

## **BUDDHISM AND CONFUCIANISM ON HOMOSEXUALITY: THE ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION BASED ON THE ARGUMENTS OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS**

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### **Abstract**

Recently, the discourse on homosexuality has heated up again in Indonesia. Various responses appear to this phenomenon, some strongly reject it, and some tolerate it. Most of the rejection came from religious circles that used religious arguments. This study explores the core teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism, especially about homosexuality, and compares the two. This study argues that the attitude of Buddhism and Confucianism towards homosexuality is highly dependent on the cultural context in which these religions exist and are practiced. In other words, certain Buddhist/Confucian societies are sometimes more tolerant of homosexual practices than other Buddhist/Confucian societies. That is, the core teachings of religions cannot be merely a measure; culture participates in shaping religious responses to homosexuals. However, it also does not mean that these two religions do not have a unique view on homosexuality. Using the literature study method, this study will focus on exploring the attitudes of these two religions, Buddhism and Confucianism, towards the practice of homosexuality, especially to queering the core teachings of both. The results of this study indicate that in both Buddhism and Confucianism, acceptance and rejection of homosexual practices exist, and almost all use their respective core teachings as arguments. In short, this study contributes to providing an overview of how homosexuality is accepted and rejected in Buddhism and Confucianism.

**Keyword:** Buddhism; Confucianism; Core Teachings; Homosexuality.

### **Abstrak**

*Belakangan ini, diskursus tentang homoseksualitas kembali memanas di Indonesia. Berbagai macam respon yang muncul terhadap fenomena ini, ada kalangan yang menolak dengan keras dan ada pula kalangan yang menoleransi. Sebagian besar penolakan muncul dari kalangan agamawan yang menggunakan dalil agama. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi ajaran inti Buddhism dan Confucianism, terutama tentang homosexuality dan berusaha membandingkan keduanya. Studi ini berargumentasi bahwa sikap Buddhism and Confucianism terhadap homoseksualitas sangat bergantung pada konteks budaya di mana agama-agama tersebut berada dan dipraktikkan. Dengan kata lain, kadang-kadang ada masyarakat Buddhist/Confucian tertentu lebih toleran terhadap praktik homosexual daripada masyarakat Buddhist/Confucian yang lain. Artinya, ajaran inti agama-agama tidak bisa semata-mata menjadi ukuran, budaya turut serta membentuk respon agama terhadap homosexual. Meski demikian, hal itu juga tidak berarti bahwa kedua agama ini tidak punya pandangan khusus terhadap homosexuality. Dengan menggunakan metode studi literatur, studi ini akan fokus menelusuri sikap kedua agama ini, Buddhism and Confucianism, terhadap praktik homoseksualitas terutama dengan tujuan untuk queering ajaran-ajaran inti keduanya. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa baik di Buddhism dan Confucianism, penerimaan dan penolakan terhadap praktik homosexual ada dan nyaris semuanya menggunakan ajaran-ajaran inti sebagai dalil. Singkatnya, kajian ini berkontribusi memberikan gambaran bagaimana penerimaan dan penolakan terhadap homoseksualitas dalam Buddhism and confucianism.*

**Kata Kunci:** Buddha; Konghucu; Ajaran Inti; Homoseksualitas.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, in Indonesia, the discourse on homosexuality has heated up again (Ives & Suhartono, 2022). This hot issue was triggered by the content of Deddy Corbuzier, who interviewed LGBT couples in his podcast (Mayasari, 2022; Putri, 2022). However, the issues of sexuality in Indonesia had been controversial long before the incident (Oetomo et al., 2013; USAID & UNDP, 2014). In responding to these events—events related to the practice of homosexuality— various responses from various groups. Some strongly reject it, and some tolerate it. Most of the rejection of homosexuality arises from religious circles that often use religious arguments as a basis (Endsjø, 2020). Even in religious circles, there are different responses to the practice of homosexuality. Apart from differences in the interpretation of sacred texts, there are also differences in the socio-cultural context in which religion exists and is interpreted (Alfian, 2021b).

Previous studies have shown that religions have their perspectives on homosexual practices (Cheng, 2018; Yang & Yen, 2011; Zhang et al., 2005). The diversity of these perspectives is highly dependent on the cultural context of a particular country where these religions exist and are practiced. In other words, sometimes, there are countries where most people are religiously more tolerant of homosexual practices than countries with other religious communities. In specific contexts, religious teachings cannot merely be the primary measure; culture participates in shaping religious responses to homosexuals. It also does not mean that religion does not have a unique view on homosexuality (Knill et al., 2020; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016). Acceptance and rejection of the practice of homosexuality among religious communities depend on the core teachings of religion that are applied in practice by a society.

Therefore, the core teachings of a religion are fundamental to understanding to measure whether the practice of homosexuality in religious communities is really rejected or can still be tolerated or even accepted. It is in this context that this study was conducted. The main objective of this study is to measure the practice of homosexuality in religious communities from the point of view of two major religions, namely Buddhism and Confucianism. These two religions were chosen as the ones studied because, based on several previous studies, they have a more fluid and open perspective on homosexuality than other major religions, which tend to vehemently reject it (Long, 2013; Silva, 2012; Zhou & Hu, 2020). However, the argument is debatable for various reasons. Another purpose of this study is to answer questions about how Buddhism and Confucianism address the practice of homosexuality and whether the practice of homosexuality is permissible, tolerated, or prohibited, especially if it is based on the core teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism.

Before diving into a discussion of how the core teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism view the practice of homosexuality, I want to clarify in this section what I mean by homosexuality. Homosexuality means a bond or a feeling of attraction either emotionally (emotionally) or erotically (sexually) to other subjects of the same sex (women or men). In other words, homosexuality is a “sexual or romantic attraction to people of the same sex” (Barker & Scheele, 2021; Foucault, 1978). Homosexuality can also refer to preferences (sexual desire, romantic love, lasting aesthetic attraction) that tend to lead to the same sex or gender (Mottier, 2008). The opposite of homosexuality is heterosexuality, a sexual orientation that leads to someone of different sex or gender (the opposite

sex) or, in other words, “sexual, emotional and romantic attraction to a sex other than your own” (Chiang et al., 2019). In addition to the duality of sexual orientation, there is a sexual orientation that leads to both, known as bisexual. A Bisexual is sexually attracted to both men and women, either because the person is emotionally attracted or because he is interested and wants to be actively involved in sexual activity (Haggerty & McGarry, 2017).

In responding to the issue of homosexuality, religious communities are usually divided into two, firstly, strongly rejecting homosexuality, and secondly, tolerating/accepting it. Again, most of the rejection came from religious circles, using religious arguments. The rejection of homosexuality, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and so on (LGBTQ+), continues to occur, especially in countries or environments where religion is quite strong. There have been many previous studies that have tried to see how religion responds to homosexuality. Many studies have proven that a society's attitude towards homosexuality cannot be separated from religion or other social aspects such as educational institutions, age, gender, and so on (Brown & Henriquez, 2008; Burdette et al., 2005; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Ohlander et al., 2005). This shows that religion and other aspects also determine a society's response to various things in everyday life (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Alfian, 2020, 2021a, 2022a, 2022c, 2022d), including discussions about homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Long, 2013). Meanwhile, research on the response or attitude of Buddhism and Confucianism to the practice of homosexuality is relatively lacking and limited. That is the reason why this study is important to do.

This study is a qualitative research or literature study. The data I present in this study is that I have collected from various pieces of literature on the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism. The literature review is generally used to find and formulate new ideas through previously available research data (Babbie, 2014; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017). In the context of this research, literature on the core teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism is available. This study seeks to present or find the position of the core teachings of the two religions in response to the practice of homosexuality. In other words, this study explores the literature related to the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism, codifies the relevant sections, and is analyzed according to the needs of this study, especially those associated with the main teachings or attitudes of Buddhism and Confucianism towards the practice of homosexuality, and analyze them.

## **2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **2.1. *Buddhism on Homosexuality: Acceptance and Rejection Arguments***

Homosexuality is an issue explicitly discussed and even prohibited in the Vinaya (Silva, 2012). However, its prohibition is not explicitly stated but is described among many other types of sexual perversion. Sexual intercourse, in early Buddhism, was widely prohibited (Jackson, 2006; Silva, 2012). For example, sexual intercourse, whether with a partner of the same sex or the opposite sex, in which the sex organs enter the vagina, mouth, or anus, is a prohibited activity, and those who do so will be expelled from the Sangha. Other sexual acts such as masturbation, although not considered a serious offense and do not result in one being expelled from the Sangha, do have to admit it in front of the members of the Sangha. In the Vinaya, “Pandaka” is often referred to as sexual misconduct. “Pandaka” is associated with people who are ‘full of lust,

thirst for lust, and are dominated by sexual desire (Scherer, 2021). However, according to some Buddhist commentators (Faure, 1998; Harvey, 2000), the word “pandaka” does not refer to homosexuals in general but only to a few people who are homosexual. Thus, the use of this argument to prohibit the practice of homosexuality is also not solid. Some Buddhist scholars argue about it.

Buddhist attitudes to homosexuality also depend on the society in which Buddhism is practiced. There are many different attitudes in Buddhist countries toward the practice of homosexuality. Some reject, and some accept. The response or attitude of Buddhism to homosexuality can also be seen through two main streams: First, Buddhism accepts homosexuality and does not consider it a deviation. The main argument is that according to the main teachings of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, it is most important to pay attention and intention to sexuality. That is, the object of a person’s sexual activity does not determine whether the sexual activity is good but depends on the attention, emotions, intentions, and intentions of the person performing the sexual activity (Cabezon, 1992; Faure, 1998; Scherer, 2021). In sexual activity, it is not important what the sex of one’s sexual partner is but what one’s sexual intentions are. If a person’s sexual intention is to give, share, and express love and affection to others, and there is mutual consent, then the act will be good because the person’s intentions are good or positive (Cheng, 2018).

Second, Buddhist scholars who reject homosexuality use the Buddhist Five Precepts (i.e., abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking) to support their arguments. They say that engaging in wrong sexual relations or homosexuality is a deviation from the teachings of Buddhism and that it will lead to self-harm and harm to others (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Jaiwong, 2010). Even if homosexuality is allowed because of good intentions, Buddhists still consider or recommend avoiding behavior that will result in a person being penalized for violating the laws that apply in a particular society to be free from anxiety and shame caused by social disapproval or fear will be subject to legal sanctions (Silva, 2012). This means that, although the core teachings of Buddhism allow or do not prohibit, the cultural aspects practiced by the people of a place can be a solid reason to reject the practice of homosexuality.

Thus, conceptually, homosexuality has room to be accepted in the Buddhist community through a reinterpretation of the main teachings of Buddhism, especially the emphasis on good attention (Alfian, 2022b). However, in practice, homosexuals are often prejudiced and discriminated against by these Buddhists, even though the core teachings of Buddhism do not specifically prohibit or hurt the practice of homosexuality. Prejudice and discrimination against homosexuals, perpetrated by adherents of Buddhism, are common, especially in Indonesia. Several Buddhist leaders in Indonesia assert that same-sex marriage and homosexual behavior are unnatural acts and deviate from the law (Saptohutomo, 2015). To quote their statement directly, “*Memang larangan perilaku homoseksual tidak tercantum dalam sastra-sastra Buddha, namun hukum agama Buddha berdasarkan kewajaran dan hukum alam*” (Saptohutomo, 2015). I translate this as: “Indeed, the prohibition of homosexual behavior is not stated in Buddhist literature, but Buddhist law is based on naturalness and natural law.” This means that although in the core teachings of Buddhism, the practice of homosexuality is not directly prohibited or condemned, Buddhist clergy often strongly reject the practice of homosexuality, especially Buddhists in Indonesia.

In short, in Buddhism, there are no laws that explicitly prohibit or punish the practice of homosexuality. In most cases, even Buddhism tends to accept homosexuality because its main teaching focus is on personal attention, goodwill, mutual love, renunciation, and the attainment of enlightenment. This main teaching has implications for the treatment of Buddhists towards homosexuality which tends to be more tolerant even though not all Buddhists tolerate the practice of homosexuality.

## **2.2. *Confucianism on Homosexuality: Acceptance and Rejection Arguments***

Various previous studies on the response of religious leaders to LGBT or homosexuality in Indonesia show that “almost all” religions view LGBT or homosexuality as deviant behavior and cannot be accepted in all religions, especially world religions in Indonesia (Mansur, 2017; Saleh & Arif, 2018). The argument is that, in those religions, sexual behavior allowed is the act of husband and wife, meaning a man and a woman, in a legal bond by religion. This is an exaggeration because even the conclusions in these studies tend to generalize that LGBT or homosexuality is a moral deviation that must be eradicated and cured in all world religions. However, such an interpretation is not always found in religious communities. There are various interpretations. In the case of Confucianism, for example, certain countries tend to be tolerant and give space and even treat homosexuals equally. However, certain Confucian countries reject homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). These studies prove that the ideas and attitudes of a religion can be very diverse or multiple interpretations of a single case, including their responses and attitudes towards the practice of homosexuality.

Confucianism’s attitudes and responses to the practice of homosexuality vary. The two main responses that often arise are: First, there is no strict prohibition against the practice of homosexuality in Confucianism as long as it does not interfere with core values such as having children and establishing good relations between family members. This means that homosexual practices are allowed or tolerated. Second, Confucianism prohibits homosexuality because same-sex marriage is not recognized. This objection is based on the argument that harmony in the family is only applied and achieved through marriage between husband (male) and wife (female) and then giving birth and raising children. With this kind of marriage, the main values of Confucianism (such as Wu Lun) can be well practiced. Wu Lun is one of the main teachings of Confucianism which regulates the relational ethics between (1) the relationship between leader and subordinate; (2) the husband and wife relationship; (3) the parent-child relationship; (4) the brother and sister relationship; (5) the relationship of friends and friends (Zhang et al., 2005). In short, the rejection of homosexuality is supported by Confucian values , which emphasize acceptance of hierarchical authority, strong community orientation, and emphasis on family and child piety.

Confucianism’s rejection of homosexuality, apart from being based on the main teachings of Confucianism, such as Wu Lun, which emphasizes the five sacred relationships and regulates how the family should be built, cultural aspects also play a role. In many Confucian societies, their local culture emphasizes the distinct roles of the male and female gender (Yang & Yen, 2011). For example, men are the leader and directors of the household, while women are in charge of housework and child care (Raymo & Ono, 2007; Xu & Lai, 2004). The separation

of heteronormative gender functions like this makes Confucian society tend to be intolerant of the practice of homosexuality (Adameczyk & Pitt, 2009). In the context of Indonesia, Confucian religious leaders do not agree with homosexuals. For example, in 2016, several Confucian figures agreed to reject LGBT (Rakhmawaty, 2016). The reason they reject the practice of homosexuality is, citing their interview, *“dalam kitab suci kami, dalam agama Konghucu, perkawinan hanya bisa dilakukan antara pria dan wanita sebagai wujud memuliakan Tuhan dan meneruskan keturunan, dan jika LGBTQ+ ingin melakukan pernikahan tentu kami akan menolak”* (Rakhmawaty, 2016). I translate this as, “in our holy book, in Confucianism, marriage can only be done between a man and a woman as a form of glorifying God and continuing offspring, and if LGBTQ+ want to marry, of course, we will refuse.”

In short, the main teachings of Confucianism are more likely to reject homosexuality than to accept it because they are oriented towards stronger communities and emphasize the family and piety of children. This main teaching is used to reject the practice of homosexuality, especially the practice of same-sex marriage. However, some contemporary Confucian researchers and experts have tried to reinterpret the meaning of family and marriage contained in the core teachings of Confucianism to see how homosexuals should be treated and seen when this practice began to spread in this age. In other words, they seek to relocate the core teachings of Confucianism in such a social context. This then shows that although the core teachings of Confucianism are often claimed to reject the practice of homosexuality, society in some Confucian countries is often more tolerant of this practice.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Both Buddhism and Confucianism have debates regarding the practice of homosexuality. Acceptance and rejection of this practice can be found in these two religions; almost all of them—rejection and acceptance—use religion's core teachings as arguments to strengthen their arguments. In Buddhism, for example, acceptance of homosexuality is an interpretation of the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, that the most important thing about the practice of sexuality is attention and intention. Justification for the good or bad of a sexual practice depends on the attention, emotions, intentions, and intentions of the person performing the sexual activity. If a person intends to give, share, and express love and affection to others, and there is mutual agreement, then the act will be good because the person's intentions are good. Whereas in Confucianism, the main argument in accepting the practice of homosexuality is that in the main teachings of Confucianism, there is no strict prohibition against homosexuality. That is, as long as it does not interfere with the main values of Confucianism, such as having children and maintaining good relations between family members, this homosexual practice is allowed or tolerated.

The rejection of the practice of homosexuality also uses religion's core teachings as a reinforcing argument. For example, Buddhists who reject the practice of homosexuality use the teachings of the Buddhist Five Precepts (i.e., abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking) to support their arguments. They say that engaging in sexual misconduct, including homosexuality, is against the teachings of Buddhism and will lead to self-harm and harm to others. Whereas in Confucianism, those who reject homosexuality

use the main teaching of Confucianism, namely Wu Lun. Wu Lun is one of the main teachings of Confucianism which regulates the relational ethics: (1) the relationship between leader and subordinate; (2) the husband and wife relationship; (3) the parent-child relationship; (4) brother and sister relationship; (5) the relationship of friends and friends. In short, Confucianism, with this teaching, emphasizes acceptance of hierarchical authority, strong community orientation, and emphasis on family and child piety. Thus, homosexuality cannot be tolerated because this practice will end in a same-sex marriage, so “they have no good future.”

The various attitudes of acceptance and rejection of Buddhism and Confucianism towards the practice of homosexuality reaffirm that religious teachings themselves are very diverse and have multiple interpretations. Just one core teaching can be interpreted by adherents in their way, in a completely different way from other adherents. As we have seen, the core teachings of the two religions, Buddhism and Confucianism, can be interpreted in various ways. It is inseparable from the context in which the religion is embraced and practiced. In short, from the discussion above, this study concludes that from the core teachings of the two religions, Buddhism tends to be more likely to be appropriate to accept the practice of homosexuality than Confucianism. Although, again, in specific contexts, Buddhism can be far more intolerant than Confucianism.

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