultural backgrounds. Fourth, Support from the academic community: All research informants agree that they are treated well by the educational community. They do not receive discriminatory treatment from lecturers and fellow students. They often receive invitations to feasts from lecturers and Muslim friends.

2. Discussion

a. Profile of Non-Muslim Students at Teuku Umar University, Meulaboh

Teuku Umar University (UTU) originated from the establishment of the Meulaboh Agricultural Academy in 1983 by religious scholars and community leaders of West Aceh through the Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh Education Foundation. In 1993, the academy was upgraded to the Teungku Dirundeng College of Agricultural Sciences (STIP), which later became the forerunner of Teuku Umar University. Based on the Directorate General of Higher Education Decree No. 262/D/O/2006, STIP officially became a private university named Teuku Umar University. With strong support from the local government, UTU continued its efforts to achieve state university status, and on April 1, 2014, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono signed the Presidential Decree establishing Teuku Umar University, which was officially handed over on April 2, 2014, at the State Palace in Jakarta.

Teuku Umar University (UTU) currently has 6 faculties with a total of more than 20 study programs covering various fields of science, social studies, economics, agriculture, engineering, and health. The number of UTU students continues to grow each year, with more than 9.000 students coming from various regions of Aceh and beyond. The diversity of student backgrounds reflects UTU's commitment to being an open and inclusive campus dedicated to nurturing excellent, creative, and competitive young generations. In the 2023/2024 academic year, UTU has 131 non-Muslim students. The largest number of non-Muslim students is Christian students at 79% or 105 people. Followed by Catholic students at 18% or 25 people. As for Buddhists, there is only 1 person or 2%. On average, non-Muslim students at UTU come from areas in North Sumatra Province and Eastern Indonesia.

b. Challenges of Non-Muslim Students of Teuku Umar University in Campus Life

Being a minority group in the midst of campus life, whose daily life is full of Islamic values, is a challenge for non-Muslim students. The results of interviews with several non-Muslim students from various faculties at UTU show that they experience several challenges in the process of interaction and integration with campus life. Social interaction refers to the process by which individuals communicate, relate to, and influence each other in various social contexts. It includes various forms of communication, such as conversation, non-verbal contact, and other social actions, both

in small and large groups (Bimo Walgito, 2004). Some important aspects in social interaction are communication, norms, and social rules (Ismail, 2020).

In the context of the campus life of non-Muslim students in Aceh, social interaction theory plays an important role in understanding and managing unique social dynamics. The application of social interaction theory in the context of adapting social norms, building positive social relationships, managing conflict and stereotypes, and developing social identity (Hamzah et al., 2021).

Basically, Teuku Umar University (UTU) has tried to provide support for non-Muslim students as a minority group to ensure that they can integrate well and feel comfortable in the academic environment. However, cultural and religious differences can be a challenge for non-Muslim students in the process of social interaction and integration. In this study, the informants consisted of several non-Muslim students from Teuku Umar University (UTU) who were in their 5th to 7th semesters from various study programs. They admitted that at first, they found it difficult to adapt to the Islamic atmosphere of the campus. One informant, EV (a 7th-semester student from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences), stated, *“At first, I felt a bit awkward because almost all campus activities had an Islamic nuance, especially during Ramadan.”* Their adaptation process took place through social interaction and mutual respect among students. This challenge is also faced by non-Muslim students who study at other campuses in Aceh, such as Malikul Shaleh University, Lhokseumawe, and Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh (Sanusi et al., 2021).

Another challenge faced by non-Muslim students at UTU is the limited access to and facilities for worship. Non-Muslim students find it difficult to access facilities that support their religious needs, such as places of worship or spaces that can be used for religious activities. Interviews with the head of the UTU Christian Student Association (Kumpulan Mahasiswa Kristen/KMK) revealed that Christian and Catholic students do not yet have a proper place to carry out religious activities on campus. The KMK chair stated, *“So far, we usually hold our worship services off campus, renting a room outside the university to celebrate Christmas, because there is no special space on campus that we can use for our activities.”* This was also confirmed by a former KMK chair. This condition shows that there are still limitations in facilities and institutional support for non-Muslim students, which may affect their comfort and sense of acceptance within the campus environment.

In 2023, an incident occurred at Teuku Umar University (UTU) involving a “Good Friday Greeting” post for Christian students made by the Student Representative Council (DPM) on the university’s official social media account. The post was originally intended as an expression of tolerance and respect for non-Muslim students commemorating Good Friday. However, it sparked mixed reactions from some members of the academic community and the surrounding society, who viewed it as inconsistent with the Islamic values that characterize the university. The university responded by facilitating a dialogue involving representatives from the DPM, UTU alumni, local

community members, non-Muslim students, and the rectorate to clarify misunderstandings and strengthen mutual respect within the campus environment. In an interview, one non-Muslim student representative, LS, stated: *"We understand that the DPM's intention was good, to show a spirit of tolerance, but perhaps the way it was expressed led to misinterpretation."* As an administrative measure, the student responsible for the post was subsequently dismissed from their position as a form of organizational accountability (Liputan6.com). This incident served as an important reflection for UTU to strengthen interreligious communication and clarify ethical boundaries for student organization publications to ensure alignment with the university's inclusive values.

Challenges are also faced by non-Muslim students in the aspect of social integration. Social integration is the process of individuals or groups in society connecting and functioning together harmoniously (Mujiwati, 2020). The goal of social integration is to create cohesion and unity among members of society who are different, whether in terms of cultural, ethnic, economic, or social background (Surbakti et al., 2023). Social integration allows for cooperation and mutual understanding between various groups in society (Sopiyan et al., 2022). Social integration of non-Muslim students in Aceh involves a process by which they can adapt and function in a Muslim-majority society while maintaining their own identity. In this context, social integration includes various aspects related to building harmonious relationships, understanding social norms, and positively contributing to the campus community.

Several challenges faced by non-Muslim students in the process of social integration within the campus environment include the need to adapt to the academic setting. Non-Muslim students must adjust to academic policies and cultures influenced by Islamic values, such as designated times for prayer or religious activities that can affect class schedules and other campus events. In addition, the academic and social support available does not fully accommodate the needs of non-Muslim students. For instance, they are unable to take religious courses on campus. So far, Christian students have attended religious classes at the Methodist Church on Jalan Teuku Umar, while Catholic students have studied at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Meulaboh, located on Jalan Tgk. Dirundeng. Most of the informants interviewed in this study expressed their concerns about having to attend religious classes off-campus, as the distance between the university and the churches is quite far. One non-Muslim student, GG, stated: *"Sometimes we have to leave campus early to get to the church because it's quite far. We hope that someday we can have a space on campus for religious learning."*

Another challenge faced by non-Muslim students is the absence of official legal recognition for their religious organization, the Christian Student Fellowship (KMK), at the university level. This situation has prevented their activities from being fully supported by the institution. The head of this student organization explained: *"We have submitted requests for KMK legalization several times, but there hasn't been any decision from the university. So, for now, we carry out our activities independently."* This

condition highlights the need for institutional attention to ensure the protection of religious freedom and recognition of interfaith student organizations to foster a more inclusive and harmonious campus environment.

c. Teuku Umar University Support and Services for Non-Muslim Students

UTU, as a higher education institution, strives to create a responsive and inclusive campus environment for non-Muslim students. This commitment is reflected in various forms of institutional support that facilitate social interaction and integration among students of different religious backgrounds. One of these supports is the provision of services related to religious needs.

Currently, UTU does not have lecturers who specifically teach Christian or Catholic religious courses. To address this gap, the university collaborates with a Church in Meulaboh City to conduct the teaching and assessment of religious education courses for non-Muslim students. An academic staff member explained, *“Religious courses for non-Muslim students are conducted at the Church in Meulaboh, and the university assists in organizing the schedule and coordinating the assessment process.”*

In addition, another form of institutional attention is UTU’s collaboration with the Military Resort Command (Korem) 012 Teuku Umar, which provides transportation for non-Muslim students who wish to attend Sunday services at the church.

These findings show that UTU has implemented a form of institutional tolerance and accommodation toward the religious needs of non-Muslim students. Such initiatives demonstrate the university’s awareness of the importance of ensuring freedom of religion and inclusivity as essential components of social diversity within the higher education setting.

UTU also provides access and equality for non-Muslim students to fully participate in campus life and to obtain the same opportunities without facing discrimination or obstacles. They have equal rights in accessing scholarships, lectures, administrative services, and membership in student organizations such as DEMA and SEMA. An academic staff member explained that, *“Non-Muslim students have the same rights as other students. There is no difference in academic or administrative services.”* This is also reinforced by the statement of a non-Muslim student who said, *“During my studies at UTU, I have never felt discriminated against. We can join campus organizations and receive the same services as Muslim students.”*

Another effort made by UTU to appreciate diversity on campus is through organizing various inclusive social activities that are not limited to any particular religion or culture. These activities include events that celebrate diversity and involve students from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Moral support is also provided by the UTU academic community. All informants in this study agreed that they were treated with respect and kindness by lecturers, administrative staff, and fellow students. No discriminatory behavior toward non-Muslim students was reported. As one informant

stated, *“During my time at UTU, I have always felt welcomed. We are often invited to attend gatherings, celebrations, or halal bi halal events by friends and lecturers.”*

Such treatment has left a strong impression on non-Muslim students. Differences in religious beliefs do not prevent them from being warmly accepted within the campus community. This reflects that UTU not only upholds the principle of passive tolerance but also practices active social inclusion, where all members of the academic community are engaged in fostering mutual respect and appreciation for diversity.

UTU has endeavored to create a fair and inclusive academic environment where non-Muslim students can learn and develop with confidence without feeling discriminated against. However, despite the support provided, cultural and religious differences cannot be completely avoided. These differences sometimes still pose challenges in the process of social integration and adaptation for non-Muslim students, which requires a continuous approach to ensure equality and mutual understanding on campus.

As a public university that has students with various religious and cultural backgrounds, there is a need for efforts to implement the concept of multiculturalism, especially multiculturalism with a sociological perspective. Sociological multiculturalism on campus refers to the application of multicultural values in the university environment, where cultural, ethnic, religious, and social background diversity is recognized, appreciated, and maintained (Liata & Fazal, 2021). A campus that implements the principles of sociological multiculturalism will create an inclusive space for students from various cultural groups to interact, learn together, and grow without feeling marginalized or discriminated against. In the theory of Multiculturalism, which emphasizes the importance of appreciating and celebrating cultural diversity, it provides insight into how the campus environment can support or hinder the integration of non-Muslim students (Seth, 2021). At UTU, the implementation of an inclusive sociological multiculturalism policy can influence the extent to which non-Muslim students feel accepted and valued. Policies that support diversity and accommodate the needs of all students can help reduce the challenges faced by non-Muslim students (Surbakti et al., 2023).

Furthermore, based on the concept of campus multicultural engagement, as proposed by Pope, R. et.al (2014), multicultural engagement in higher education refers to institutional efforts to foster positive interactions among diverse groups through both academic and non-academic activities. This approach encourages the creation of a supportive, respectful, and discrimination-free campus environment. In the context of UTU, such engagement is evident through inclusive social programs, moral support from the academic community, and equal access policies for all students regardless of religious background. Thus, UTU can be regarded as an institution that has begun to implement an inclusive and multicultural campus model, where the values of justice, recognition, and participation serve as the foundation for building a harmonious academic atmosphere that respects diversity.

From the perspective of social inclusion theory, as explained by Levitas (2005), social inclusion emphasizes the importance of full participation of all individuals in social, economic, and cultural life without structural barriers. In the context of UTU, various policies and initiatives, such as collaboration with the Church, the provision of transportation for worship, and interfaith social activities, demonstrate that the university not only tolerates diversity but also actively promotes the full participation of non-Muslim students in campus life. This reflects a form of social inclusion that focuses on *empowerment* and *equal participation*.

Although interfaith harmony in the UTU community has been going well, UTU must continue to maintain the existing harmony. Maintaining interfaith harmony is an important part of building a community that respects and works together, even though they have different beliefs (Kumalasari, 2020). In the religious dimension, efforts that can be made to maintain harmony between students at UTU are by instilling the values of religious moderation among the academic community. Religious moderation is defined as an approach to practicing religion by prioritizing a middle attitude, not an extreme (Jauhari Umar & Faqih, 2022; Kumalasari, 2022). Religious moderation can create an inclusive and tolerant campus environment, prevent radicalism and extremism, and foster mutual respect (Arifinsyah et al., 2020; Ramadan, 2022). By implementing religious moderation, campuses can be safe, respectful, and supportive places for all students, regardless of their differences in belief (Anzaikhan et al., 2023). Preparing moderate students to live in a pluralistic society is a national asset in maintaining religious harmony in Indonesia (Syahbudin et al., 2023). For that reason, UTU increases activities in the form of training, seminars, and others that can foster the values of religious moderation among students and other academics.

D. Conclusion

This study identifies and analyzes various challenges and dynamics faced by non-Muslim students at Teuku Umar University (UTU), Meulaboh, and provides an overview of their experiences in an academic environment dominated by Islamic values. Cultural and religious differences pose various challenges for non-Muslim students, both in terms of social interaction and social integration. UTU has tried to provide non-discriminatory support and services to create a dynamic and harmonious campus life.

This study provides valuable insights into the campus life of non-Muslim students in Aceh and contributes to a better understanding of interfaith interactions in higher education environments. These findings are expected to be used as study material in efforts to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their religious background.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that UTU strengthen its policies and programs that support diversity and inclusivity within the campus environment. This can be achieved through the development of interfaith interaction guidelines, the organization of interreligious dialogues, and training programs for

lecturers and academic staff to enhance their sensitivity to diversity issues. In addition, UTU is also encouraged to establish a service center or interfaith student forum that functions as a platform for communication, advocacy, and the promotion of tolerance among members of the academic community.

Despite the contributions that this research has made, there are several things that are limitations in this research, namely in the aspects of methodology and research approach. This research does not use a case study approach in examining several things that are challenges for non-Muslim students at UTU, such as the case of Good Friday flyers. This can be a recommendation for subsequent researchers who are interested in studying interfaith life at Teuku Umar University, Meulaboh

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