

**Penulis:**

Nezia Mavitau Rustyana

**Afiliasi:**

Universitas Gadjah Mada

**Korespondensi:**

neziamavitau@gmail.com

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RUSTYANADOI: 10.21460/gema.  
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## PERJUMPAAN BOTI-KRISTEN DALAM DIALOG BUDAYA LINTAS AGAMA

### Respon terhadap Krisis Lingkungan di Pulau Timor

#### *Abstrak*

Artikel ini bertujuan membangun dialog budaya lintas agama antara penganut agama asli Boti dan umat Kristiani di Timor Tengah Selatan, Nusa Tenggara Timur. Fokus kajian tertuju pada dua fenomena: krisis lingkungan artifisial yang berakar pada paradigma Kristen barat yang mengunggulkan modernisme, dan fenomena konversi yang tidak ramah terhadap masyarakat asli. Fenomena tersebut mencakup berbagai kenyataan sehubungan dengan peran komunitas Boti dalam ritual dan praktik kehidupan sehari-hari, yang mengusung nilai-nilai ekologis yang berakar pada pengetahuan setempat. Paradigma yang dipakai orang Boti terbentuk dari pengalaman interpersonal antara manusia dan alam. Pandangan itu telah menolong mereka melewati kekeringan yang panjang yang disebabkan oleh faktor alam sebagai dampak dari krisis lingkungan di Timor. Artikel ini menggugat pengaruh kekristenan yang menggunakan pandangan barat, dan mengusulkan untuk menggantinya dengan sebuah teologi yang menghargai tradisi Boti. Sehubungan dengan itu, artikel ini menggarisbawahi kritik terhadap konsep superioritas manusia terhadap alam sebagaimana terkandung di dalam Alkitab, kemudian menawarkan sebuah konsep hubungan yang lebih serasi antara alam dan manusia di mana penghargaan dan pemeliharaan alam adalah wujud hubungan yang harmonis dengan Tuhan.

*Keywords:* krisis lingkungan, agama Boti, teologi kontekstual, ekoteologi, teologi poskolonial, Timor, lintas agama.

## THE BOTI-CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT IN INTER- RELIGIOUS CULTURAL DIALOGUE

### Response to Environmental Crisis on Timor Island

#### *Abstract*

This article aims to build an inter-religious cultural dialogue between Boti indigenous people and Christians, South Timor Tengah, East Nusa

Tenggara. It responds to two phenomena: the artificial environmental crisis rooted in the western paradigm of Christianity glorifying modernism and expanded with the phenomenon of conversion that is not friendly to indigenous peoples. The phenomena cover various facts about the role of the Boti community in their rituals and daily practices, which have promoted ecological values derived from their local knowledge. The Boti people uphold the indigenous paradigm through their interpersonal relationships with nature. This view has helped them face the long drought due to the natural factor of the environmental crisis in Timor. This article criticizes the influence of Christianity using the western view by replacing it with theology in appreciating local knowledge of Boti indigenous peoples. It also criticizes the human superiority in the Bible toward nature by offering a harmonious relationship between the two that humans should respect and preserve nature to maintain a harmonious relationship with God.

*Kata-kata kunci:* environmental crisis, Boti religion, contextual theology, ecotheology, post-colonial theology, Timor, interreligious.

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to engage Boti-Christian communities in building environmental management to reduce the environmental crisis on Timor Island. Nevertheless, it is problematic because there is still a contradictory relationship between Boti and Christian, linked to the conversion phenomenon. Timor Christians regard the Boti people as irreligious, primitive, and backward. Eventually, the Boti community has undergone a very significant change due to Christianity's presence and is forced to change with the term "civilization." The fact marking Boti tribe now has been divided into two parts, namely the inner Boti (Boti Dalam) and the outer Boti (Boti Luar) (Iswanto & Liufeto 2014, 160-161). Even Three tribes of Boti have converted to Christianity, and only one tribe adheres to the teachings of Halaika (ancestral teaching) (Faot 2014, 4). However, the Timor Christian influence on the term "civilization" develops the concept of true

religion and supports modernism, tending to overlook the rights of indigenous people and nature. Timor Christians getting too close to modern attributes become too exploitative and consumptive.

Otherwise, Boti's religiosity (based on their ancestral teaching) has offered ecological values practiced by the Boti people to deal with environmental crisis issues. They have overcome their crisis through the harmonious relationship between the Boti people and nature. Their religiosity develops knowledge as a conservationist to alleviate the environmental crisis. Hence, eliminating the Boti people should mean threatening nature. Besides, the churches in Timor have started to pay attention to this problem by conducting a month for the environment each year (GMIT Synod Website). They realize that they live during an environmental crisis such as drought, so they should be caring for nature. Nevertheless, Timor Christians still become ambiguous in response to the environmental crisis because

their concern for the environment contrasts with their mission to convert the Boti people. They overlook the Boti people's contribution to the environment due to embracing indigenous religion.

Due to the contradictory relationship between Boti people and Timor Christian, this article intends to engage Boti and Christianity as a coworker to build environmental management. Boti religiosity can refer to Timor people in dealing with environmental crisis issues. Environmental management between indigenous and Christian communities aims to influence a modern Christian community to build a harmonious relationship with nature, reflected Boti people. Likewise, it aims to build respect for indigenous peoples. The essential point is how Timor Christians can let go of the primitive and irreligious label that is too discriminative. Otherwise, Timor Christians should appreciate an intimate relationship between the Boti people and their environment as the environmental management. It delivers their religiosity, meaning interdependence on nature, an essential solution to reducing the environmental crisis.

Indigenous theology discusses that Timor Christians should eliminate western theology and contrarily appreciate local knowledge to do their theology. Appreciating local knowledge from indigenous peoples is essential. In Asia, especially Timor Christians, Christians can build their own theology from their local knowledge (supported by Lattu 2020; Yewangoe 2013; Pieris 1996). Meanwhile, Eco theology seeks to reconstruct human superiority in Christian teaching inspired by the world religion paradigm (White 1967; Ludji 2014; Keriapy 2019; Ruether

2011). These two discussions support Boti's religiosity in the concept of interdependence on nature and create an interreligious cultural dialogue for Christians and indigenous peoples. Especially Timor Christians can be religious by collaborating on their ancestral teaching.

## DISCUSSION

This discussion consists of four sections: the Boti's religiosity, the influence of Christianity on the Boti area, recontextualization of Christianity, and Boti-Christian engagement for environmental management. The four sections aim to deliver this article's purpose, which does not merely influence Timor Christians to care for nature but also influences them to appreciate Boti indigenous religion.

### 1. Boti's Religiosity

The Boti religiosity implements Boti's worldview about anything outside of themselves. This concept primarily promotes ecological purposes that their intimacy with their environment represents their religiosity. Their religiosity then forms a harmonious relationship with nature so that for them, being religious cannot be separated from the attitude of loving nature. The indigenous religion paradigm essentially rejects the concept of humans conquering nature by offering an interdependence relationship. It looks at the relationship between nature and humans as studied in the Nayaka people (South Indians) as a dividual relationship by rejecting animism (Bird-David 1999, 71). She recorded a dividual relationship between humans and rocks,

elephants and hills (Bird-David 1999). Also, for Ammatoans, Ruppana (Forest) is subject to sharing knowledge, energy, and skills (Maarif 2015, 148). He called it an intersubjective relationship between humans and non-humans as subjects by influencing each other.

The dividual and intersubjective relationship portrays the Boti community of NTT when they depend on nature. This community embraces an indigenous religion called Halaika's Teaching. It guides Boti's way of life regarding communicating and interacting with nature (Iswanto & Liufeto 2014, 161). They are very dependent on nature in their everyday lives, such as building houses, household furniture, or food (YouTube Channel Watchdoc Image, 2018; CNN Indonesia, 2017; Trans7 Official, 2018). Depending on *Uis Neno*, *Uis Pah* (ruler of heaven and earth), their relationship is believed to be a source of blessing and life safety for the Boti people (Jayanti 2015, 158). The belief requires taking care of nature and caring for each other (KEW & YPBB 2013, 13). In fulfilling all these practices, they protect their forest from people who want to destroy it, such as by cutting down trees, fruit, or hunting birds (Suminar 2018). It is then attached to customary law to maintain the environment, such as clearing fields and building family bonds (Nope 2017, 15). These ways of life illustrate that respecting nature is their ethic of life, shaped their moral values from generation to generation.

Relationships depending on nature are strengthened in religious practices or rituals that the Boti people still carry out today. First, they have three types of holding rituals (prayer) in a year; in September, they clean the garden; in the rainy season, they start planting and end

with a thanksgiving prayer at harvest (YouTube Channel CNN Indonesia, 2017). Second, they still adhere to the 9-day time regulation. The first day is the day of the fire, and the second day is the day of water, which is to be careful using water. The third day is iron or copper day; the fourth day is *Uis Neno* and *Uis Pah*, where they carry out worship activities. On the fifth day, they are careful in speaking to avoid a dispute. The sixth day is for everyone to work hard to get more profit. The seventh day is the day of fostering brotherhood. The eighth day is the day for children to express themselves and the ninth day is a day of rest by gathering at the *lopo* (traditional houses) (Konay 2017, 20-22). This time regulation includes an order to create a harmonious relationship either with others or nature. It is to enforce their religious paradigm that everything in the cosmos influences each other. Maintaining this relationship encourages them to be pious in rituals (Andung 2020, 39). They believe that evil deeds will get punishment from *Uis Neno* and *Uis Pah*, and good deeds will earn rewards such as blessings, protection, and welfare (Nope 2017, 13). The belief refers to the understanding that all entities in the cosmos are interconnected so that harmonious relationships among subjects (including non-humans) are required.

This harmonious inter-subjective relationship is also connected with how Boti people involve taboo matters in their lives. Ordinary people call it animism because this belief is attached to mystical things. At the same time, the form of myths connected with nature has had a good effect on the environment (Jayanti 2015, 159). For environmental conservation, they are concerned for *Kae* (prohibition) in consuming several plants,

especially prohibiting the consumption of some plants during the rainy season (KEW & YPBB 2013, 19-20). This understanding adheres to good ecological values in which the Boti people know which plants should be limited to consumption. It is linked to the harvest system for long-life crops such as coconut and the ritual of planting short-lived crops such as corn (Iswanto & Liufeto 2014, 168). Essentially, their respect for nature formed in a taboo system has made them realize that they need to share life with other beings. Therefore, the worldview of Boti (indigenous paradigm) reflected in their daily lives and ritual practices are also tied to this taboo system, showing that they have contributed to ecological values.

## 2. The Influence of Christianity on the Boti Area

The influence of Christianity in the Boti area is indicated by the presence of the Boti *Luar* people, who have embraced Christianity as their new religion. When the missionaries arrived, they quickly announced that Christianity could give new life (Webb 1986, 249). The mission, however, has contributed to the glorification of colonial products in terms of providing new life, which shows the indigenous paradigm is mistaken and should instead perpetuate western-style Christianity. The western-style Christianity, including world religious paradigms, then influenced the phenomenon of conversion and a lousy stigma for indigenous religions. Commonly, this stigma supports the term civilization labeling the Boti people as primitive, infidel, heretic, and backward. Then, the transformation to Christian life is considered a transformation from a “dead religion” to a vibrant spiritual life (Wiyono

2001, 282). Furthermore, as in various places, missionaries are targeting indigenous religions to change that is not just from paganism to true religion but from traditions towards modernity or globalization (Laugrand 2012, 4). It points out that the concept of modernization or globalization echoed by colonialism uses Christianity as a tool to attack the indigenous religious paradigm.

Christians’ world religious paradigm also triggers the disrespect for indigenous religions by justifying a true religion. The world religion paradigm puts on a cosmological system based on western monotheistic ontology among categories of being: divinity, humanity, and nature (Maarif 2017, 7). Likewise, the creation story in the Bible (Genesis 1:26) supports this hierarchical relationship to be perpetuated. The definition of the supernatural has also affected the colonial period (western theology), which has created conflicts between the supernatural and nature (Aragon 2003). It, however, contributes to a contradictory relationship between humans and nature that Christianity has adopted up to now. Many Christians contribute to building a concept that humans have a right to rule over all creation and have a right to be exploitative. The idea of Tylor (1871) also supports that humans and nature must be separated because intimacy is considered animism and backward. This hierarchical relationship further creates discrimination for indigenous peoples because they rely on the world religions paradigm. Stokke (2017) narrates it to the politics of citizenship affecting the recognition of indigenous peoples.

A product of colonialism and world religion glorification is now marked by the presence of churches and schools in the Boti area. It unconsciously sustains the conversion

phenomenon and, at the same time, eliminates local knowledge tied to the ancestral teaching of the Boti people. The Boti people embracing Christianity are usually forcibly expelled from the Boti *Dalam* tribe (Faot 2014). On the other hand, being Christian means that they need to abandon their ancestral teaching as they have to prioritize the Christian rituals related to world religion attributes. This fact is inseparable from the term “infidel” attached to the Boti people if they do not want to change their religion (Iswanto and Liufeto 2014). Then this term leads to the acceptance of the Boti people that they are different and deserve to be despised by the term.

Further, Boti people who were previously closely related to *Uis Pah* attached to all entities in nature are now replaced with Christian monotheistic concepts. The church’s emphasis on the western style of Jesus is often a tool for judging indigenous peoples. Boti people embracing Christianity must replace the idea of God or westernized religion. Churches forget to be sensitive to local people by doing theology from their context. This argument is built on the fact that people who have become Christians must also be separated from ties to their ancestors (indigenous paradigm). Intimacy with natural rituals is still associated with mystical things which are justified as heretical teachings. Contrarily, the understanding of God must also come from things close to the community itself, such as the culture that includes the teachings of their ancestors.

### 3. Recontextualization of Christianity

This section is a finding that criticizes the previous point about the spread of Christianity with colonial products related to

hatred towards the indigenous religion. This criticism targets Christians in Timor to value their local knowledge more than over-voiced conversion activities that do not impact Timor. This point directly rejects the spread of old-fashioned Christianity with its colonial-style (the conversion method). Christianity must come with a new face, which is more friendly to people who adhere to ancestral teachings. The two of them can collaborate to form a theology/Christianity that is typical to Timor people. It means that Christians must build their theological narratives, such as how to do theology to solve environmental crisis problems. Timor Christians no longer see Boti’s religiosity with the demand to civilize, but they can learn some from Boti’s religiosity, such as ecological practices. At this point, the author considers two concepts, namely Indigenous Theology (refers to theology without ink by Izak Lattu) and eco-theology, to support Boti’s religiosity.

Firstly, Indigenous Theology understands that all Christians have their own authenticity, connected with the local knowledge in which Christians live. Indigenous theology supports efforts in theology that is not only develop biblical texts and the writings of classical and modern theologians but develop community narratives as living texts. (Lattu 2020, 91). It gives direction to Christians that they should value their local knowledge and change the Western Christian perspective as a benchmark for Christianity, such as the colonial era view, which is incompatible with eastern culture. At this point, the churches also need to be aware that the church can find its theological roots in the culture, life, and struggles of the people who live in it (Lattu

2020, 94). The church should comprehend that each community has its unique local knowledge and form its own theology. It also supports the development of Asian theology to eliminate western authorities tending to discriminate. Christians must understand the gospel in contexts adapted to different regional/local cultures and expressed in the languages of different cultures. (Yewangoe 2013, 4). It means that the Christ depicted should also be adapted to the context of a particular society so that the Christ with a colonial face like the early Christian mission in Indonesia must be immediately destroyed.

Jesus can find his way into the Asian ethos through parables and other paradigms, as marginal Christian communities and non-Christian Disciples of Christ try to retell the story of Jesus and even find their way of conveying His unique identity (Pieris 1996, 108-109 & 112). Concurrently it delivers space for indigenous peoples to find Christ in their worldview. It is a way of liberation by interpreting Christ from their own context. The view of Kolimon (chairman of the GMIT synod) quoted by Setio supports the existence of a new face of Christ for indigenous peoples that the ancestors did not work alone but together with God, so that belief in the power of ancestors does not mean eliminating belief in God because they can walk together (Setio 2019). There is no problem with the dualism between Christians and their ancestral belief because even a great healer does not have his/her power but the power of God (Setio 2019, 216). Christ has shown impartiality, meaning he defends all classes of people even if they are not church members. They should understand Jesus in a more unique to Timor people's

hospitable way than the old discriminatory way (imperialism and colonialism). However, some churches are still playing a part in that way until now.

Secondly, Christian Eco theology seeks to re-understand the mandate of humans in interacting with nature as an effort to "preserve," not "rule over" it. It is a form of rejection of the human importance in modern religious narratives that lasts to this day. It means the church needs to remember that the world's redemption cannot be detached from justice to nature which means the salvation of individuals from society cannot be separated from nature's salvation (Ruether 2011, 354). The Asian tradition that emphasizes religion about nature by indigenous peoples has valuable resources that need to be developed (Ruether 2011, 354-355). Therefore, awareness of environmental management should have become a moral awareness of Timor Christians that the damage that occurred can be repaired. One of them is how people regard nature as value creation and how it is also ultimately connected to indigenous peoples, however, entirely dependent on their land. Humans need to be re-aware of their mandate in utilizing nature as part of their service to God, so utilizing nature must be in line with efforts to protect and maintain (Keriapy 2019, 6). Theology is no longer about the relationship between humans and God but about how humans take care of the created world as a form of glorifying God (Keriapy 2019, 11). This awareness forms a belief that God is working in all forms of creation surrounding us. In the concept of creation, humans are given the task of maintaining and caring for nature. So, humans must return to a proper hermeneutic

understanding by eliminating anthropocentric understanding (Awang, Setyawan, & Nuban Timo 2019, 141).

Christianity contrasting with ancient paganism and Asian religions (except Zoroastrianism) with the concept of dualism of human and nature, has somehow contributed to human attitudes in feeling worthy of exploiting nature for themselves (White 1967, 1205). This dualism still haunts Eco theology because it tries to understand God as other/outside this world and is rooted in the separation of humans and nature. (Kearns 2003, 479). The dualistic view then creates a contradictory relationship between humans, nature, and God so that the intimacy of humans and nature is vulnerable to being poorly stigmatized. Meanwhile, religion is understood merely in the context of the intimacy of humans and God. Accordingly, the position of God as a separate creator from creation is, according to some theologians, the root of the crisis as God is believed to be *creatio ex nihilo* (Ludji 2014, 66). The meaning of Eco theology then comes as an effort to eliminate that dualism by building a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and God. (Ludji 2014) Labels humans as guardians of God's garden where humans cooperate with God to care for nature. Likewise, White proposes St. Francis' term for panpsychism: animate and inanimate are designed to glorify a transcendent creator (White 1967, 1207). Therefore, humans should require renewing the meaning of religiosity.

#### **4. Boti-Christian Engagement for Environmental Management**

The Indigenous Theology and Eco theology concept look at Boti's religiosity as an essential

point to deal with the environmental crisis in Timor. The dependence of the Boti people on nature manifested in their daily practices and rituals illustrates that they can overcome the crisis well. On the other hand, Timor Christians who are close to the mission of civilization and modernism tend to be less wise in dealing with the crisis. It indicates the growing regional development projects in Timor, some of which do not have good ecological values. The crisis of the artificial environment became big and uncontrollable. It looks at the role of Timor Christians and the church that even though they know ecology, they do not know how to relate to and respect nature in practice. It refers to the indigenous paradigm regarding nature unite (intersubjective relationship) to the human. Therefore, this section aims to understand Boti's religiosity to gain ecological values about the intersubjective relationship with nature that helps them overcome the crisis. The discussion is divided into four parts:

Firstly, Timor Christians can learn and contribute to maintaining and protecting customary lands and the land of Timor as a whole. It refers to how the Boti community is committed to protecting their land by not cutting down trees indiscriminately (Andung 2010, 37). They are connected with the moral value of clearing the fields they will plant (Nope 2017, 15) and working together to clean the yard, plant trees, and clean up water sources (CNN Indonesia Youtube Channel 2017). This attitude can contribute to Timor Christians to start taking part in preserving and protecting nature. Timor Christians must be sensitive that destroying nature, such as customary land, is a worse deed. This understanding (the essence of human beings) is created as a guardian of

God's garden, where they have a responsibility to God to maintain His creation (Ludji 2014, 72).

Secondly, Timor Christians learn to serve nature. It grasps indigenous peoples are working hard as part of their lifestyle that "Meup on le at, tah on le usif" (working as a servant, eating like a king) (Naat 2017, 55). Their attitude illustrates their service in refusing government assistance which can affect their lives, such as lazy behavior so that they become independent by farming, raising livestock, weaving (Youtube Channel Traveler Community, 2019 & Watchdoc Image 2015). They value plants by classifying plants that can be consumed, such as tamarind fruit, candlenut, and corn, as staple food (Naat 2017, 42). This attitude can be an example of how Timor Christians deal with their environment. Even though in their daily life, they do not entirely depend on nature like the Boti people, they can reduce apathy towards the environment. As a subsystem of the ecological community, humans should take responsibility for the environmental crisis (Awang, Setyawan, & Nuban Timo 2019, 140). Timor Christian can undertake to serve the environment by planting or organizing waste properly.

Thirdly, Timor Christians can learn to live simply to avoid exploitation or excess. This view of Boti's dependence on nature drives the Boti people to the awareness to share life with nature. Living a simple life makes them feel enough for everything. For them, nature has the right to survive as well. They think enough to eat and drink a day, have a place to live, make their own clothes, and do not even wear sandals (Naat 2017, 52) & (CNN Indonesia 2017). They also do not

use electricity and allow natural road access as taught by their ancestors (Trans 7 2018; Traveler Community 2019). This behavior can be an example for Timor Christians to control themselves from the demands of modernism. One that supports this behavior is the understanding of the inseparability of God and nature as White (1967) took the pantheism of St. Francis's existence of God is inherent in all creations. Therefore, humans can be wise in consuming or using anything, such as waste generated from consumptive behavior.

Fourthly, Timor Christians need to re-articulate the devil worship, primitive and irreligious view of indigenous religion into an eco-theological perspective. Timor Christians need to adapt to different religious and local cultures to understand Christianity, and also that Christ needs to be reinterpreted by Christians and non-Christians (Yewangoe 2013, 4;6). It is also as Jesus wants Christians to retell His story in their way to convey His unique identity (Pieris 1996, 108-109). Christians need to understand the taboos and mystique from the Boti's religiosity with their indigenous paradigm, not the world religion paradigm. The rituals performed by the Boti people reflect references to how their ancestors lived. For example, the nine-day system has inspired them to avoid harmful conditions and get a better life in the future (Iswanto & Liufeto, 2014, 169) (Konay 2017, 20). This indigenous paradigm is built on inter-subjective relationships (Maarif 2017) and a relational epistemology by human and non-human as dividual relationships (Bird-David 1999). It leads Christians to be more amicable to indigenous peoples by understanding that Boti practices, including taboos and mystical

things, are moral legacies taught by their ancestors to survive in life. For them being religious cannot be separated from the attitude of loving their environment.

## CONCLUSION

This article refers to two phenomena: the environmental crisis due to natural and artificial factors and the phenomenon of conversion with the colonial method (western paradigm) that is increasingly intense for indigenous people like the Boti people. It is a worry because this phenomenon is accepted, and the opportunities are enlarged. Meanwhile, it causes various threats to indigenous peoples rooted in their local knowledge as conservationists. For this reason, this article aims to build an understanding that Boti's religiosity can contribute to alleviating the environmental crisis on Timor island. Furthermore, this article also criticizes ambiguous Christian responses to environmental issues. On one side, Timor Christian respects *adat* and environmental issues but otherwise still applies unfriendly conversion activities by upholding the western paradigm. At the same time, the western paradigm has contributed many ideas that are hostile to nature.

Continuously, this article provides four discussions as a critique of the phenomena. The first describes Boti's religiosity showing a friendly response to the environment. Boti's practices provide the ecological values needed to face the crisis. The second shows how the development of Christianity around Boti is strongly influenced by Christianity, a colonial product and an attribute of world religion.

These two things reduce the local knowledge of the Timor people, who have long lived in harmony and dependence with nature. As a critique of the spread of Christianity with a western pattern, the third raises the theory of indigenous theology and Christian eco-theology. Indigenous theology criticizes the western paradigm in Christianity by offering theology from local knowledge and based on the context of a particular society. Meanwhile, Ecotheology tries to recover the relationship between humans and nature that humans are no longer the master but coworkers of God in protecting nature (maintaining and preserving). Fourth, criticism of the phenomena provides a solution for environmental management in which the Boti and Timor Christians engage each other. Such things as protecting customary lands, serving nature, depending on nature, living simply, and leaving various discriminatory labels such as infidels that affect their role and citizenship rights.

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