

Humanism in Javanese Islam: The Thought of Sosrokartono and Religious Ethics

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Abstract

This article examines the thought of Sosrokartono as a prominent Javanese intellectual whose spiritual ideas reflect core values of religious humanism embedded in Javanese religiosity. This study employs a qualitative approach through intellectual and textual analysis. Primary data consist of Sosrokartono's teachings and writings, particularly the concepts of *ilmu kantong bolong* and *ilmu kantong kosong*, while secondary data are drawn from scholarly works on religious humanism, Javanese Islam, and ethical spirituality. The study aims to uncover the construction of religious humanist values in Sosrokartono's thought and to analyze their implications for the ethical orientation of religious life in Javanese society. The findings reveal that *ilmu kantong bolong* and *ilmu kantong kosong* embody key principles of religious humanism, including sincerity, empathy, self-transcendence, social service, and the spiritual discipline of ego-emptying. These values contribute to the formation of an inclusive, ethical, and human-centered model of religiosity that characterizes Javanese Islam. This study argues that religious humanism in Javanese Islam should be understood as a lived ethical-spiritual praxis rather than merely a normative or doctrinal construct.

Keyword: *Javanese Islam, Sosrokartono, Religious Ethics, Local Spirituality.*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji pemikiran Sosrokartono sebagai salah satu figur intelektual Jawa yang merepresentasikan nilai-nilai humanisme religius dalam wacana dan praktik keberagamaan masyarakat Jawa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi pemikiran. Data primer berupa teks, ajaran, dan gagasan Sosrokartono, khususnya konsep *ilmu kantong bolong* dan *ilmu kantong kosong*, dianalisis secara interpretatif, sementara data sekunder diperoleh dari literatur yang relevan dengan kajian humanisme religius dan Islam Jawa. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah mengungkap konstruksi nilai-nilai humanisme religius dalam pemikiran Sosrokartono serta menjelaskan implikasinya terhadap etika dan perilaku keberagamaan masyarakat Jawa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ajaran *ilmu kantong bolong* dan *ilmu kantong kosong* mengandung prinsip-prinsip utama humanisme religius, seperti keikhlasan, empati, pengabdian sosial, dan pengosongan ego sebagai fondasi spiritualitas. Nilai-nilai tersebut berkontribusi pada pembentukan corak keberagamaan yang inklusif, etis, dan berorientasi pada kemanusiaan, yang menjadi ciri khas religiositas masyarakat Jawa. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa humanisme religius dalam Islam Jawa dapat dipahami sebagai praksis spiritual-etis yang hidup, bukan sekadar konstruksi normatif-teoretis.

Kata Kunci: *Islam Jawa, Sosrokartono, Etika Keagamaan, Spiritualitas Lokal.*

INTRODUCTION

Javanese society has been historically shaped by prolonged encounters with multiple cultural and religious traditions, including Hindu Buddhism, Islam, Chinese culture, and Western influences (Bakri, 2019). These encounters have produced a distinctive form of Javanese Islam characterized by the integration of divine and human dimensions within religious life. Rather than abandoning local customs, Javanese religiosity is marked by a continuous process of ethical negotiation in which cultural norms are reinterpreted in light of Islamic values, resulting in a contextualized and human centered model of religiosity.

Within the broader history of modern thought, Western humanism emerged as a philosophical movement that positioned human beings as the ultimate center of meaning and value. In the German intellectual tradition, *Humanismus* emphasized human autonomy and rational superiority, often at the expense of transcendence (Mueller & Sartre, 1947). This anthropocentric orientation has been widely criticized for marginalizing the role of God in human existence. In response, religious humanism developed as an alternative framework that seeks to reconcile human dignity with divine authority by integrating ethical humanism into religious worldviews (Ibda, 2020).

In Islamic thought, this integration is articulated through the ethical balance between *ḥabl min Allāh* and *ḥabl min al-nās*, which underscores the inseparability of spiritual devotion and social responsibility (Rozaq, 2019). Religious behavior, therefore, is not merely ritualistic but constitutes an ethical praxis shaped by belief, knowledge, experience, and moral consequence. Religiosity manifests in lived practices that reflect one's understanding of religious teachings and their ethical implications (Daradjat, 1989).

Against this theoretical backdrop, the thought of Sosrokartono offers a locally grounded articulation of religious humanism within Javanese Islam. Although Sosrokartono did not formulate a systematic theory of religious humanism, his teachings implicitly embody its core principles. Concepts such as *ilmu kantong bolong* and *ilmu kantong kosong* represent a form of ethical spirituality centered on sincerity, empathy, ego transcendence, and social service. These principles frame religiosity as a lived ethical practice in which humanization becomes a spiritual pathway toward God.

This study situates Sosrokartono's thought within broader debates on religious humanism and Islamic ethics, arguing that Javanese Islam provides a significant example of how religious humanism operates as an ethical spiritual praxis rather than a doctrinal abstraction.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research to examine the intellectual and ethical thought of Sosrokartono. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to exploring meaning, ideas, and conceptual frameworks embedded within philosophical and religious texts, rather than focusing on measurable variables (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). Library research enables a systematic engagement with primary and secondary sources in order to reconstruct and critically interpret a thinker's worldview.

The primary sources of this study consist of Sosrokartono's ideas and teachings as articulated in his writings and reflections. Secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and classical manuscripts discussing Sosrokartono, particularly those addressing themes of religious humanism and religious conduct. Data are analyzed thematically through qualitative content analysis, allowing for the identification of key concepts, ethical orientations, and humanistic values within Sosrokartono's thought. This research aims to contribute to the theoretical development of religious humanism by situating Sosrokartono as a significant figure within Javanese intellectual and spiritual traditions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sosrokartono, whose full name was Raden Mas Panji (R.M.P) Sosrokartono, was born on 10 April 1877 in Mayong, Jepara, and passed away on 8 February 1952. He was the son of Raden Mas Adipati Ario Samingoen Sosroningrat, a colonial official who served as Regent of Jepara (Rahman, 2013). Sosrokartono was the third child of Raden Mas Adipati Ario Samingoen Sosroningrat and Ngasirah, the daughter of Kiai Mudirono, a respected religious figure from Teluk Awur. He had three younger sisters, R.A. Kartini, R.A. Kardinah, and R.A. Roekmini, who are widely recognized as influential figures in the social and intellectual history of Java.

A significant portion of Sosrokartono's life was spent in Western environments, particularly through his education and intellectual engagements in Europe. Nevertheless, his worldview and way of life remained deeply rooted in Javanese cultural values and spiritual traditions. This consistency led Western contemporaries to refer to him as The Javanese Prince, a designation that underscored his strong cultural identity within the modern Western world (Khakim, 2008).

Beyond his aristocratic title, Sosrokartono was also known by several symbolic epithets, most notably Mandor Klungsu and Djoko Pring. The term klungsu, meaning tamarind seed, symbolizes something small yet resilient, capable of growth and long term usefulness. In this context, mandor signifies a figure who plants moral and spiritual values that later develop into broader social benefits. Meanwhile, the epithet Djoko Pring represents a modest and self renewing individual, analogous to the bamboo tree, whose leaves, stems, and roots are all beneficial to human life (Danim, 2002). These appellations reflect Sosrokartono's lifelong commitment to spiritual devotion and social service, as well as his ethical orientation toward serving both God and humanity (Syuropati, 2011).

Sosrokartono's thought is characterized by profound philosophical reflection, particularly concerning the interrelationship between spirituality, morality, and humanity. Rahman (2013) identifies at least 53 ethical and spiritual teachings attributed to Sosrokartono, each marked by layered meanings and deep interpretative dimensions. Among his most widely discussed teachings are ilmu kantong bolong, ilmu kantong kosong, and ilmu sunyi (Wahyudi & Azka, 2021). These concepts emphasize sincerity, the emptying of the ego, self discipline, and social devotion, which can be conceptually understood as distinctive expressions of religious humanism within the Javanese spiritual tradition.

Sosrokartono's Conception of Religious Humanism

Religious humanism represents a synthesis of humanistic and divine values that positions human beings as ethical subjects without negating the role of God as the central orientation of spiritual life. This concept emerges as a critique of Western humanism, which tends to be anthropocentric by placing humanity at the center of all existence and, in some of its more extreme formulations, marginalizing divine intervention in human affairs. As a result, while humans attain a dominant position

within the cosmic order, they simultaneously experience spiritual crisis and metaphysical alienation (Irawan, 2019).

It is within this context that the thought of R.M.P. Sosrokartono can be understood as a distinctive form of Javanese religious humanism. His ideas integrate a deep sense of human consciousness with an unequivocal recognition of humanity's position as servants of God. Sosrokartono's religious humanism is reflected in a number of his ethical and spiritual expressions and teachings. One of his most frequently cited statements reads as follows:

"Sinau ngraosake lan nyumerepi tunggalipun manungsa, tunggalipun rasa, tunggalipun asal lan maksudipun agesang" (Aksan, 1986).

This expression affirms the unity of human feeling and origin, carrying ethical implications in the form of an obligation to share in the suffering and hardships of others. In Sosrokartono's perspective, social empathy is not merely a humanistic value but a direct consequence of spiritual awareness that all human beings originate from the same source, namely God. This principle is consonant with Islamic teachings on the obligation to assist one another in righteousness and piety. Within the Islamic tradition, the values of empathy and social responsibility are articulated normatively through the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which position empathy as an integral component of moral responsibility and the social character of the Muslim community, rather than as a mere emotional response. Prophetic traditions thus function as an ethical foundation that emphasizes compassion, solidarity, and concern for others as constitutive elements of Islamic morality (Nurjaman & Alif, 2025).

Penekanan Sosrokartono pada aspek kemanusiaan tidak pernah berdiri terpisah dari dimensi ketuhanan. Mencintai sesama manusia dipahami sebagai manifestasi cinta kepada Tuhan. Di sinilah letak distingsi mendasar antara humanisme religius ala Sosrokartono dan humanisme sekuler Barat. Jika humanisme Barat menempatkan manusia sebagai tujuan akhir, maka humanisme religius Sosrokartono memosisikan Tuhan sebagai orientasi tertinggi, sementara kemanusiaan menjadi jalan spiritual untuk mendekat kepada-Nya. Nilai ini semakin tegas dalam pengakuan Sosrokartono yang dikutip Muhammad Ali:

“Aku R.M.P. Sosrokartono, aku ora mampu, aku ora kuasa. Sesungguhnya dari Tuhan, Allah, Gusti Kang Maha Agung-lah yang melakukan segala sesuatunya. Orang-orang telah salah sangka, dikiranya akulah yang melakukannya” (Ali, 1966).

Sosrokartono’s emphasis on the human dimension is never detached from the divine. Love for fellow human beings is understood as a manifestation of love for God. It is at this point that the fundamental distinction between Sosrokartono’s religious humanism and Western secular humanism becomes evident. Whereas Western humanism positions humanity as the ultimate end, Sosrokartono’s religious humanism places God as the highest orientation, with humanity serving as a spiritual pathway toward divine proximity. This value is articulated more explicitly in Sosrokartono’s own acknowledgment, as cited by Muhammad Ali:

“Sugih tanpa banda, digdaya tanpa aji, nglurug tanpa bala, menang tanpa ngasorake” (Aksan, 1986).

This expression illustrates a religious ethic that rejects materialistic orientations, the pursuit of symbolic power, and practices of social domination. Wealth, strength, and victory are not understood as the accumulation of material possessions or superiority over others, but rather as the capacity for self control, the cultivation of humility, and the attainment of spiritual maturity. Such an ethical orientation is consistent with Sufi ethical thought, which places *tazkiyat al nafs* (self purification) as the primary measure of religious success, rather than worldly achievement.

In a social context, this ethical orientation contributes to the formation of religious behavior that is inclusive, moderate, and oriented toward social harmony. Clifford Geertz argues that Javanese spirituality emphasizes inner balance, emotional self regulation, and harmonious social relations as the ethical foundations of religious life (Geertz, 1960). This perspective resonates with Nurcholish Madjid’s conception of religiosity, which rejects formalism and symbolic domination while prioritizing universal moral values such as justice, empathy, and human dignity (Madjid, 1997). Accordingly, the religious ethics reflected in Sosrokartono’s thought may be understood as an expression of humanistic spiritual religiosity that remains highly relevant to pluralistic social life.

Religious Practice and Humanistic Ethics in Javanese Islam

Religious behavior can be understood as the totality of actions and expressions of individuals that originate from their belief in God and adherence to the teachings of their religion (Azmi et al., 2021). Such behavior is shaped by internal factors, including personal awareness and motivation, as well as external factors in the form of social and cultural environments. Within Javanese society, social norms and cultural values play a significant role in shaping individual expressions of religiosity.

Culturally, Javanese society is widely recognized for upholding ethical principles of politeness and humility (*andap asor*), which are reflected in intergenerational relations and everyday social interactions (Gusmian, 2020). Moreover, Javanese religious worldview emphasizes that the universe is a divine creation that must be respected and preserved, thereby positioning the human relationship with nature as an integral part of religiosity (Bakri, 2020). Islam in Java developed through a relatively peaceful and accommodative process of cultural adaptation. Rather than erasing local traditions, Islamic values interacted with existing cultural practices, resulting in a distinctive cultural religious synthesis (Jannah, 2020). Ritual practices such as *selamatan* exemplify the Javanese spiritual orientation that prioritizes social harmony, reverence for ancestors, and supplication for divine protection and well-being (Simuh, 1995).

When examined through the framework proposed by Glock and Stark, as cited by Ancok and Suroso (2001), Javanese religious behavior can be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing belief, ritual practice, religious experience, spiritual commitment, and religious knowledge. The dimension of belief refers to the acceptance of core theological doctrines, while ritual practice reflects the performance of formal and informal religious rites embedded in daily life. Religious experience highlights the subjective and affective dimension of faith, including feelings of closeness to the divine, inner peace, and moral awareness. Spiritual commitment is expressed through the internalization of religious values that guide ethical conduct and social responsibility, whereas religious knowledge concerns understanding religious teachings and moral principles.

Taken together, these dimensions illustrate a distinctive pattern of religiosity in Javanese society that does not privilege doctrinal orthodoxy alone, but emphasizes

ethical balance, social harmony, and spiritual depth. This integrative form of religiosity demonstrates a dynamic equilibrium between humanistic concerns and theocentric orientation, closely aligning with Sosrokartono's notion of religious humanism, which views humanity as a spiritual path toward divine proximity rather than an end in itself.

Kantong Bolong, Kantong Kosong, and Sunyi as an Ethics of Religious Humanism

When examined through the analytical framework developed by Glock and Stark, as cited by Ancok and Suroso (2001), Javanese religious behavior can be conceptualized as a multidimensional and integrated expression of religiosity. This framework identifies several interrelated dimensions, including belief, ritual practice, religious experience, spiritual commitment, and religious knowledge, all of which are deeply embedded in the socio cultural context of Javanese society. The dimension of belief concerns the acceptance of fundamental theological principles, particularly the acknowledgment of God as the ultimate source of existence and moral authority. In the Javanese context, such belief is often articulated in a subtle and non confrontational manner, emphasizing inner conviction rather than overt doctrinal assertion.

Ritual practice constitutes another central dimension of Javanese religiosity. Religious rituals are not limited to formal Islamic obligations but also encompass culturally embedded practices such as selamatan, communal prayers, and life cycle ceremonies. These practices function not only as acts of devotion but also as mechanisms for reinforcing social cohesion and collective harmony. The dimension of religious experience highlights the subjective and experiential aspects of faith, including feelings of tranquility, spiritual connectedness, and inner balance, which are highly valued within Javanese spiritual sensibilities.

Spiritual commitment is reflected in the internalization of ethical values such as humility, self restraint, patience, and compassion, which guide everyday behavior and interpersonal relations. This commitment demonstrates how religiosity in Java is closely linked to moral conduct and social responsibility. Finally, religious knowledge refers to the understanding of religious teachings and ethical principles, often transmitted through informal learning, local wisdom, and exemplary figures rather than through formal religious instruction alone.

Taken together, these dimensions reveal a pattern of religiosity that seeks to harmonize humanistic values with a strong theocentric orientation. Such a balance

resonates closely with Sosrokartono's concept of religious humanism, which emphasizes the cultivation of humanity as a spiritual pathway toward closeness to God, rather than positioning human beings as autonomous or ultimate ends in themselves.

Conclusion

Religious humanism in the thought of R.M.P. Sosrokartono demonstrates a distinctive synthesis of humanistic and theocentric values within the Javanese religious tradition. This concept emerges not only as a critical response to Western humanism, which tends to be anthropocentric and potentially marginalizes the transcendent dimension, but also as a corrective to theological approaches that emphasize exclusive individual piety. Within Sosrokartono's framework, humanity is not positioned as an ultimate end, but rather as an ethical and spiritual pathway through which closeness to God is attained.

The teachings of *ilmu kantong bolong* and *ilmu kantong kosong* represent the core of this religious humanism. Both emphasize sincerity, empathy, social service, and spiritual discipline through the emptying of the ego as fundamental foundations of religiosity. Through these teachings, Sosrokartono affirms that the relationship with God cannot be separated from moral responsibility toward fellow human beings. Humanizing others, offering help without expectation of return, and serving social life are understood as concrete expressions of love for and obedience to God.

The implications of these values are evident in the religious behavior of Javanese society, which does not remain confined to ritualistic and individual piety but develops into an inclusive form of social piety oriented toward harmony. Religious humanism in Javanese Islam, as reflected in Sosrokartono's thought, should therefore be understood not merely as a normative or doctrinal construct, but as a lived ethical–spiritual praxis embedded in everyday life. This pattern of religiosity underscores that the orientations toward God and toward humanity operate simultaneously, mutually reinforcing one another, and remain highly relevant to plural social contexts.

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