

Critique of Religious Conservatism through Comic Strips on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

The use of comics as a medium for conveying religious messages has been present in Indonesia since at least the 1960s. However, few comics have seriously addressed critiques of conservative religious practices. This study aims to describe the critique of religious conservatism in the comic strips on the Instagram account @islamidotco. This research is a descriptive qualitative study. The comics in this study are examined using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. The research concludes that the comic strips on the Instagram account *islami.co* represent a critique of religious conservatism. This is evident in a comic strip depicting a Santa Claus character who is a Muslim and is performing the midday prayer (*zuhr*). The issues discussed in the comic relate to Christmas-related controversies in the Indonesian context, such as debates over Christmas greetings, the prohibition of wearing Christmas attire, and the controversy surrounding Muslims' giving and receiving of Christmas gifts.

Keywords: *Religious Conservatism, Comic Strips, Instagram, Semiotics, Islami.Co*

Introduction

The use of comics as a medium for Islamic proselytization in Indonesia has been documented since the 1960s. The 1960s marked the golden age of Indonesian comics, with the publication of notable works such as *Si Buta dari Gua Hantu* (Ganes TH), *Seri Mahabharata* (RA Kosasih), *Gundala Putra Petir* (Hasmi), *Godam* (Wid NS), *Panji Tengkorak* (Hans Jadalara), and *Jaka Sembung* (Djair). The comic *Taman Surga* (1961) by KT Ahmar is the first Islamic comic published in Indonesia, followed by *Taman Surga* and *Siksa Neraka* by *Ema Wardana* in the 1970s. After this period, Islamic comics experienced cycles of rise and decline, competing with imported comics from the United States and Japan (N. P. Putra, Sunarto, & Dharsono, 2019). Another perspective suggests that the emergence of comics as a medium for Islamic proselytization in Indonesia began around the year 2000, coinciding with the increased prominence of Islam in public spaces after

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the New Order era. These religious comics generally focused on Islamic history and education for children and teenagers (Yani & Alamiyah, 2017).

Islamic comics published in Indonesia from the 1960s to 2008 were written against the contemporary events that shaped how comic creators and readers understood the past and present. The narratives in these Islamic comics served as responses to historical developments in Indonesia within a religious framework. For example, during the New Order era, Islamic comics often explored themes of escape, reflecting a form of release from the social pressures of the time. The emergence of Islamic comics in the 1960s and 1990s, on the other hand, mirrored how Indonesian society engaged with the question of Islam's significance as the nation's foundation, making their voices heard through these comics (Soenarto, 2008).

Unlike previous research, which found that Islamic comics serve as a medium for spreading religious conservatism, this study demonstrates that Islamic comics can also be a medium for critiquing religious conservatism. This research seeks to answer the question: how is religious conservatism critiqued in the comic strips on Instagram? The object of this study is the comic published on the Instagram account *@islamidotco*. *Islami.co* is a platform dedicated to promoting information and ideas that support the growth of a tolerant and peaceful society. Young alumni of Islamic boarding schools manage it. *Islami.co* operates under the tagline "Friendly and Enlightening Islamic Media" and regularly publishes critical Islamic comic strips through their Instagram account (Islami.co, 2013).

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research method. This study yields findings that could not be achieved through statistical procedures or other forms of quantification (Sukidi, 2002). The comic being analyzed is examined using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. Barthes' theory is based on three main concepts: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the first level of signs, consisting of a chain of signifiers and signifieds, which is the materialistic relationship between the signifier and the abstract concept behind it. Connotation is associated with ideological operations, revealing and validating a particular period's dominant values. Myth, on the other hand, is built upon an existing chain of meanings and is considered a second-order system of meaning (Sobur, 2016).

This article also employs the framework of social semiotics within the context of digital media, as proposed by Marco Giacomazzi. According to Giacomazzi, digital media should not be viewed merely as text, but rather as a complex network of translation that shapes identity and meaning. Digital media serves as a space where identities, ideologies, and cultural meanings are produced and negotiated. Cultural semiotics enables the analysis of cultural codes, discourses, and ideologies within the context of digital media production (Giacomazzi, 2022). Contemporary studies in social semiotics are fundamentally rooted in the ideas of Lotman, who viewed culture as a space of meaning negotiation, identity struggles, and symbolic hegemonic tactics (Lorusso & Sedda, 2022).

Literature Review

Comics are considered an effective medium for Islamic proselytization. They are a "flexible" medium, as anyone can enjoy them, regardless of age (Nasrullah & Sari, 2014). Maharsi describes comics as a form of visual communication (a combination of text and images) with the power to convey information in a popular and easily understood manner (Maharsi, 2014). The stories in comics are often drawn from real-life conditions in society, making them relevant for religious outreach (Adilah, Ridwan, & Solahudin, 2019). Comics are considered to have advantages as a communication medium due to their concise nature and specificity (Setiawan, 2002). It is not

surprising that, over time, comics have been widely utilized as tools for persuasion and propaganda (Gunawan, 2018). However, in the beginning, comics in Indonesia were stigmatized as “forbidden items” that had to be read in secret, primarily because they were seen as disrupting children’s study time (Bonneff, 2008). During the New Order era, several comics were even banned for allegedly corrupting the morals of adolescents (L. Kurnia, 2016). According to Zara, within the discourse of Islamic art, the study of comics has been almost entirely neglected, as comics are often associated with slapstick humor, caricatures, light stories, and simple illustrations typically read during leisure time by children or teenagers (Zara, 2022).

Islamic comics have continued to evolve, offering various themes, from everyday moral stories aimed at children to narratives about the prophets, Sufi tales, and stories of Islamic heroes. Various ideologies can be disseminated and exchanged through comics (Zulhazmi, 2022). Seno Gumira Ajidarma describes comics as a cultural representation and a site of ideological struggle. Ideology is the consciousness embedded within discourse, so reading comics becomes an ideological struggle within the contest of discourses. In this context, “reading” is understood as examining comics through the process of “deconstruction” (Ajidarma, 2011). Comics are considered a reflection of a society’s culture because they emerge from the social, political, economic, and religious realities that evolve within the community (Latiff et al., 2016). Comics are a form of cultural artifact (Wibowo, 2015).

Kees de Groot notes that comics offer a unique perspective on society, culture, and religion. According to him, comics are often used to convey religious content, as seen in works like the Comics Bible. The relationship between comics and religion serves as a medium for the production of knowledge itself. Comics are utilized in religious studies education, providing sociological insights into religion and society and reflecting broader trends in the world of fiction (Groot, 2024). In line with Groot’s opinion, the reflection of diverse ideologies can be traced through comics, cartoons, and memes published in post-reform Indonesia, facilitated by freedom of expression, including comics that address religious themes. (Mahadian, Hashim, & Hustafa, 2023). Comics are even regarded as historical sources that document past events and serve as a complement to primary sources (K. H. Lubis, 2019).

Over time, Islamic comics have been identified as a medium for spreading religious conservatism. Lubis observes that there was initially a “moral debate” about whether comics could be a legitimate medium for religious proselytization. The intersection of Islam and popular culture became a subject of debate among Muslims. Today, however, comics are widely used for religious outreach in Indonesia, as evidenced by the emergence of communities like Liqomik (Lingkar Komik), which serves as a platform for Muslim comic artists in Indonesia (N. Lubis, 2021). Nikmah Lubis’s research shows that the da’wah comics she studied on social media often contain calls to *hijrah* (spiritual migration), including encouragement to wear more *syar’i* (Islamically appropriate) hijab and to abandon sinful behavior in favor of Islamic teachings. She also identified a recurring “reward and punishment” pattern, where negative behavior is portrayed as being immediately met with negative consequences, and vice versa (N. Lubis, 2021).

Regarding conservatism, a survey by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) found that religious conservatism among young people in Indonesia is on the rise, particularly among millennials. Interestingly, despite their conservative views, they tend to engage less frequently in religious rituals. One of the reasons for the increase in conservatism is their frequent exposure to conservative-Islamist media on social media platforms (PPIM, 2021). The PPIM survey supports the findings of Kirana and Garadian, who noted that conservatism has come to dominate religious narratives on social media (Kirana & Garadian, 2020).

Bruinessen defines conservative Islam as ideological streams that reject the liberal and progressive reinterpretation of Islamic teachings and tend to uphold traditional interpretations and social systems (Bruinessen, 2013). According to Bruinessen, the rise of conservatism in Indonesia is partly due to the influence of transnational Islamic movements, particularly from

Saudi Arabia, which have diminished the religious authority previously held by established organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (Bruinessen, 2013). Yanwar Pribadi argues that the rise of conservatism could threaten democracy in Indonesia (Pribadi, 2021).

Result and Discussion

Islamic Comic on Instagram

A number of studies on comics and Islam have shown that comics are used by individuals or groups to convey ideas and ideologies. In the case of *Qahera*, for example, resistance to misogynistic and sexist thought is evident, while the *Kamala Khan* comics represent resistance to racism and discrimination (Landis, 2019). In the Indonesian context, comics have also been used to promote religious moderation, such as in *Kampung Sukaraya* (Suciartini, 2023). Additionally, comics have been utilized to disseminate ideas related to *Islam Nusantara* (Eka, Budi, & Purwaningrum, 2019). However, research on comics as a medium for critiquing religious conservatism remains scarce. This article seeks to fill that gap.

As a researcher, I have a close connection to the topic explored in this article. My work focuses on Islamic issues, particularly in the field of da'wah, including digital da'wah and da'wah that engages with popular culture. The expression of religiosity through comics is also a central focus of my research. In addition, I am both a reader and contributor to the *islami.co* website, a follower of *@islami.co* on Instagram, and an active observer of the comic strips featured on the platform.

The comic under study was posted on the Instagram account *islami.co* on December 25, 2022. The caption for this post reads: “*The people who may seem bad in our eyes might actually be better than us.*” As of August 2024, the comic has received 1,805 likes and 13 comments. These comments can be categorized into three groups. First, comments that reflect acceptance or tolerance, as seen in the following examples: “*Wearing certain attributes doesn't weaken one's faith... when it's time to pray, we still pray*” (@klhyun_), “*Earlier at Ancol it was the same, someone wearing a Santa costume helped lift some heavy stuff and said bismillah 🤲*” (@saidatul.muqima), “*I feel the need to tag my friends who celebrate Christmas @benidictivity @gigihadiguna @priskabarusegu 🤲🤲🤲 @fair.uz.*” Second, comments that contain irony, such as: “*Wanted to post this on my WhatsApp story, but afraid my family would label me a liberal*” (@ini_budiiii), “*Santa, Christmas trees—all products of capitalism. Still confused why people tie them to a particular religion, including those who celebrate Christmas themselves*” (@anhdamuahs). Third, comments that express resistance, as reflected in the following statement: “*The religious symbols of non-Muslims should not be normalized*” (@mmarabdulmateen).

These comments can be interpreted as expressions of public religiosity—that is, how religion is present and interacts within social life. Netizens who respond to religious content (in this case, a comic strip) exercise the freedom to express their religious preferences. Among them are individuals who portray Islam in a progressive manner by supporting the comic strip. On the other hand, there are also expressions of religious irony, such as the admission of fear about posting the comic on personal social media due to concerns about being labeled “liberal” (a term that often carries negative connotations in the Indonesian context). Meanwhile, expressions of resistance are reflected in negative reactions to the comic, with some commenters rejecting the need to display elements of non-Muslim cultural practices.



Figure 1.

A Comic about Santa Claus on the Instagram account Islami.co.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmlxwwPvo6R/?igsh=ZjFkYzZmMDQzZg%3D%3D>

The comments on this comic strip on Instagram suggest that it has the potential to be controversial. For example, one comment mentions a fear of being labelled as liberal if the comic is shared. Other comments link Christmas symbols with religious faith and with capitalism. The comic strip does not merely “stop” at its initial message but opens up space for discussion.

The comic strip was then analyzed using Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis, based on three key concepts: denotation, connotation, and myth.

Table 1.

Denotation

Panels	Description
Panel 1	A short-haired woman is wearing a pink t-shirt, blue skirt, and red bag. She is holding a pink outfit hanging on a clothes hanger. Next to her is a child in a red t-shirt, green pants, and red shoes. Above the child is a speech bubble saying: “Mom, I want to take a photo with Santa Claus.”
Panel 2	The same woman and child are shown from behind. Above the child is a speech bubble, saying: “He was here earlier.” They are looking at a red hat hanging on a pole and red shoes underneath it.
Panel 3	The woman and child face a man in a green outfit holding a newspaper. Above the woman is a speech bubble asking: “Excuse me, do you know where Santa Claus went?”
Panel 4	The man in the green outfit, still holding the newspaper, responds with a speech bubble saying: “He said he needs to pray first.”

Table 2.

Connotation

Panels	Description
Panel 1	A mother and child shop for clothes at a mall. The child desires to take a photo with Santa Claus, suggesting that the scene is set around Christmas, possibly during the day.
Panel 2	The mother and child can't find Santa Claus. They only see his hat hanging up and his shoes left behind, indicating that Santa is in the process of removing his costume. Santa is typically portrayed as a figure dressed in a red suit with a long white beard and a round belly. Traditionally, Santa is said to visit homes secretly on Christmas Eve to leave gifts.
Panel 3	The mother then asks a man sitting nearby reading a newspaper if he knows where Santa Claus went.
Panel 4	The man tells the mother and child that Santa Claus is currently praying the midday prayer (<i>z}uhr</i>). This suggests that the person playing Santa Claus is likely a Muslim. This revelation is a "twist" in the comic strip's narrative.

Table 3.

Myth

Panels	Description
Panel 1	The comic strip being analyzed is set in a shopping mall during the days leading up to Christmas.
Panel 2	The characters in the comic—a mother and her child—are at the mall to shop. In Indonesia, shopping malls often adopt specific themes based on the season or holiday. For example, during Ramadan and Eid, the atmosphere of the malls becomes more "Islamic," with decorations
Panel 3	like lanterns, <i>ketupat</i> (rice cakes), and <i>bedug</i> (traditional drums), and Islamic music is often played. Similarly, during Christmas, malls are adorned with Christmas-themed decorations like Christmas trees, reindeer statues, and Santa Claus impersonators.
Panel 4	

Historically, Santa Claus refers to Saint Nicholas, a bishop from Southern Turkey in the 4th century, after Emperor Constantine became the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Saint Nicholas was known for his generosity, often leaving coins and grain on window sills or doorsteps and encouraging merchants to sell bread and essential goods at affordable prices (Hardiantoro & Dzulfaroh, 2023).

In the comic, a child wants to take a photo with Santa Claus, but when they look for him, he's nowhere to be found. The mother asks someone nearby where Santa went, and they respond that Santa is currently praying the midday prayer (*z}uhr*). This answer is both amusing and contradictory: Santa Claus, a figure associated with Christmas, is performing a Muslim prayer. These two elements seem impossible to reconcile, yet it's entirely plausible to find a Muslim playing the role of Santa Claus in a shopping mall in Indonesia. This may be due to job requirements, where a Muslim worker is asked to wear Santa Claus attire. Although a Muslim wearing Christmas symbols can spark controversy and debate in Indonesia, it is an undeniable social reality.

Interestingly, these comics are generally presented with a humorous tone, which helps to avoid provoking anger even when addressing sensitive themes. Humor offers both flexibility and directness in delivering social critiques, including those related to religious topics. From a communication perspective, humor is an integral element of human interaction as social beings. It softens rigid aspects of communication and has the ability to unravel complexities and resolve issues (Rahadian, 2021). The term "comic" itself originally means "funny," as it was initially used to convey humorous content (Ajidarma, 2021).

Religious themes have become increasingly prevalent in Indonesian comics since around 2010. This trend parallels the rise of political themes, which have also gained prominence in comic storytelling. One notable example is the popularity of Benny and Mice in Kompas newspaper, which tackles political themes with a satirical approach. The freedom of expression in Indonesia following the reform era is seen as a catalyst for the diversification of comic themes, which were previously dominated by romance, teenage love stories, and martial arts tales (*cerita silat*). Comic artists have become more daring in exploring topics that were once considered taboo (A. Kurnia, 2017; Rozaq, Agung, & Nafi'ah, 2024).

In the Indonesian context, the use of comics and cartoons to convey criticism actually is not a new phenomenon. The Benny & Mice comic strip, published weekly in Kompas newspaper, consistently delivers critiques on various social issues in Indonesia (Hadid, 2013). Himawan's research on *Komik Kita* also highlights social and religious critiques conveyed through caricatures (Himawan, 2023). Similarly, Luthfi examines *Komik Faktap* as a medium for delivering criticism through comics and humor (Luthfi, 2020). On Instagram, social critique through comic strips is also presented by accounts such as @Komikin_ajah (Ramadhani & Putra, 2017). This occurs because comics today serve as a form of mass communication that allows individual voices to be heard (McCloud, 2022). Social critique through comics can take the form of humor, satire, and sarcasm (M. S. H. Putra, 2023).



Figure 2.

Comics that represent critical thinking and progressive Islam on the Instagram account Islami.co.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/islamidotco/>

The comic strips featured on the Instagram account *islami.co* consistently exhibit a critical, contextual, and humorous character. This is evident, for example, in the two comics previously discussed. The first comic critiques public debates surrounding the number of *rakaat* in tarawih prayers, as well as the phenomenon of tarawih being performed in an unusually fast manner. The comic explains that while the number of *rakaat* may differ, the spiritual reward remains the same, as the intention to perform *tarawih* is shared. Similarly, in the second comic, *islami.co* portrays how Indonesian children sometimes express their religiosity in playful ways during congregational prayers at the mosque—for instance, by shouting “amin” loudly.

The common thread between these two comics is that both advocate for a non-rigid, non-judgmental approach to religious practice. They depict the religious expressions of Indonesian society as they are—humorous, yet also critical. This same tone is evident in the comic under analysis in this article, which portrays Santa Claus performing the *zuhr* prayer.

Critique of Religious Conservatism Through Comics

The comic strip depicting Santa Claus performing the midday prayer (*z*uhr) on the Instagram account *islami.co* can be interpreted as a critique of religious conservatism in Indonesia. The issue of whether a Muslim can wear Christmas attire (such as Santa Claus costumes) is a recurring debate in Indonesia every Christmas season. Other topics that also spark discussions include the permissibility of wishing someone a Merry Christmas and giving or receiving Christmas gifts. These debates are often heated on social media leading up to December 25th each year. It seems that there are two opposing camps: one that adheres strictly to preserving religious purity and another that allows such practices to promote interfaith harmony.

The comic on *islami.co* uses Christmas symbols to criticize the conservative approach to religion some Indonesians hold. In the Indonesian context, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) issued a fatwa in 2016 regarding the “prohibition of using non-Muslim religious symbols.” The fatwa declared that wearing or encouraging others to wear “non-Muslim religious symbols” is *ḥarām*. This fatwa mainly referred to Muslims wearing what are perceived as “Christian symbols,” such as Santa Claus costumes and accessories (Fachrudin, 2016).

This fatwa sparked controversy, as it provided a basis for the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) to conduct “sweeping” operations in shopping malls in Surabaya ahead of Christmas. The fatwa also raised questions about what constitutes “non-Muslim symbols.” Does a Santa Claus costume fall under this category? The ambiguity in this definition led to differing interpretations among the public, causing anxiety and even prompting acts of vigilantism (Fachrudin, 2016).

The impact of the 2016 MUI fatwa was still evident in 2021 in South Sulawesi. The Secretary of the South Sulawesi MUI, Muammar Bakry, urged that Christmas symbols should not be forced upon or worn by Muslims, particularly those working in companies or factories. He stated that wearing Christmas symbols could potentially harm the faith of Muslims (Wardyah, 2021). The situation in South Sulawesi illustrates that using Christmas symbols remains a “yearly controversy” in Indonesia. Within this context, the critique of the comic on *islami.co* is directed.

On the other hand, the comic published by *islami.co* brings to mind discussions surrounding the controversy of the Prophet Muhammad cartoons published in a Danish newspaper in 2006. Although it did not spark widespread debate or create a sensational controversy, the comic strip about Santa Claus on *islami.co* similarly raises religious themes in visual communication (comics). Al Makin’s research highlights how the Indonesian public responded to the Prophet Muhammad cartoons in Denmark. He found that conservative groups viewed the cartoons as an unforgivable insult to Islam and called for retaliatory actions. They referred to religious texts such as the Qur’an, hadith, and *sirah* to legitimize their outrage. Meanwhile, liberal and progressive groups adopted a more rational approach, emphasizing the need to understand the social and political context in Europe and critiquing the inaccurate stereotypes about Islam (Makin, 2015).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the comic strip on the Instagram account *islami.co* represents a critique of religious conservatism. This is evident in the comic strip’s portrayal of a Muslim Santa Claus who is shown performing the midday prayer (*z*uhr). The issues addressed in the comic are related to debates surrounding Christmas in the Indonesian context, such as the controversy over wishing people a Merry Christmas, the prohibition against wearing Christmas symbols, and the debate over giving or receiving Christmas gifts as a Muslim. Comics serve as a flexible and popular medium for conveying religious teachings, including critiques of rigid interpretations of religious doctrines. Popular media like comics should receive greater attention in Islamic outreach and education.

This study contributes to enriching the discourse on comics as a medium for conveying messages, particularly religious messages. Furthermore, it broadens the landscape of studies on Islamic expression in social media, paving the way for future research to conduct similar investigations. The findings of this study can serve as input for preachers to develop creative approaches to digital da'wa, including the use of comics as a medium. Campaigns promoting religious moderation can also draw inspiration from this research, demonstrating that strengthening *washatiyyah* Islam can be achieved creatively and engagingly through popular media.

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