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## The Existence of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) as a Reflection of Religious Tolerance in Banda Aceh City

**\*Syukrullah Syukrullah<sup>1</sup>, Mawardi Mawardi<sup>2</sup>, Nurlaila Nurlaila<sup>3</sup>**

Univesitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Indonesia

Email: [190302014@student.ar-raniry.ac.id](mailto:190302014@student.ar-raniry.ac.id)

### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the existence of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) in Banda Aceh City as a reflection of religious tolerance within a predominantly Muslim society. The research is grounded in the socio-religious dynamics of Banda Aceh, a region implementing Islamic law while guaranteeing freedom of religion for other faith communities. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that the presence of GPIB is socially accepted due to effective communication between the church congregation, local community leaders, and the government. Factors supporting this tolerance include local cultural values, inclusive regional policies, and the role of religious figures in maintaining harmony. Therefore, the existence of GPIB in Banda Aceh represents a dynamic form of tolerance that balances religious identity and local governance.

**Keywords:** *GPIB, Religious Tolerance, Banda Aceh, Pluralism, Local Policy.*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis eksistensi Gereja Protestan Indonesia Barat (GPIB) di Kota Banda Aceh sebagai cerminan praktik toleransi beragama dalam masyarakat yang mayoritas beragama Islam. Kajian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh dinamika kehidupan sosial keagamaan di Banda Aceh sebagai daerah yang menerapkan Syariat Islam namun tetap menjamin kebebasan beragama bagi pemeluk agama lain. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif, melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi lapangan, dan studi dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keberadaan GPIB diterima secara sosial karena adanya komunikasi yang baik antara jemaat gereja, tokoh masyarakat, dan pemerintah setempat. Faktor yang mendukung toleransi ini meliputi nilai-nilai budaya lokal, kebijakan pemerintah daerah yang inklusif, serta peran tokoh agama dalam menjaga kerukunan. Dengan demikian, eksistensi GPIB di Banda Aceh mencerminkan praktik toleransi yang dinamis antara identitas keagamaan dan kebijakan sosial keagamaan di tingkat lokal.

**Kata Kunci:** *GPIB, Toleransi Beragama, Banda Aceh, Pluralisme, Kebijakan Lokal.*

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## A. Introduction

Tolerance is one of the fundamental values in social life that serves as the foundation for creating harmony among religious communities in Indonesia (Mawardi, 2022). In the General Dictionary of the Indonesian Language, tolerance is defined as an attitude or behavior that respects, allows, and permits differences in opinions, views, beliefs, and habits that may be contrary to one's own. Etymologically, the term "tolerance" originates from the Arabic word *tasamuh*, which means to forgive, to pardon, and to be open to differences, as well as from the Latin word *tolerantia*, which denotes leniency, gentleness, and patience (Abdullah & Irhamna, 2023). This concept emphasizes the recognition of every individual's right to express their opinions and beliefs freely, even when they differ from the majority's perspective.

In theoretical discourse, Susan Mondus, as cited by Mafri Amir, divides tolerance into two forms: *negative tolerance* and *positive tolerance*. Negative tolerance only requires individuals to refrain from harming or disturbing others, while positive tolerance demands active engagement in building cooperation and harmonious relationships among different groups (Ruslan, 2020, p. 34). Meanwhile, Muhammad Ali views tolerance as an attitude positioned between two extremes of religious diversity, namely exclusivism and pluralism. Tolerance is not merely about allowing differences to exist but also about the willingness to understand and cooperate within diversity.

The social history of Acehese society shows that the values of tolerance have long been an integral part of local cultural identity since the era of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate (Sartina & Hanif, 2023). This is reflected in the diversity of ethnicities and religions that have lived peacefully side by side in various regions, such as Kampung Emperom, which has Turkish ancestry; Kampung Keudah, influenced by Malaysian culture; and Kampung Jawa, inhabited by people of Javanese descent. The Sultanate of Aceh even provided a special area for non-Muslim foreign traders in Peunayong, which became a multicultural trading hub free from discrimination based on religion or race. These historical facts confirm that tolerance has been deeply rooted in Acehese society as part of its cultural heritage.

In the context of religious development in Banda Aceh, the presence of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) serves as important evidence of religious tolerance within a predominantly Muslim society. This church was originally built during the Dutch colonial period as *Indische Kerk* in the Simpang Kodim area, functioning as a place of worship for Protestant congregations, particularly those of Dutch descent and members of the colonial military. After Indonesia's independence, the church was never destroyed or rejected by the local community; instead, it was given space for relocation and renovation on Pocut

Baren Street, next to the Methodist Church in Kampung Mulia. The continued existence of GPIB today symbolizes social acceptance and respect for religious diversity in Banda Aceh (Mawardi et al., 2024).

On the other hand, several international media outlets and survey institutions such as Human Rights Watch, ABC News, Asia News, and the Setara Institute often portray Banda Aceh as a city with a high level of intolerance. These reports generally highlight the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh and certain cases of restrictions on religious freedom or discrimination against minority groups. The imbalance between the tolerant social reality of Acehnese society and the negative perceptions at national and international levels presents an intriguing issue that warrants scholarly examination.

Based on this background, this study seeks to analyze the existence of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) in Banda Aceh City as a reflection of religious tolerance within a Muslim-majority society (Hasbullah, 2020, p. 16). This study not only explores the physical existence of GPIB as a minority house of worship but also examines social interactions, policy support, and local cultural values that sustain harmonious interfaith relations in the city. The novelty of this research lies in its contextual approach to the practice of religious tolerance through the case study of GPIB's existence in Banda Aceh, which has rarely been addressed in previous studies. Earlier research has generally focused on Aceh from political perspectives related to the implementation of Islamic law or issues of intolerance based on national and international reports. In contrast, this study offers a local perspective that emphasizes empirical experiences and everyday interactions among Banda Aceh residents in maintaining interfaith harmony, thus providing a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of tolerance in a region widely known as the "Veranda of Mecca." (Hasbi Amiruddin, 2006)

## **B. Metode**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the existence of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) as a reflection of religious tolerance in Banda Aceh City. The descriptive qualitative method was chosen because it allows the researcher to comprehensively explore social realities, particularly the dynamics of interreligious relations in a region known for its strong Islamic identity such as Banda Aceh. This research emphasizes understanding the studied phenomenon through field data collection and analysis of relevant secondary sources.

Two main methods were used in this research: field research and library research (Rully Indrawan, 2016). Field research was conducted to obtain primary data through direct observation of GPIB's activities and the interactions between

church congregants and the surrounding community. The researcher also conducted in-depth interviews with several key informants directly related to the phenomenon under study, including the Secretary of GPIB Banda Aceh, the Head of Gampong Mulia (Village Chief), five members of the GPIB congregation, and five Muslim residents living near the church. Meanwhile, library research was carried out to collect secondary data by reviewing relevant literature such as books, academic journals, research reports, and official documents related to issues of religious tolerance and the existence of GPIB in Banda Aceh.

The research was conducted at the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) Banda Aceh, located on Pocut Baren Street, Gampong Mulia. This location was chosen because of its strategic position in the city center and its proximity to the Muslim-majority community, allowing the researcher to directly observe patterns of social interaction and the local community's attitudes toward the presence of a minority religious institution.

The research instruments consisted of observation, interviews, and documentation (Khilmiyah, 2016). Observation was carried out directly to examine the church's activities, congregational interactions, and the physical environment of the church and its surroundings. Structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the informants' perceptions, experiences, and views regarding religious tolerance around GPIB. Documentation was used to complement the data by collecting photos, recordings, documents, and archives related to the history, social activities, and government regulations concerning religious freedom in Banda Aceh.

The data sources were divided into primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly from the field through interviews and observations, while secondary data were collected from various written sources such as books, reports, and official documents relevant to the research topic. Data collection techniques involved three stages interview, observation, and documentation while maintaining research validity and ethical standards.

The data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive analysis technique, which involves categorizing, reducing, and interpreting the data to identify patterns and meanings within the observed phenomena (Lexi J. Moeleong, 2002). This analysis was conducted by reviewing interview results and documentation to understand the forms of tolerance and interreligious interactions reflected in the existence of GPIB in Banda Aceh City. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive depiction of daily interreligious relations and to highlight the values of tolerance that thrive within the Banda Aceh community.

## **C. Result and Discussion**

### **1. History of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) Banda Aceh**

The establishment of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) Banda Aceh cannot be separated from the social, political, and cultural dynamics that have shaped Aceh's history, particularly since the Dutch colonial period (Buletin Haba, 2010, p. 11). The origins of GPIB Banda Aceh trace back to the founding of the Indische Kerk in 1911, built by the Dutch colonial government to meet the spiritual needs of the Royal Dutch East Indies Army, especially those from the Ambonese ethnic group. For this reason, the church was locally known as the Ambon Church. At that time, Banda Aceh was the center of colonial administration, marked by the construction of public facilities, military infrastructure, and European-style buildings, among which was the Indische Kerk, which would later serve as the foundation for GPIB Banda Aceh.

Originally, the Indische Kerk building was located in the city center, but following changes in land ownership after Indonesia's independence, the church was relocated to Jalan Pocut Baren, Gampong Mulia, where GPIB Banda Aceh still stands today. Based on very limited literature particularly Noer Abijono's 1997 work *"Ethnic Stereotypes Among Ethnic Groups in GPIB Banda Aceh Congregation"* the church underwent various functional changes due to political and social conditions (Noer Abijono, 1977). During the Japanese occupation in 1942, the church building was repurposed as a storage facility for food supplies and a slaughterhouse. Only after 1948, in the early years of Indonesia's independence, was the building restored for worship and officially handed over to GPIB, under the name GPIB Jemaat Banda Aceh.

In the early post-independence period (1948–1966), GPIB Banda Aceh was led by J.B. Pattinasarene, together with members of the church council such as M.B. Aipasa and J.Ch. Sapulete. This period was characterized by social and political dynamics, including the 1965–1966 G30S/PKI rebellion, which briefly caused misunderstandings regarding Christian organizations. Despite these tensions, no actual violence occurred, and the congregation continued its worship activities peacefully within a predominantly Muslim society. Changes in congregation composition also became evident, with the Ambonese population gradually declining while Batak Karo, Manado, and Nias ethnic groups increasingly joined the church. This reflects the internal diversity of GPIB, serving as a microcosm of interethnic and interreligious tolerance in Banda Aceh.

During the period of 1970–1978, leadership of GPIB Banda Aceh was held by M.B. Aipasa and later by Akab Sebayang, from the Batak Karo ethnic group. The internal dynamics of the congregation during this period were relatively complex. While there were occasional ethnic conflicts, such as disagreements over church council elections and differing perspectives between the Batak Karo and Nias groups, these conflicts were resolved peacefully through reconciliatory approaches.



Pastors and the church council undertook constructive initiatives, including post-service greetings, expanding participation in church activities, and visiting congregants' homes to strengthen relationships. These efforts reflected a spirit of unity, mutual respect, and internal tolerance, which subsequently mirrored GPIB's external tolerance toward the surrounding community.

Over time, GPIB Banda Aceh developed into a religious institution that not only conducted worship but also actively engaged in social and community activities. The church's presence was demonstrated through participation in various events in Banda Aceh, including humanitarian and official local government activities. The existence of GPIB did not provoke resistance from the local community; rather, residents of Gampong Mulia welcomed the church and respected the congregants' freedom to worship. This indicates that despite Banda Aceh's strong implementation of Islamic Sharia, values of humanity and interreligious respect have been maintained.

Thus, the historical development of GPIB Banda Aceh not only reflects the institutional journey of a church but also serves as tangible evidence of religious tolerance in Banda Aceh. From the colonial era to the modern period, GPIB has been a symbol of a minority community that continues to exist, is respected, and contributes to social harmony within a predominantly Muslim environment. The presence and acceptance of GPIB in Banda Aceh demonstrate that tolerance is not merely a concept but a lived practice in the daily life of the local community.

## 2. The Existence of GPIB in Banda Aceh

The existence of the GPIB building, which continues to function well for Protestant Christian congregations in carrying out their worship until today, can be seen as an indicator of the presence of tolerance within the daily life of Acehnese society. The existence of GPIB itself can be considered an indicator of religious tolerance in Banda Aceh, considering that the majority of Acehnese people are Muslims who adhere to Islam as their faith and implement Islamic law through the *Qanun Aceh* (a local regulation) that governs various aspects of life in the province.

Concerns among the Christian community in Banda Aceh have not been absent. A reference source stated that even before the official implementation of Islamic law in Aceh through Law Number 11 of 2006 concerning the Governance of Aceh, non-Muslim residents had already expressed anxiety about their position. On January 16, 2002, the Aceh Church Assembly (MPG Aceh) sent a letter to the Governor of Aceh to express their concerns and requested that the government remain neutral, pay attention to minority groups, and prevent any form of violence or oppression carried out in the name of religion (Ali Abubakar, 2020, pp. 64–65).

Furthermore, several years after the enforcement of Islamic law in Aceh through Law Number 11 of 2006 and *Qanun* Number 11 concerning the Implementation of Islamic Law in the fields of Faith (*Aqidah*), Worship (*Ibadah*), and Islamic Practice (*Syariah*), a report dated June 14, 2011 stated that Christian religious leaders affirmed that the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh did not disturb the lives of non-Muslims. This situation has allowed harmonious interfaith relations to flourish in the region. According to Rev. Sandino, S.Th., Chairman of the Banda Aceh Church Assembly, Christians in Aceh do not feel burdened because Islamic law only applies to Muslims, and Christians respect these regulations. Although they are a minority, Christians have not experienced any interference in performing their worship, as the local community mutually respects and upholds tolerance. Consequently, social life in the region remains safe and peaceful. Rev. Sandino also added that Christians in Aceh always show respect toward Muslims for example, during the fasting month, non-Muslims refrain from selling food and drinks in public during the daytime. This reflects the harmony among religious communities in Aceh, which has been well maintained and should continue to be preserved in society.

This statement is also supported by the results of an interview with Mr. J, who explained that during worship activities at GPIB Banda Aceh, there has never been any incident of intolerance, such as interruptions of ongoing services or closure of the church.

“The condition of the church is very safe; the surrounding environment is quite good and pleasant. Perhaps people outside have a different perception, but in reality, we are perfectly fine. Communication is good, and activities run well. You could say our location is behind a mosque, in front of a mosque, beside a temple, and next to another mosque. In fact, there has never been any problem. In the past, when people still used bells that had to be rung before worship began, even that never disturbed anyone at all and until now, there has never been any disturbance.”

The statement delivered by Mr. J illustrates how the GPIB congregation in Banda Aceh has been able to carry out their worship activities despite the full implementation of Islamic law in the city, which was previously a source of concern. The culture of interreligious tolerance exists not only between Christians and Muslims but also includes other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This can be seen from the presence of various houses of worship built side by side within relatively close proximity.

The implementation of Islamic law, in essence, does not cause non-Muslims or followers of other religions to experience discrimination. This is because the Islamic legal regulations enforced in Aceh such as the *Qanun on the Fundamentals of Islamic Law*, the *Qanun Jinayat* (Islamic Criminal Code), and other related *Qanun*

do not contain provisions that restrict or limit the scope of worship for non-Muslim communities.

In addition to the guaranteed safety and comfort of Protestant Christian congregants in practicing their faith, the relationship between the congregation and the surrounding residents of Kampung Mulia, where the GPIB Banda Aceh building is located, also remains very good and harmonious.

“Our relationship with the church congregation is quite good; we maintain harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect for one another. The church also always reports any activities that will be carried out. Although most of the congregants of GPIB Banda Aceh are not residents who live in Gampong Mulia, Banda Aceh City.”

The social relationship between the GPIB Banda Aceh congregation and the surrounding community, particularly the residents of Gampong Mulia, has been well maintained, as stated by the head of Gampong Mulia. This good relationship can be seen from the absence of any recorded conflicts between the GPIB congregation and the local community of Gampong Mulia. The culture of interreligious tolerance is reflected both socially and in the freedom to practice religious worship.

Mr. B. Ferdian also explained that the good relationship between the people of Gampong Mulia and the GPIB Banda Aceh congregation has existed for a long time. Even when Mr. B. Ferdian was a child and a native resident of Gampong Mulia, there had never been any issues of disturbance or conflict. The establishment of this harmonious relationship cannot be separated from the mutual respect that exists among followers of different religions in the city of Banda Aceh.

“Our side always tries to take a respectful attitude toward the surrounding Muslim community. For example, during the fasting month, we remind our congregation members not to eat or drink in public. It would be awkward if children saw and said, ‘Why is that man eating and drinking during the day?’ Therefore, to maintain harmony and comfort, we show respect to Muslims who are observing the fasting month of Ramadan.”

From the excerpt of the interview, it can be seen how the GPIB Banda Aceh congregation shows respect by taking an understanding attitude toward the conditions experienced by the surrounding Muslim community. This is certainly an essential part of religious tolerance. By understanding certain conditions and situations, a sense of mutual tolerance can grow while minimizing the potential for social conflict that may arise from a lack of understanding among people. By showing respect to Muslims who are fasting during the month of Ramadan, the GPIB congregation also fosters a sense of sympathy and appreciation from the surrounding community.



“Of course, I really appreciate and am thankful for the actions of our friends at the GPIB Church in Banda Aceh City, who refrain from activities such as eating and drinking during the fasting month. I have also seen non-Muslim food vendors who are not required to fast, yet they choose to close their businesses during Ramadan out of respect for the Muslims living in the area.”

The excerpt from the interview reflects the opinion of a resident of Gampong Mulia. From this interview, it is evident that the local community is very pleased with the respectful attitude and actions of the GPIB Banda Aceh congregation toward the surrounding Muslim community. Mutual respect among people of different religions is also evident in Gampong Mulia, where Protestant Christians can safely carry out their worship in their own homes, as expressed by Abdi, a member of the GPIB Banda Aceh congregation:

“During my worship activities, I have never faced any difficulties, whether at the church or when gathering for family worship at home. The community has no problem with it and is open to such activities. We only need to maintain the comfort of the surrounding residents for example, by not parking carelessly on the streets or in front of other people’s houses during family worship, and by adjusting the timing of our services. If our worship happens to coincide with the time of the evening *Isha* prayer, we hold it after the Muslim community has completed their worship.”

The attitude of the surrounding community in allowing people of different faiths to conduct their worship in their own homes represents a positive step in the development of a culture of tolerance in Banda Aceh. Such experiences help the people of Aceh better understand how to respond to the presence and existence of non-Muslims in their midst, thereby minimizing the potential for ethnic or religious conflicts.

On the other hand, GPIB Banda Aceh also carries out various social activities within the community to strengthen interfaith relations, which are also considered a form of worship. As stated by Mr. J:

“There are many social activities we carry out, such as community clean-ups, providing social assistance to those in need, occasionally organizing blood donation drives, and visiting neighbors when there is a death in the area. There are still many other social activities we conduct. Social activities are important because they serve as concrete proof of what we have learned in our faith.”

The services and social activities organized by GPIB Banda Aceh aim to strengthen interreligious relationships through cooperation and tolerance. This can be achieved by providing equal social services to all members of society regardless of religion, ethnicity, or cultural background (Pikahulan, 2023). It is also seen as a way of putting religious teachings into practice. Social services can help reinforce

social bonds among people of different faiths through various means, such as organizing humanitarian aid programs for natural disaster victims, poverty alleviation initiatives, and public health projects. They also promote universal values such as mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation among people of different religious backgrounds, while raising awareness and appreciation for religious, cultural, and belief diversity ultimately fostering stronger interfaith collaboration.

In addition to conducting social activities, GPIB Banda Aceh also actively participates in programs organized by both governmental and private institutions related to discussions on current social and religious issues.

“For example, here we often collaborate with Kontras, with disability organizations, and with community organizations such as those focused on the protection of women and children we often document those activities. Sometimes, when they hold an event, we are invited to attend as well, such as programs that discuss interfaith matters. In essence, we never close ourselves off from participating; as long as the activities are good and appropriate, we take part and fully support them.”

The effort to continue participating in various community activities, whether organized by the government or private institutions, is a step taken to demonstrate that the church and its congregation are open to positive and constructive initiatives. It also shows that the GPIB Banda Aceh and its members are present and willing to contribute to every activity carried out by the local community.

It is known that in 2021, the GPIB Banda Aceh congregation also took part in activities related to upholding Islamic law (*Syariat Islam*). The GPIB, through a mass media statement, also voiced criticism toward the lack of seriousness in enforcing Islamic law. Kamal Rijal, a student of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting at UIN Ar-Raniry and also a spokesperson for GPIB, stated that this public hearing was held due to the numerous violations of Islamic law in Banda Aceh City, which had made the public feel uncomfortable.

During the meeting, GPIB submitted several demands in the public hearing. They requested that punishments for violations of Islamic law, such as flogging for adultery offenders, should not only be directed at individuals who violate Islamic law but also at the Banda Aceh City Office of Islamic Law (*Dinas Syariat Islam*). GPIB hoped that the Office of Islamic Law would take firm action and revoke the licenses of cafés and hotels that violate Islamic law so that similar incidents would not happen again.

The preservation of interreligious harmony in Banda Aceh City, particularly in the Gampong Mulia area and its surroundings, has contributed positively to the development of a culture of tolerance in Aceh. It also serves as a role model for other regions to continue maintaining religious harmony. Based on an interview with the

Acting Head of Gampong Mulia, it was explained that in 2017, Gampong Mulia was officially recognized as the most religiously harmonious village in Aceh.

The designation of Gampong Mulia as a “Harmony-Conscious Village” was based on the harmony among its residents, who have lived side by side peacefully without conflict despite the diversity of religions within the village. This harmony has existed since the establishment of GPIB, and there are no historical records indicating any acts of intolerance within or toward the GPIB congregation.

The status of Gampong Mulia as a “Harmony-Conscious Village,” as explained, did not merely end as a symbolic declaration. Based on an interview with Mr. B.F., it was revealed that there is a structured management body for the harmony-conscious village initiative.

“So, we have a harmony-conscious village committee in Gampong Mulia, consisting of local religious leaders from GPIB, the Methodist Church, the AKBP, the Vihara, and the village imam. For ease of communication, we have created a WhatsApp group so that coordination can be conducted more effectively.”

The establishment of such a forum by the Gampong Mulia administration demonstrates the seriousness of all parties in maintaining interreligious harmony. Through this communication forum, people of different faiths can share experiences, ideas, and perspectives regarding their beliefs and religious practices. This helps reduce misconceptions, stereotypes, and negative prejudices that may arise between religious communities. Moreover, interfaith communication forums can assist in resolving potential conflicts through open dialogue and discussion, allowing for better understanding and peaceful resolutions. Such platforms help build a more inclusive and harmonious society, bringing various benefits such as improved social welfare, strengthened security, and greater opportunities for sustainable development.

In addition to establishing a communication platform to strengthen interreligious social relations, another effort that demonstrates the spirit of tolerance in Gampong Mulia is the organization of the *Pekan Harmoni Mulia* (Mulia Harmony Week).

The *Pekan Harmoni Mulia* was held with the aim of nurturing young generations to be aware of interreligious harmony and to uphold the spirit of tolerance among different faiths. Activities involving people of various religions in Banda Aceh are highly important, as they help strengthen interfaith relationships and promote a deeper understanding of diverse religious beliefs and practices. Such events are crucial because they increase tolerance and appreciation for differences, reduce misconceptions and negative prejudices, enhance cooperation and peace, and contribute to building an inclusive and harmonious society.

However, even though there is abundant evidence of the establishment of tolerance values within Banda Aceh society, acknowledging and respecting every religion, there are still aspects that deserve critical attention. It must be recognized that achieving 100% acceptance of diversity is nearly impossible, as it is influenced by individual ideologies and beliefs. Even within the Muslim community itself, there are differing opinions regarding how interreligious tolerance should be understood and practiced.

From the interviews conducted, several findings indicate that certain limitations continue to hinder the progress of tolerance culture in Banda Aceh, causing it to remain stagnant. For example, according to the statement from Mr. M:

“That’s what we often hope for to increase the frequency of meetings but they often clash with each person’s schedule. For instance, we frequently communicate with the mosque management of Gampong Mulia, but they also have their own schedules for various activities, and it’s the same here. Sometimes, meetings can only take place during specific events. For example, recently we were invited to participate in an event promoting adherence to Pancasila, held at the mosque located behind the church and we attended. However, meetings between the church community and the surrounding Muslim community rarely occur, even among the youth groups. This is very unfortunate because maintaining and strengthening interfaith relations is very necessary. Sometimes people hesitate to visit the church due to their beliefs and ideologies, while on our side, we are always open and willing to welcome anyone.”

The lack of regular social interaction between the GPIB Banda Aceh congregation and the residents of Gampong Mulia occurring only during certain events demonstrates a limitation in developing deeper interfaith tolerance and harmony. This limitation may be caused by several factors, as Mr. M previously explained, such as time constraints; some people simply have limited time to interact with those of different faiths due to work or daily commitments. However, beyond time constraints, another evident reason why Acehnese society respects non-Muslims yet hesitates to socialize closely with them lies in the beliefs and religious convictions held by Muslims themselves as reflected in the understanding of *Surah Ali ‘Imran* verses 118:

“O you who believe, do not take as friends those who cause you harm. They are not of your kind and always commit evil against you. They are pleased to see you in difficulty. The hatred that comes from their mouths is evident, while what they conceal in their hearts is far greater. Indeed, We have made clear to you Our verses, if you would understand.” (Qur’an, *Surah Ali ‘Imran*, Verse 188)

This verse from the Qur'an helps explain why some Muslims in Banda Aceh are reluctant to befriend non-Muslim residents. In a study conducted by Fina Nuriah Rohimatul Umah, it is explained that this verse essentially discusses the ethics of interacting with others. As conveyed in the significance (maghza, or main message) of Surah Ali 'Imran, Muslims are advised to be cautious in building relationships with others, to avoid harboring ill intentions, grudges, or hatred, to refrain from hypocrisy, to show compassion and love toward fellow human beings, to remain patient in facing hardships, and to always be mindful of Allah SWT (Nuriah & Umah, 2021).

Although the verse does not prohibit interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, many people in Banda Aceh still choose to limit such interactions or to avoid them unless necessary. The boundaries in building interreligious tolerance are indeed regulated within Islam, whether derived from the Qur'an or the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Nevertheless, there is no prohibition against befriending non-Muslims as long as these boundaries are observed. At the very least, the positive aspect that can be drawn is that Muslims in Banda Aceh do not engage in persecution or restrict other religious communities from practicing their faith.

### **3. Acehnese People's Perspective on the Existence of GPIB**

A perspective is the way an individual views or perceives something whether an object, event, or issue in their surroundings. Perspectives can be influenced by various factors such as life experiences, cultural background, values, religion, and other elements that shape how a person sees the world. A perspective may also include one's understanding of an issue or topic, including how they interpret and respond to a particular situation. Perspectives can be positive or negative, depending on one's viewpoint and perception.

In this section, the author discusses how the people of Aceh perceive the existence of GPIB (Gereja Protestan di Indonesia bagian Barat / Protestant Church in Western Indonesia) in Banda Aceh, based on interviews and documentation. The questions asked included: What are people's opinions regarding the GPIB building that has stood for a long time in Banda Aceh? How do they view religious freedom and the rights of minorities to worship? What actions should be taken to strengthen tolerance and interreligious harmony? And other related questions.

From five respondents all Muslims living near the GPIB area and in Banda Aceh City it was found that they showed tolerance toward the presence of the GPIB building. Several respondents stated that the existence of GPIB is evidence that Muslims in Aceh possess a high level of tolerance and are not intolerant, contrary to



how some external media portray Aceh as an intolerant region merely because it implements Islamic law in everyday life.

The interviewed respondents expressed highly tolerant attitudes toward the questions posed, such as: “How do you respond to religious freedom and the right to worship according to one’s faith?” The first respondent expressed appreciation and respect toward non-Muslims practicing their religion. According to them, there is nothing wrong with it because, despite differing beliefs, everyone is a human being who possesses human rights that must be respected and protected. The second and third respondents shared similar views, stating that performing religious worship is a good act and shows that a person is devout to their faith. They believed that no religion teaches wrongdoing; as long as one’s actions do not harm or disturb others, there is no reason to dislike them, as they are humans just like us.

The third respondent provided a perspective that prohibiting non-Muslim worship could have negative consequences if the same were to happen to Muslims. They cited the situation in Palestine, where both Muslims and Christians often face interference when worshiping. Therefore, the respondent argued that no one should prohibit others from practicing their faith.

Similarly, the fourth and fifth respondents expressed comparable opinions, explaining that there is no problem with non-Muslims performing their religious services. However, they suggested that non-Muslims should ideally conduct their worship in designated places of worship, such as the GPIB Banda Aceh, to prevent discomfort or conflict with individuals who might not agree or who may harbor negative sentiments. They also acknowledged that not everyone is open-minded toward religious differences and expressed concern over the possibility of unfortunate or embarrassing incidents, even though such actions would only be the work of certain individuals.

From the interviews conducted, it can be concluded that there are no indicators suggesting that the respondents or the people of Banda Aceh in general harbor intolerant attitudes. Their views toward the existence of GPIB Banda Aceh are positive; they acknowledge that the church has long existed and serves as a vital place of worship for Protestant Christians. There is no reason to hate or close down such a place of worship. On the contrary, respondents expressed support for their non-Muslim neighbors to worship safely and comfortably.

On the other hand, previous statements that labeled Banda Aceh as the most intolerant city in Indonesia are based on survey data released by certain institutions. For example, a survey by the Setara Institute in 2017 ranked Banda Aceh as the second most intolerant city in Indonesia, after Jakarta. However, the findings of this study indicate that, at the community level, the people of Banda Aceh practice

tolerance and respect toward the existence of non-Muslim places of worship such as GPIB.

No.	Kota	Skor
1	DKI Jakarta	2,30
2	Banda Aceh	2,90
3	Bogor	3,05
4	Cilegon	3,20
5	Depok	3,30
6	Yogyakarta	3,40
7	Banjarmasin	3,55
8	Makassar	3,65
9	Padang	3,75
10	Mataram	3,78

**Table 4.2 Cities with the Lowest Tolerance Scores in 2017**

The survey clearly shows that Banda Aceh ranked as the city with the lowest tolerance score in Indonesia. The indicators used by the Setara Institute included: government regulations, discriminatory policies, government actions and statements related to events, social regulations, incidents of violations, and religious demographic indicators specifically the composition of the population based on religion. Not only in 2017, but Banda Aceh was also listed among the least tolerant cities in 2018, once again ranking second, while the first position that year was held by the city of Tanjung Balai.

KOTA	Regulasi Pemerintah		Regulasi Sosial		Tindakan Pemerintah		Demografi Agama		Skor Akhir
	Ind 1	Ind 2	Ind 3	Ind 4	Ind 5	Ind 6	Ind 7	Ind 8	
Sabang	0.367	0.840	1.200	0.200	0.400	0.450	0.100	0.200	3.757
Medan	0.350	1.260	0.600	0.500	0.300	0.300	0.200	0.200	3.710
Makassar	0.317	0.770	1.000	0.400	0.400	0.300	0.150	0.300	3.637
Bogor	0.433	0.700	1.200	0.200	0.300	0.300	0.200	0.200	3.533
Depok	0.350	0.840	0.800	0.500	0.300	0.300	0.200	0.200	3.490
Padang	0.200	0.700	1.200	0.300	0.300	0.300	0.150	0.300	3.450
Cilegon	0.250	0.770	1.200	0.200	0.300	0.300	0.200	0.200	3.420
Jakarta	0.250	0.980	0.200	0.500	0.200	0.300	0.250	0.200	2.880
Banda Aceh	0.300	0.630	0.600	0.300	0.200	0.300	0.100	0.400	2.830
Tanjung Balai	0.317	0.650	0.600	0.200	0.300	0.450	0.100	0.200	2.817

**Table 4.2 Cities with the Lowest Tolerance Scores in 2018**

If we generally observe the attitude of the people of Banda Aceh toward accepting non-Muslims, we may find that many of them are welcoming and respectful of the rights of non-Muslims to practice their religion. This is also reflected in several interview results that have been conducted. However, a fundamental question arises: why is Banda Aceh still considered an intolerant city, even though historical records show that there has never been a case of interreligious conflict in Banda Aceh caused by the implementation of Islamic law or any other related factor?

It is important to understand that intolerance can occur not only between people of different religions but also among those who share the same faith. This attitude often arises due to differences in interpreting religious teachings, which eventually lead to conflicting understandings. At a mild level, such conflicts may only result in endless debates, while at a more extreme level, they can escalate into violent conflicts and even acts of persecution.

When analyzing and identifying the causes of such issues, it is essential to consider multiple perspectives and remain open to input from others. As long as these perspectives can help improve the socio-cultural conditions of Banda Aceh and do not contradict the city's values and social norms, critical viewpoints should be taken into account.

A journal article titled "Indeks Kota Toleransi" (City Tolerance Index) by Subhi Azhari Halili explains the reasons why Banda Aceh continues to be listed among the least tolerant cities in Indonesia. These assessments are based on several notable incidents that have occurred in Banda Aceh.

**a. The Al-Makmur Lampriet Mosque (Oman Mosque) Incident, Banda Aceh City – January 27, 2020**

The incident that occurred on January 27, 2020, remains memorable for anyone who attended the religious lecture (*pengajian*) delivered by Ustaz Farhan at the Al-Makmur Lampriet Mosque. On that date and at that location, an incident took place in which a group of Banda Aceh residents disrupted and disbanded the lecture, as they disagreed with certain teachings presented by Ustaz Farhan. This event was captured in several authentic video recordings that circulated widely on the internet and can still be accessed on social media platforms, particularly those focused on video content such as YouTube.

Before labeling the incident as an act of intolerance as claimed by the Setara Institute it is important to first understand the underlying context and causes of the event. Research conducted by Alhadid Arasy Rizfa explains:

"Initially, the lecture at Oman Al-Makmur Mosque in Lampriet was disbanded because the preacher, Ustaz Farhan, was suspected of promoting Wahhabi teachings, which were considered by many to deviate from and mislead the religious practices of the Acehnese community in general. He and his followers were seen as unwilling to accept differing opinions in interpreting certain religious matters and often demeaned other preachers who did not share their views. Moreover, there were differences in the interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet. In relation to this, the Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly (MPU) had issued a fatwa outlining the criteria for deviant understandings to control the spread of Wahhabi preaching that was becoming increasingly widespread."

The saying “*there is no smoke without fire*” may best describe what happened at the Oman Mosque. The residents of Banda Aceh disbanded Ustaz Farhan’s lecture due to his verbal expressions, which were seen as promoting intolerance within Islam itself such as declaring certain long-standing Acehese religious practices forbidden (*haram*) and condemning the beliefs of the local Muslim community. This raises an important question: does opposing an intolerant ideology constitute an act of intolerance, especially when an individual or group explicitly insults or verbally attacks others? What may be regrettable, however, is the manner in which the disbandment occurred it appeared to lack prior dialogue or a more constructive approach to addressing the issue.

From the Oman Mosque incident, the main point that can be critically examined is the *ethics* of how the situation was handled. Perhaps the Setara Institute only observed snippets of the circulating video without delving deeper into the root causes of the event. A strong and well-grounded analysis is essential before justifying or categorizing a social event as intolerance. Data and conclusions should not be based merely on superficial observations; otherwise, such judgments risk resembling uninformed public opinions that assess incidents only from appearances, without understanding the underlying issues.

#### **b. The Ban on Valentine’s Day, 2020 (February 10, 2020)**

The ban on celebrating Valentine’s Day in Aceh particularly in Banda Aceh has existed for a long time. It was not only enforced in 2020 but also in previous years and is expected to continue in the future. To assess whether such a regulation is an act of intolerance, it is not sufficient to judge it merely by its surface appearance.

The proverb “*Where the earth is trodden, there the sky is upheld*” may help to understand the context of this issue. It is well known that Aceh’s population is overwhelmingly Muslim, and the same applies to Banda Aceh. In Aceh, Islamic law (*Syariat Islam*) has been implemented through various *Qanun* (regional Islamic laws), such as the *Qanun on the Principles of Islamic Law* and the *Qanun Jinayat* (Islamic Criminal Code).

The enforcement of Islamic law in Banda Aceh is based on two fundamental legal principles: the *territorial principle* and the *personal principle*. The territorial principle means that the regulation applies only within Aceh, while the personal principle means that it applies only to those who follow Islam. Therefore, all Islamic law regulations in Aceh apply exclusively to Muslims living in or temporarily residing in the region. Consequently, the prohibition against celebrating Valentine’s Day applies only to Muslims in Aceh. Non-Muslims, on the other hand, are free to celebrate it “under applicable conditions and limitations.”

The “applicable conditions and limitations” refer to acts considered immoral, which are often associated with Valentine’s Day, such as promiscuity, public displays of affection, and other behaviors that contradict Acehese local wisdom and values. This explains why the Aceh government strictly prohibits the celebration of Valentine’s Day.

From a historical perspective, Valentine’s Day traces back to the 5th century. More than 200 years later, on February 14, the day was declared St. Valentine’s Day. At that time, Rome was predominantly Christian, and the Catholic Church sought to eliminate remnants of paganism. Pope Gelasius abolished the pagan festival of *Lupercalia* and merged it with St. Valentine’s Day. Following this change, the pagan rituals disappeared, and the celebration evolved into one symbolizing romance and affection. Before this transformation, the pagan fertility ritual had been held annually in February. However, the Pope abolished it and established February 14 as St. Valentine’s Day in the Christian calendar.

The historical roots of Valentine’s Day are fundamentally inconsistent with Islamic teachings. In Islam both in the Qur’an and Hadith there are clear prohibitions against imitating or resembling other religious or cultural groups. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: *“Whoever imitates a people is one of them.”* (Narrated by Abu Dawud). An analysis by Rizki Ramdani explains:

“If we celebrate Valentine’s Day, it is as if we are recognizing it as a religious festival. In Islam, the designation of a holiday requires textual evidence found in the Qur’an and Sunnah. There is an authentic hadith of the Prophet that addresses this matter.”

*‘Whoever introduces into this affair of ours (religion) something that does not belong to it, it will be rejected.’* (Narrated by Al-Bukhari in *Sahih* [2697] and Muslim in *Sahih* [1718]).

Thus, claiming that the Valentine’s Day ban constitutes intolerance must be based on strong and accurate reasoning. The prohibition applies only to Muslims in Aceh and is grounded in the doctrinal foundations of Islamic teachings themselves. To properly understand this phenomenon, the context must be placed accurately to avoid misinterpretation by outsiders who may not comprehend Aceh’s religious and cultural setting, and who might wrongly assume that Aceh’s regulations contradict or suppress other religions. Moreover, Article 18B of the Indonesian Constitution (*Undang-Undang Dasar 1945*) clearly states:

“The state recognizes and respects the units of customary law communities and their traditional rights as long as they remain in existence and are in accordance with the development of society and the principles of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, as regulated by law.”



#### D. Conclusion

The existence of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia (GPIB) in Banda Aceh City reflects the preservation of religious tolerance within a predominantly Muslim society. The relationship between the GPIB congregation and the surrounding community, particularly the residents of Gampong Mulia where the church is located, remains harmonious and free from any recorded conflicts or acts of intolerance. The presence of GPIB is well accepted by the local community, demonstrating mutual respect and appreciation for religious diversity. This is evident from the active participation of GPIB in various social and community activities, including supporting the implementation of Islamic law, engaging in social programs, and taking part in events organized within Banda Aceh City.

Although the frequency of interaction between the GPIB congregation and the local residents is limited and mostly occurs during specific occasions, such circumstances do not diminish the sense of togetherness that has been established. Differences in faith and time constraints have not hindered the creation of peaceful and respectful coexistence. Functionally, GPIB serves as a place of worship for Protestant Christians and as a center for character education based on religious values, while also contributing socially through participation in inclusive community activities across Banda Aceh.

Overall, the existence of GPIB in Banda Aceh stands as a tangible symbol of religious tolerance practiced in everyday life. The acceptance and support shown by the local community toward the church demonstrate that humanitarian values and interfaith solidarity remain deeply rooted within Acehnese society. These findings highlight that interreligious harmony can be sustained through mutual respect, openness, and collaboration in social life without negating each community's distinct religious identity.

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