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Distorted Devotion: Cult of Personality in Indonesia

Devosi yang Terdistorsi: Kultus Individu di Indonesia

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Abstract

Religion in the Indonesian context is understood as a religious seed that is ontologically embedded at the core of societal existence. However, this natural religious impulse risks being distorted into a cult of personality when it is not guided by rational enlightenment and the integrity of faith. This crisis is intensified by the role of social media as an instrument of digital hagiography, creating epistemological ambiguity in which the opinions of revered figures are treated as absolute revelation. This study aims to examine this distortion through a philosophical lens. It employs a qualitative methodology using a literature review and a philosophical hermeneutic approach, combined with phenomenological analysis comparing devotion to God and devotion to human figures. The findings reveal that the cult of personality represents a failure to integrate faith and reason. Societies experiencing a paralysis of reason tend to project their need for absolute authority onto human figures, resulting in the creation of “little gods,” which leads to moral degradation and the erosion of critical thinking in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Cult of Personality; Philosophy of Religion; Distorted Devotion; Social Dynamics; Faith and Reason Integration

Abstrak

Agama dalam konteks Indonesia dipahami sebagai benih religius yang secara ontologis melekat pada inti keberadaan masyarakat. Namun, dorongan religius ini berpotensi mengalami distorsi menjadi cult of personality apabila tidak diarahkan oleh pencerahan rasional dan integritas iman. Fenomena ini semakin diperparah oleh peran media sosial sebagai sarana hagiografi digital yang menciptakan ambiguitas epistemologis, di mana opini tokoh diagungkan setara dengan wahyu absolut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis distorsi tersebut melalui pendekatan filosofis. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan studi literatur dan hermeneutika filosofis, serta analisis fenomenologis terhadap perbandingan devosi kepada Tuhan dan kepada figur manusia. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa cult of personality merupakan kegagalan integrasi antara iman dan rasio. Masyarakat yang mengalami paralisis nalar cenderung memproyeksikan kebutuhan akan otoritas absolut kepada manusia, sehingga memunculkan “tuhan-tuhan kecil” yang berdampak pada degradasi moral dan hilangnya daya kritis dalam masyarakat pluralistik.

Kata Kunci: Kultus Individu; Filsafat Agama; Devosi Terdistorsi; Dinamika Sosial; Integrasi Iman dan Rasio



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INTRODUCTION

Within the historical context and sociopolitical landscape of Indonesia, religion is not merely present as a formal institution or an administrative formality in the citizenship identification section.¹ Moreover, religion is a seed (seed of religion or *semina religionis*) that is ontologically embedded in the very core of the Indonesian people's existence. This phenomenon, as profoundly articulated by Hefner, this reveals that the existence of the Indonesian people is characterized by an inner drive that, by its very nature, seeks the "supreme being." Therefore, any systematic attempt to separate civic life from the spirit of religiosity is a sociological impossibility.²

In Indonesia, national identity and religious dynamics are not two separate entities, but rather a closely intertwined dialectic in which one aspect lends validity to the other.³

Philosophically, the concept of the "seed of religion" affirms the ontological premise that human beings are inherently religious creatures. This inclination is not an external construct imposed by social structures, but rather a natural response to the "breath of God" that instills a sense of eternity within the human soul.⁴ In Indonesia's pluralistic society, this seed has transformed into a moral foundation that transcends the boundaries of ethnicity and tribalism. However, this reality carries grave existential consequences when this natural religious impulse is not guided by sound rational enlightenment and the integrity of faith, it becomes distorted.⁵ Humans, in their metaphysical hunger for transcendent authority, tend to shift their devotion to visible entities when they experience spiritual emptiness or a paralysis of reason.⁶

The cultification of religion often occurs through a process of psychological and philosophical distortion of basic human religious impulses. Cultification occurs when natural impulses are not guided by sound rational insight and true integrity of faith. In their search for a transcendent authority, people tend to shift their devotion to visible entities namely, human figures when they experience a spiritual void.⁷

Cult-like behavior arises when there is a failure to integrate faith with reason. This leads to a situation where only faith without the necessary rational critique is required, thereby creating

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- 1 Greg Barton, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Nicholas Morieson, "Authoritarianism, Democracy, Islamic Movements and Contestations of Islamic Religious Ideas in Indonesia," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080641>.
 - 2 Robert W. Hefner, "Islam and Institutional Religious Freedom in Indonesia," *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060415>.
 - 3 Muhammad H. Siregar and Sahrul Sahrul, "Searching Legal Format: Reshaping the Role of State and Religion in Indonesia Post-Suharto," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7922>.
 - 4 Fahmi Ulum Al Mubarak et al., "Progressive Islamic Education through the Lens of Human Essence: Philosophical Foundations and Transformative Strategies," *Multicultural Islamic Education Review* 3, no. 1 (2025): 01–14, <https://doi.org/10.23917/mier.v3i1.9911>.
 - 5 Bayu Amanda, and Dian Erwanto. 2026. "Philosophical Insights into Taqwa and Ghaflah in Surah Maryam 59-63: As-Sya'rawi's Tafsir". *Dirasat Qur'anīyyah Wa Hadithīyyah* 1 (1): 89-107. <https://doi.org/10.14804/daqiyah.v1i1.39>.
 - 6 Greg Barton, Ihsan Yilmaz, and Nicholas Morieson, "Religious and Pro-Violence Populism in Indonesia: The Rise and Fall of a Far-Right Islamist Civilisationist Movement," *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): 397, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060397>.
 - 7 Savanna Robertson, Hailey, "Coercion, Conversion, Control: Techniques Utilized to Recruit and Indoctrinate New Members into Cult Organizations" (2024), <https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1489>.

fertile ground for blind obedience.⁸ Furthermore, the ambiguity of truth in society begins to equate the opinions or words of revered figures with absolute revelation. In this situation, verification of data or sacred texts is overridden by the personal authority of the leader, paralyzing reason in the face of authority deemed sacred, and causing followers to lose their ability to think critically.

In the dynamics of thought, idolization is driven by a mindset that is absolutely absolute. This model of thought rigidly prioritizes the element of revelation and tends toward sacralism or the sanctification of specific religious ideas. When a human thought or interpretation is deemed sacred and beyond question, the figure who conceived that thought is also sanctified, ultimately leading to cult like worship.

The integration of faith and reason is viewed as a complementary and inseparable relationship, despite the classic debate between the two. Therefore, in Santoso view, reason and faith have an integrative relationship because both are rooted in God's revelation of truth.⁹ In line with the principle of reconciliation through theistic science, proposes a concept of reconciliation rooted in the thought of Ibn Rushd, who asserted that revelation cannot possibly contradict reason or demonstrative logic.¹⁰ This is possible because, ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically, science and religion are in harmony.

In addition to that, there is also Ken Wilber's integral approach. He proposes an integral approach to address the crisis of modernity, which separates scientific reason from religious values. Wilber expands the meaning of reason to include not only sensory experiences, but also mental and spiritual experiences. Thus, integration can occur through the exterior or empirical aspect of reason, which acknowledges the validity of spiritual experiences or the esoteric interior aspect as a form of genuine knowledge. However, to avoid pseudoscience and pseudo religion, true integration must require science to abandon reductionist imperialism that is, the exclusive recognition of the material and religion to discard dogmatic myths that contradict scientific facts (Wilber, 1997).¹¹

Overall, these sources conclude that faith without reason is blind, while reason without faith is crippled. The ideal integration does not reduce either party, but rather places both in a dialogical interaction. This phenomenon arises as a result of the encounter between humanity's natural religious impulse and the unique consciousness of each individual.

This is what marks the beginning of the phenomenon of the personality cult.¹² When the seeds of religion which should have blossomed into an understanding of the supreme designer are diverted by pragmatic interests or a lack of philosophical literacy, human figures begin to occupy a space of absolute authority that, ontologically speaking, belongs solely to the Creator. The cult of personality in Indonesian social dynamics, therefore, is not merely a matter of practical politics, but rather a religious pathology in which the mortal is elevated to the status of the immortal.¹³

8 Giancarlo Lucchetti, Harold G. Koenig, and Alessandra Lamas Granero Lucchetti, "Spirituality, Religiousness, and Mental Health: A Review of the Current Scientific Evidence," *World Journal of Clinical Cases* 9, no. 26 (2021): 7620–31, <https://doi.org/10.12998/wjcc.v9.i26.7620>.

9 Magedan Pranata Santoso, *Filsafat Agama* (Yogyakarta: Graha Ilmu, 2009).

10 Nidhal Guessoum, "The Qur'an, Science, and the (Related) Contemporary Muslim Discourse," *Zygon* 43, no. 2 (2008): 411–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2008.00925.x>.

11 Ken Wilber, "An Integral Theory of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 4, no. 1 (1997): 71–92.

12 Meghan Hynson, "A Balinese 'Call to Prayer': Sounding Religious Nationalism and Local Identity in the Puja Tri Sandhya," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (August 23, 2021): 668, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080668>.

13 Hefner, "Islam and Institutional Religious Freedom in Indonesia."

Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in a literature review and a philosophical hermeneutic approach. This design is chosen to move beyond surface-level statistical indicators and instead explore the deeper cultural and intellectual structures within Indonesian society. The phenomenon of idolization, therefore, is not merely interpreted through metrics such as social media followings, but as a reflection of an epistemological and ontological crisis.¹⁴ The research process involves extracting philosophical insights by identifying key concepts from foundational texts in the philosophy of religion, particularly those addressing ontological, epistemological, and moral dimensions. These concepts are then contextualized within the broader social structure of Indonesia.¹⁵

The analytical framework applies two main approaches to interpret the findings. First, phenomenological comparison is used to examine parallels between devotion to public figures in cult-like phenomena and traditional forms of devotion to God found in historical and ethnological discourse. Second, the study analyzes religious and social impacts by assessing how distortions of divine authority contribute to the erosion of rational thought and moral integrity in a pluralistic society. This methodology is particularly suitable because it reveals how the presence or absence of rational enlightenment shapes societal engagement with power. Ultimately, it demonstrates that the cult of personality reflects a broader failure to reconcile faith with scientific reasoning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of the Cult of Personality

In the context of Indonesian social dynamics, the cult of personality can be understood as a manifestation of humanity's enduring metaphysical need for a supreme designer. However, this need has been displaced from its proper transcendental orientation into the sociopolitical sphere. When society experiences moral disorientation, individuals tend to seek stability and certainty by elevating certain figures to a quasi-divine status.¹⁶ These figures are perceived as possessing exceptional authority, wisdom, and even salvific power. Consequently, idolization emerges not merely as a sociological phenomenon but as a deeper philosophical distortion. It reflects a shift from transcendence toward immanence, where human figures replace divine authority as the ultimate source of meaning, guidance, and existential security within the collective consciousness.

14 Ricardo A. Correia et al., "Digital Data Sources and Methods for Conservation Culturomics," *Conservation Biology* 35, no. 2 (2021): 398–411, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13706>; Daniel Munro, "Cults, Conspiracies, and Fantasies of Knowledge," *Episteme* 21, no. 3 (2024): 949–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2022.55>.

15 Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People, The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315613956>.

16 Steve Taylor, *DisConnected: The Roots of Human Cruelty and How Connection Can Heal the World* (Simon and Schuster, 2023).

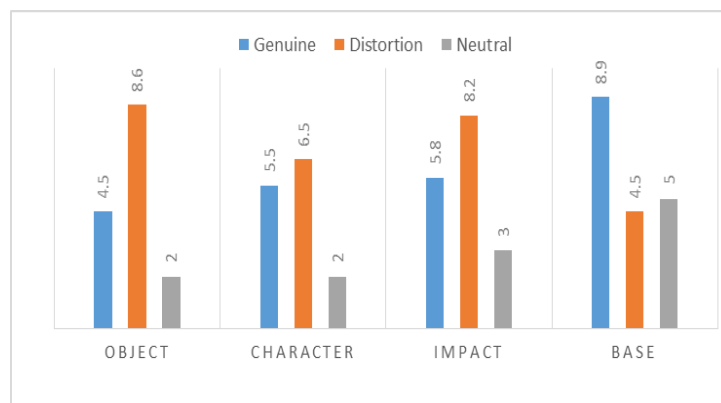


Figure 1. A contrastive analysis of the objects and characteristics of service.

Source: the Author

At a fundamental level, human beings recognize themselves as contingent beings whose existence depends on external causes. This awareness is central to classical metaphysical thought and is deeply embedded in human consciousness. However, within the phenomenon of cult worship, this ontological awareness is misdirected. Followers begin to perceive their lives, identities, and even destinies as entirely dependent on a specific figurehead. This figure is then positioned as the ultimate cause or source of their well-being and salvation. Such a perception represents a profound ontological distortion, as a finite and fallible human being is elevated to the status of an absolute being. In this distorted framework, the natural hierarchy between the Creator and creation is fundamentally reversed.

Table 1. The characteristics of religious and non-religious healthy communities.

Characteristic	A Healthy and Religious Community.	Society Trapped in a Cult of Personality
Authority Center	God’s Sovereignty and the Truth of His Word (<i>Soli Deo Gloria</i>)	A human figure regarded as the Absolute Mediator
Leader Status	Fallible Being, a human being who is prone to error and in need of repentance.	An Infallible Figure, a figure who must never be wrong and must never be criticized
Ratio Function	A renewed, critical, and reflective perspective	A mind that is paralyzed, blindly submissive, and devoid of critical thinking
Code of Ethics	Objective, grounded in God’s Word and just laws	Subjective, depending on the character’s comfort and instructions
Social Interaction	Dialogic, respectful of pluralism, and inclusive	Exclusive, full of negative preconceptions, and confrontational toward “outsiders”

*Source: Data is based on the results of a systematic literature review conducted by the researcher of several studies. Specifically.*¹⁷

¹⁷ Anne Mette Holmgård Sundahl, “Personality Cult or a Mere Matter of Popularity?,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 36, no. 4 (2023): 431–58, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-022-09423-0>.

From an ontological perspective, humans inherently possess an idea of absolute perfection, which functions as a guiding principle in their search for meaning and truth.¹⁸ This idea serves as a conceptual anchor that directs human longing toward a perfect and ultimate reality. However, idolization occurs when this idea of perfection is projected onto a human figure. Once such a projection takes place, the figure is no longer perceived as fallible but as an embodiment of perfection itself. As a result, rational criticism becomes ineffective, since any challenge to the figure is interpreted as a challenge to the perceived absolute truth. In this way, the figure transitions from being a leader to becoming the standard of truth and legitimacy within the community.

This distortion is further reinforced by the presence of moral law within human beings, which points toward the existence of an absolute judge. Moral consciousness inherently implies a transcendent source of authority that grounds ethical obligations. However, when reason fails to apprehend the transcendent nature of God, individuals often seek a tangible representation of moral authority in human figures. In the Indonesian context, this tendency becomes particularly pronounced when charismatic leaders are perceived as embodying moral law itself.¹⁹ Consequently, any command or prohibition issued by such figures is accepted as morally binding, even when it contradicts sacred texts or universal ethical principles. This substitution represents a critical shift in the source of moral legitimacy.

The implications of these ontological and epistemological distortions can be systematically observed through comparative analysis. There are clear differences between societies that maintain a proper understanding of divine authority and those that fall into the trap of cult worship. These differences are not merely superficial but extend to the fundamental structures of authority, reasoning, and ethical orientation. A healthy religious society is characterized by its recognition of divine sovereignty as the ultimate source of truth, whereas a society influenced by cult dynamics places a human figure at the center of authority.²⁰ This shift fundamentally alters the epistemological framework through which truth and knowledge are understood.

In societies governed by divine-centered epistemology, leaders are recognized as fallible human beings who are subject to moral accountability and capable of error. In contrast, within a cult of personality, leaders are perceived as infallible and beyond criticism. This transformation has profound consequences for the function of reason. In healthy societies, reason operates as a critical and reflective tool that enables individuals to evaluate truth claims. However, in cult-driven societies, reason becomes paralyzed, replaced by blind submission and uncritical acceptance. This epistemological closure prevents the emergence of genuine dialogue and inhibits intellectual development, thereby reinforcing the dominance of the figurehead as the sole arbiter of truth.

18 John Bishop, "On the Significance of Assumptions about Divine Goodness and Divine Ontology for 'Logical' Arguments from Evil," *Religions* 12, no. 3 (March 11, 2021): 186, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12030186>.

19 Samsul Maarif, "Human (Relational) Dignity: Perspectives of Followers of Indigenous Religions of Indonesia," *Religions* 14, no. 7 (June 28, 2023): 848, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070848>.

20 HUMEIRA IQTIDAR and OLIVER SCHARBRODT, "Divine Sovereignty, Morality and the State: Maududi and His Influence," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 277–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186321000766>.

Social, Moral, and Religious Implications of Distorted Devotion

The contrast between authentic devotion and distorted devotion can be further understood through the philosophical framework of the objects and characteristics of worship. In the philosophy of religion, authentic devotion is directed toward God as the ultimate being, a transcendent reality that reveals itself through divine revelation. This perspective affirms that ultimate authority lies beyond human limitations and provides a stable foundation for moral and existential meaning. In contrast, distorted devotion within a cult shifts its focus toward a human figure or authoritarian leader. This transformation represents not only a theological error but also a fundamental reconfiguration of human consciousness, in which the locus of ultimate authority is relocated from the divine to the human realm.

This shift can be analyzed as a process in which human ideals are projected onto a particular figure, resulting in the elevation of that figure to an absolute status. Through psychological mechanisms such as the need for certainty, security, and collective identity, individuals begin to attribute extraordinary qualities to the leader.²¹ As a result, devotion becomes inwardly oriented, reflecting a form of collective self-projection disguised as absolute truth. This creates an ontological shift in which humans become the center of legitimacy, replacing the transcendent source of truth. In such a system, the authority of the figure is no longer questioned, and the distinction between truth and power becomes increasingly blurred.

One of the most significant consequences of this distortion is the transformation of moral consciousness. In authentic devotion, individuals retain the ability to exercise reason and moral judgment independently of any human authority. Faith and reason function in harmony, allowing for critical reflection and ethical accountability. In contrast, cult-like devotion demands absolute obedience without rational verification. Reason is perceived as a threat, and moral actions are determined by the will of the figure rather than by objective principles. This shift results in a form of obedience that serves to maintain power structures rather than to promote genuine moral development or personal integrity.²²

Furthermore, the psychological and social effects of cult devotion are profound and far-reaching. Authentic devotion fosters character transformation, integrity, and a sense of responsibility grounded in objective moral values. It strengthens individual agency by encouraging critical thinking and personal accountability. Conversely, cult devotion leads to psychological dependence and the erosion of personal autonomy. Individuals become trapped in a cycle of fear, obedience, and validation, which reinforces their attachment to the authority figure.²³ This dependency loop makes it difficult for individuals to disengage, as their identity becomes deeply intertwined with their devotion and group belonging.

From an epistemological standpoint, cult systems tend to function as closed structures that resist external critique. Truth is defined internally by the group, and any opposing perspective is dismissed as hostile or invalid. This creates a self-reinforcing system in which critical inquiry is suppressed, and intellectual development is hindered. In contrast, authentic devotion is open to rational reflection and grounded in broader philosophical traditions that support the existence of objective truth. This openness allows for continuous moral and intellectual growth, ensuring that faith remains dynamic and responsive rather than rigid and dogmatic.

21 S Alexander Haslam, Stephen D Reicher, and Michael J Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power* (Routledge, 2020).

22 Aarti Iyer, "Understanding Advantaged Groups' Opposition to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Policies: The Role of Perceived Threat," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 16, no. 5 (May 13, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12666>.

23 Joyzy Pius Egunjobi, "Theology of Response Styles," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 9, no. 5 (2025): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2025.90500001>.

The broader social implications of cult devotion are particularly evident in pluralistic societies. The rigid mindset associated with such systems often leads to exclusivity, intolerance, and conflict with those who hold different beliefs. This undermines social cohesion and weakens the foundations of mutual respect and dialogue. Additionally, the rise of human-centered perspectives is often amplified by the misuse of technology, which can be employed to construct and reinforce new objects of worship. Instead of fostering enlightenment, technology becomes a tool for amplifying authority and suppressing dissent, thereby contributing to the decline of intellectual and moral integrity within society.

In response to these challenges, the concept of leadership with integrity becomes essential. A true leader is characterized not by absolute authority but by moral responsibility, humility, and a commitment to truth. Such leaders recognize their own limitations and remain accountable to higher principles. They seek to guide rather than dominate, and to empower rather than control. By maintaining a balance between faith and reason, they cultivate a form of devotion that is both transformative and liberating. Ultimately, restoring this balance is crucial for preserving social harmony, moral stability, and the integrity of religious life within a diverse and pluralistic society.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the phenomenon of the cult of personality in Indonesian society is not merely a sociopolitical issue but reflects a deeper ontological and epistemological distortion. This distortion arises when the human need for transcendence is misdirected toward finite figures, resulting in the elevation of human authority to an absolute status. Consequently, the function of reason becomes weakened, moral standards shift from objective to subjective, and social structures experience fragmentation. The study also reveals a clear contrast between authentic devotion, which is grounded in transcendence and rational reflection, and distorted devotion, which is characterized by blind obedience and psychological dependence. These dynamics significantly impact pluralistic society by fostering intolerance, weakening critical thinking, and undermining moral integrity.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Indonesian society strengthen the integration of faith and reason as a foundational framework for social and intellectual life. Educational institutions, particularly at the higher education level, should emphasize the philosophy of religion as a critical discipline to cultivate individuals who are both intellectually reflective and spiritually grounded. Additionally, there is a need to promote models of leadership that prioritize integrity, humility, and accountability rather than absolute authority. Religious and social institutions must also encourage critical engagement with belief systems to prevent the emergence of blind fanaticism. Ultimately, fostering a balanced understanding of divine authority and human limitation is essential to preserving social harmony, protecting pluralism, and ensuring that devotion remains transformative rather than manipulative.

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