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Conflict Resolution in Post-Conflict Maluku: Integrating Lewis Coser's Safety Valve Theory and Pope Francis' Theology of Reconciliation

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Abstract

Sustainable conflict resolution in multicultural societies requires not only effective mechanisms for managing social tensions but also moral transformation capable of restoring fractured relationships. Although sociological and theological approaches to reconciliation have been widely discussed, their integration remains underexplored, particularly in the context of post-conflict Maluku. This study analyzes the relationship between Lewis Coser's safety valve theory and Pope Francis' theology of reconciliation and examines their relevance for conflict resolution in post-conflict Maluku. This study employs a qualitative library research design with a conceptual analysis approach. Primary sources include Lewis Coser's writings on conflict theory and Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, supported by scholarly literature on conflict resolution and the Maluku communal conflict. The findings reveal that safety valve mechanisms, including dialogue, customary institutions, and the leadership of religious and traditional authorities, play an important role in preventing the escalation of communal conflict. However, sustainable peace requires more than institutional conflict management. Pope Francis' emphasis on love, forgiveness, justice, and fraternity complements Coser's sociological perspective by providing the moral foundations necessary for enduring reconciliation. This study proposes an integrative socio-religious framework that combines structural conflict management with moral reconciliation, offering a conceptual contribution to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in multicultural societies.

Keyword

Conflict resolution , Fratelli Tutti, Lewis Coser, Maluku, Reconciliation

Abstrak

Resolusi konflik yang berkelanjutan dalam masyarakat multikultural tidak hanya memerlukan mekanisme yang efektif untuk mengelola ketegangan sosial, tetapi juga transformasi moral yang mampu memulihkan hubungan antarmanusia yang retak. Meskipun pendekatan sosiologis dan teologis terhadap rekonsiliasi telah banyak dikaji, integrasi keduanya masih jarang dibahas, khususnya dalam konteks Maluku pascakonflik. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis hubungan antara teori safety valve Lewis Coser dan teologi rekonsiliasi Paus Fransiskus serta mengkaji relevansinya bagi resolusi konflik di Maluku pascakonflik. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kepustakaan kualitatif dengan pendekatan analisis konseptual. Sumber utama penelitian meliputi karya-karya Lewis Coser tentang teori konflik dan ensiklik Fratelli Tutti karya Paus Fransiskus, yang didukung oleh berbagai publikasi ilmiah mengenai resolusi konflik dan konflik komunal di Maluku. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mekanisme safety valve, seperti dialog, lembaga adat, serta kepemimpinan tokoh agama dan tokoh adat, berperan penting dalam mencegah eskalasi konflik komunal. Namun, perdamaian yang berkelanjutan tidak dapat dicapai hanya melalui pengelolaan konflik secara institusional. Penekanan Paus Fransiskus pada kasih, pengampunan, keadilan, dan persaudaraan melengkapi perspektif sosiologis Lewis Coser dengan menyediakan landasan moral bagi rekonsiliasi yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini menawarkan suatu kerangka konseptual sosio-religius yang mengintegrasikan pengelolaan konflik secara struktural dengan rekonsiliasi moral sebagai kontribusi konseptual bagi kajian resolusi konflik dan pembangunan perdamaian dalam masyarakat multikultural.

Kata Kunci

Fratelli Tutti, Lewis Coser, Maluku, rekonsiliasi, resolusi konflik

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable part of human life. In the context of complex and pluralistic modern societies, the potential for conflict continues to grow. The complexity of today's world has also led to greater plurality and complexity in social conflicts. Every social relationship, from the smallest unit, such as the family, to larger communities, such as society or organizations, contains the potential for diverse and complex conflicts arising from differences in values, interests, and paradigms. Differences in religion, culture, economic interests, political identity, gender, social status, food preferences, and lifestyles can trigger social tensions (Wahyudi, 2021).

Although conflict possesses destructive potential, it also serves an important social function by contributing to the formation of a constructive social order (Fadillah & Afrizal, 2026; Musahwi & Pitriyani, 2022; Nadilla Aleyda Maqhfira Agustin et al., 2023). Constructive conflict management generates positive values that empower communities, reduce social tensions, heal the wounds caused by conflict, and prevent the emergence of more severe disputes. Conflict resolution that merely suppresses tensions often addresses only the symptoms rather than transforming the underlying causes. Therefore, conflict resolution must address conflicts at their roots while simultaneously anticipating future disputes through preventive measures (Wahyudi, 2021).

Lewis Coser, a Jewish-American sociologist, proposed the concept of the "safety valve" as one mechanism for conflict resolution. A safety valve provides a channel for negotiation of tensions between conflicting parties can be expressed and managed

constructively (Fadillah & Afrizal, 2026). Dialogue, cultural values, institutions, community leaders, and various public forums can all function as safety valves for resolving conflicts in constructive ways (Wahyudi, 2021). However, a purely structural safety valve often focuses merely on managing surface-level tensions and institutional negotiations. This sociological approach therefore requires an ethical and moral dimension that addresses the deeply personal and human aspects of conflict, upholding the dignity of every human person. Pope Francis, the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church from 2013 to 2025, emphasized in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* that authentic conflict resolution should be founded upon love and forgiveness rather than revenge (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 227).

The integration of Lewis Coser's safety valve theory with Pope Francis' vision of reconciliation in *Fratelli Tutti* offers a model of conflict resolution that not only reduces social tensions but also heals the inner wounds of individuals (Pabubung & Harsono, 2024). This integrated approach is particularly relevant to multicultural societies with a history of communal conflict. The people of Maluku constitute one such multicultural society, having experienced violent communal conflicts between 1999 and 2003 (Ansori et al., 2014). Following the conflict, Maluku relied heavily on local "safety valves," such as interfaith dialogue, the indigenous tradition of *pela gandong*, and the authority of customary and religious leaders to restore order (Hasudungan et al., 2020; Shofiyah & Cangara, 2023). However, existing peacebuilding efforts in Maluku face limitations, as these traditional safety valves often function as temporary buffers against open violence without fully resolving deep-seated interreligious prejudice or healing psychological trauma.

Despite the growing body of literature on conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and reconciliation in Maluku, existing studies have generally examined sociological mechanisms and moral-theological approaches separately. Research on Maluku has predominantly focused on local wisdom, community dialogue, and institutional peacebuilding, whereas studies of *Fratelli Tutti* have largely explored Pope Francis' ethical vision of peace in broader theological contexts. Consequently, limited attention has been given to integrating Lewis Coser's sociological concept of the safety valve with Pope Francis' theology of reconciliation as a unified framework for understanding conflict resolution in post-conflict Maluku. This theoretical separation leaves unanswered how structural mechanisms for managing conflict can be combined with moral transformation to sustain long-term reconciliation.

Addressing this gap, the present study develops an integrative conceptual framework by bringing together Lewis Coser's safety valve theory and Pope Francis' theology of reconciliation to analyze conflict resolution in post-conflict Maluku. Rather than treating these perspectives as competing explanations, this study argues that they are complementary: Coser explains how social tensions may be institutionally managed, whereas Pope Francis provides the moral and ethical foundations necessary for rebuilding fractured relationships. Specifically, the study aims to analyze Coser's safety valve concept and Pope Francis' theology of reconciliation, exploring their synergy within the multicultural context of Maluku Province (excluding North Maluku Province). By integrating these perspectives, this article offers a socio-religious framework that contributes to conflict resolution scholarship while providing a more comprehensive

understanding of sustainable peace in multicultural societies affected by communal violence.

Method

This study employs a qualitative library research design using a conceptual analysis approach to examine the relationship between Lewis Coser's conflict theory and Pope Francis' theology of reconciliation and to explore their relevance for conflict resolution in post-conflict Maluku. Rather than systematically reviewing empirical evidence, this study synthesizes sociological and theological perspectives to develop an integrative conceptual framework for understanding conflict resolution in multicultural societies.

The primary sources consist of Lewis Coser's major works on social conflict, particularly his concept of the *safety valve*, and Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* as the principal theological text on fraternity and reconciliation. These primary texts are complemented by secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and scholarly publications on conflict resolution, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and the communal conflict in Maluku. The selected literature was chosen based on its relevance to the research objectives and its contribution to the discussion of sociological, theological, and socio-cultural dimensions of conflict resolution.

Data were collected through an extensive review of academic literature and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved three stages: (1) identifying the principal concepts of conflict management in Lewis Coser's theory, particularly the *safety valve* mechanism; (2) examining Pope Francis' theological understanding of reconciliation, forgiveness, fraternity, and dialogue in *Fratelli Tutti*; and (3) synthesizing these perspectives into an integrative analytical framework, which was subsequently employed to interpret conflict resolution within the context of post-conflict Maluku. Through this conceptual synthesis, the study seeks to demonstrate how sociological mechanisms of conflict management can be complemented by moral and theological principles to promote sustainable peace and social reconciliation.

Result and Discussion

Lewis Coser's Conflict Theory and the Safety Valve Concept

Lewis A. Coser, born in Berlin on November 27, 1913, into a Jewish bourgeois family, devoted his academic career to the study of social and political issues. Following the Second World War, he taught at the University of Chicago and Brandeis University. He earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University, where he later developed much of his scholarly work in sociology. His extensive contributions to the discipline led to his election as President of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 1975. Coser's most influential work, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, is regarded as a landmark contribution to sociology. In this work, he emphasizes the positive social functions of conflict. His theoretical framework draws upon the American structural-functional tradition represented by scholars such as Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton while incorporating key insights from conflict theory (Wahyudi, 2021).

Coser recognized that every society inevitably experiences social tensions and friction (Wahyudi, 2021). Social systems do not always function harmoniously because

individuals possess distinct interests, goals, and aspirations. Consequently, conflicts naturally emerge from competing interests among actors within a social system. However, conflict should not be viewed solely as destructive. Rather than inevitably undermining social order, conflict also possesses constructive potential (Wahyudi, 2021; Musahwi & Pitriyani, 2022; Nadilla Aleyda Maqhfira Agustin et al., 2023). Similarly, Ralf Dahrendorf argued that conflict generates positive outcomes by serving as a driving force for social change, the redistribution of power, and the restructuring of social institutions. Anthony Giddens likewise maintained that conflict contains an enabling dimension, creating opportunities for changes in both social action and social structures (Wahyudi, 2021).

According to Coser, conflict performs important positive social functions (Wahyudi, 2021). It encourages social adaptation (Ryota & Hamada, 2025) and should not be regarded merely as dysfunctional. Instead, conflict may strengthen social systems and promote social integration, particularly within the in-group. Coser distinguishes between realistic and non-realistic conflicts. Realistic conflicts arise from tangible issues such as power, authority, status, or material interests. By contrast, non-realistic conflicts originate primarily from emotional motivations, such as hatred, resentment, or anger, without clearly defined practical objectives.

Conflict arises when inequalities or injustices exist in access to resources. Coser identifies two principal sources of conflict. First, conflict emerges when members of subordinate groups perceive the existing system as unjust, question the legitimacy of the distribution of scarce resources, and lack adequate channels for expressing their grievances. Second, conflict develops when subordinate groups experience a sense of relative deprivation, perceiving themselves as disadvantaged by comparing their conditions with those of dominant groups. This latter form of conflict is reinforced when subordinate groups possess extensive socialization experiences that reduce internal psychological barriers to challenging the established order, while dominant groups become less capable of employing external constraints, such as laws, policies, or political authority to suppress subordinate groups (Wahyudi, 2021; Morack, 2024; Nadilla Aleyda Maqhfira Agustin et al., 2023).

Conflicts become increasingly intense when they involve non-realistic issues, particularly those related to core values (Wahyudi, 2021). Violence is more likely when sacred or deeply held values are perceived to have been violated. Such conflicts are difficult to negotiate because they often lack clear objectives and are driven by emotional rather than rational considerations. Religious conflicts, for example, frequently resist compromise because they concern sacred beliefs and values. Religious doctrines, which cannot easily be resolved through rational argument alone, may further intensify hostilities. When individuals perceive that their religious beliefs have been insulted or violated, the intensity of conflict often escalates. Because different faith communities hold fundamentally different theological perspectives, finding common ground becomes particularly challenging.

By contrast, conflicts arising from realistic issues are generally easier to resolve because they involve tangible and clearly identifiable objects. Land disputes, for example, concern a concrete object—land—and can often be addressed through negotiated agreements concerning ownership or distribution. Such compromises help reduce the intensity of conflict. Furthermore, conflict tends to become more severe when

functional interdependence among social units is weak and when few mechanisms exist for absorbing social tensions. If conflicting groups perceive themselves as independent and not mutually dependent, conflict is likely to escalate. Likewise, when there are no effective forums for negotiation or no third parties capable of receiving grievances and facilitating mediation, conflicts become increasingly severe. Coser refers to these mechanisms for accommodating grievances as “safety valves” (Wahyudi, 2021).

Conflict may become prolonged when its objectives are expansive, when there is little consensus regarding the goals of the conflict, and when the symbols of victory or defeat remain ambiguous (Wahyudi, 2021; Kardiana & Widiyanto, 2021a, 2021b; Rifqi & Arifin, 2025). Broad and multifaceted objectives, the absence of shared understandings, and uncertainty regarding whether the conflict has ended all contribute to the persistence of conflict. Conversely, conflicts are more likely to be resolved when leaders recognize the high costs of continued confrontation, when the balance of power between opposing groups becomes evident, when indicators of victory or defeat are clearly defined, and when leaders possess sufficient influence over their followers. The duration of conflict therefore depends largely on the centralization of authority and the degree of social integration among the conflicting parties (Wahyudi, 2021; Musahwi & Pitriyani, 2022; Nendissa, 2022; Tualeka, 2017). Effective leadership plays a crucial role in reducing conflict, while stronger integration between opposing groups decreases the likelihood of prolonged disputes.

For Coser, conflict is an unavoidable feature of social life. To preserve social equilibrium, conflict requires institutionalized channels through which tensions can be managed. He refers to this mechanism as the Safety Valve. The safety valve functions to prevent conflict from becoming destructive by providing opportunities for conflicting parties to express grievances, negotiate differences, accommodate competing interests, and seek constructive solutions (Wahyudi, 2021). Such channels include dialogue, deliberative forums, cultural traditions, meetings among religious leaders, and similar institutions. Nevertheless, safety valves may fail to address the root causes of conflict if they merely relieve emotional tensions without transforming the structural injustices that generated the conflict. Social systems characterized by inequality may therefore remain unchanged, even though genuine conflict resolution requires addressing both structural causes and the psychological wounds experienced by the conflicting parties. Conflicts that are not resolved comprehensively may eventually produce even more destructive outbreaks of violence (Darsono et al., 2025; Nadilla Aleyda Maqhira Agustin et al., 2023; Naranjo-Álvarez & Alonso-Niño, 2023).

From the perspective of social functions, Coser identifies several positive contributions of conflict. First, conflict strengthens solidarity within the in-group. He argues that conflict enhances internal cohesion by reinforcing collective identity. The more intensely a group confronts an out-group, the stronger the loyalty, solidarity, and unity among its own members become (Wahyudi, 2021). Moreover, internal conflict often stimulates dialogue, raises collective awareness regarding shared welfare, and encourages mutual social support. Differences within groups can ultimately contribute to organizational maturity and collective growth. Second, Coser maintains that limited internal conflict is beneficial because it prevents the accumulation of tensions that could otherwise damage social relationships (Wahyudi, 2021). Conflict helps maintain

healthy relationships by releasing antagonistic feelings such as disappointment, anger, resentment, or suspicion. Through the open expression of grievances, misunderstandings can be clarified before they become deeply entrenched. Third, conflict does not necessarily divide or separate groups; rather, it can provide opportunities for rebuilding social integration between previously opposing groups (Wahyudi, 2021). Conflict may serve as a catalyst for establishing new patterns of cooperation, interaction, and social equilibrium. Fourth, conflict contributes to social change. Through conflict, societies often develop institutional improvements and new forms of social organization. New public policies, communication systems, and social arrangements frequently emerge as responses to conflict and the demands for reform (Wahyudi, 2021; Fadillah & Afrizal, 2026; Morack, 2024; Piter Pasaribu et al., 2022).

Conflict and Reconciliation in Pope Francis' Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*

Pope Francis, born Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina on 17 December 1936, was elected Pope on 13 March 2013 and served as Supreme Pontiff until his death in 2025. Throughout his pontificate, he consistently emphasized mercy, universal fraternity, interreligious dialogue, care for creation, and the spirit of synodality. One of his most significant documents highlighting fraternity and dialogue is the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* ("All Brothers and Sisters"), which was promulgated in 2020. The following section discusses several of Pope Francis' fundamental perspectives on conflict and reconciliation as presented in this encyclical.

1. A. Conflict: An Art and a Challenge

Conflict is an inevitable reality of human existence. The dynamic nature of social life inevitably gives rise to tensions within society. Conflicts often do not emerge naturally but are deliberately provoked or constructed. Nevertheless, conflict remains an inherent aspect of human interaction and an integral part of the art of encounter. Conflict frequently reflects the richness of human diversity, revealing the many dimensions of social life. According to Pope Francis, diversity within society resembles a polyhedron—a geometric figure composed of many distinct faces that together form a harmonious whole (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 215). Therefore, social differences and tensions should not be regarded as threats but as opportunities for mutual enrichment and illumination. No person is useless, including those whose views differ from our own. Every individual possesses a unique perspective and lived reality that may not yet be fully understood. Genuine understanding of these differences is essential for making sound and responsible decisions.

2. Dialogue: Mutual Listening.

The Catholic Church considers dialogue to be essential for peaceful coexistence. Dialogue is the process through which people of different backgrounds encounter one another and communicate with open hearts. Its purpose is to enable individuals and religious communities to know, understand, and appreciate one another. Dialogue serves as an instrument for sharing truth while respecting the inherent dignity of every human person (Neonnub & Kosat, 2026; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024; Sitepu et al., 2025; Tambunan, 2024). Pope Francis understands dialogue as a space for mutual encounter and sharing. It is the meeting point where individuals express themselves, listen to one another, and develop deeper mutual understanding (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 198). Authentic

dialogue requires openness, honesty, and respect for differing perspectives, thereby creating the conditions for genuine discussion (Fratelli Tutti, no. 203). Inclusive dialogue promotes reciprocal openness while pursuing clearly defined objectives rather than surrendering to moral relativism. Relativism, according to Pope Francis, can encourage manipulation and distortions of truth. What truly benefits society is founded upon consensus grounded in truths accessible to human reason and common sense (Ngara, 2025).

For Pope Francis, dialogue does not seek uniformity but rather cooperation that benefits all participants (Fratelli Tutti, nos. 114, 228). Genuine dialogue rejects domination and instead promotes service to others. Justice can be achieved through dialogue that fosters reconciliation while encouraging the development of every individual according to his or her unique identity (Pabubung & Harsono, 2024).

3. Dialogue and Love

Amid differences and social tensions, the Catholic Church consistently advocates peace through dialogue inspired by love. Responding to conflict with violence can never produce genuine peace; instead, it merely generates new cycles of violence (Aliano et al., 2023; Ngara, 2025; Wuriningsih & Setiyaningtiyas, 2023). From a biblical perspective, Jesus Christ called His disciples to make love the foundation of all human relationships. Love is the greatest commandment (cf. Matthew 22:37–40) and is manifested through self-sacrifice, for “greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (cf. John 15:13). Christ also revealed divine peace to the world (cf. John 14:27) and instructed His followers to respond to evil not with revenge but with love (cf. Matthew 5:44).

Love constitutes the fundamental spirit underlying authentic dialogue because God Himself is love. God is merciful and compassionate (Laiké, 2022; Mbukut & Atu, 2024; Satrio & Viktorahadi, 2021). Consequently, the Church and all followers of Christ ground their ministry of dialogue in God’s love. Human beings are called to love because God first loved humanity and because every person is inherently worthy of love. Love is not merely an emotional expression but a concrete action (Neonnub & Kosat, 2026). To love means to act. Genuine love is expressed through acts of charity rather than remaining a mere feeling. Such love is universal, transcending distinctions of religion, nationality, ethnicity, and social status. Pope Francis emphasizes that love enables us to recognize every person as a brother or sister. Conversely, individualism and self-centeredness imprison individuals within their own interests, preventing them from living together in authentic fraternity (Fratelli Tutti, no. 105). Acts of love are never utilitarian but are performed because they are intrinsically good, without expectation of reward or reciprocity (Fratelli Tutti, no. 139).

4. Dialogue and Forgiveness

Forgiveness refers to an inner disposition that enables individuals to accept and release painful experiences. To forgive means to courageously acknowledge the wounds of the past while reorienting oneself toward the future. Pope Francis emphasizes that reflecting upon past conflicts should not reopen trauma but should instead become a therapeutic process that heals dissatisfaction, resentment, and confusion while enabling individuals and communities to learn from history and build a better future (Fratelli Tutti, no. 226). Rebuilding the future requires honoring the memory of victims while

simultaneously opening new horizons free from revenge. Peace agreements cannot remain merely legal documents; they must also preserve the voices, tears, and demands of victims and seek healing through justice and truth (Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024). Society has the right to know the truth about the past—not to provoke new conflicts but to develop appropriate strategies for healing and restoration (Fratelli Tutti, no. 248).

According to Pope Francis, reconciliation with a painful past does not require forgetting suffering but learning from it while continuing to pursue truth, justice, and mercy (Fratelli Tutti, no. 227). Forgiveness should therefore be accompanied by a commitment to reveal the truth and uphold justice, yet always in a spirit of compassion. Forgiveness does not imply revenge; rather, it seeks justice without perpetuating hatred. Violence never breaks the cycle of violence, and hatred inevitably generates more hatred (Renna, 2021; Sarumaha, 2025; Viyo et al., 2024).

Dialogue also requires a spirit of fraternity in which all participants feel “at home” as members of one family (Ngara, 2025). Just as family members respect one another despite disagreements, participants in dialogue should experience one another’s suffering as their own and work together to heal collective wounds. Families naturally experience disagreements and even conflict, yet family bonds remain intact and encourage reconciliation. We are called to regard neighbors and even adversaries as brothers, sisters, parents, spouses, or children—as members of the same human family. Authentic families do not seek to harm one another, even amid disagreements (Ngara, 2025; Sitepu et al., 2025; Tambunan, 2024).

For Pope Francis, successful dialogue does not end at the negotiating table or in institutional offices. Rather, it is realized through concrete and creative actions inspired by hope, peace, and reconciliation (Fratelli Tutti, no. 231). Every individual, according to his or her particular vocation and competence, is called to become an architect of peace without revenge or violence. Peacebuilding requires shared commitment, continuous effort, and perseverance over time (Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024). Genuine peacebuilding is inclusive, collaborative, and integrates the contributions of all sectors of society (Kwuelum, 2024).

Reconciliation should never be interpreted as weakness or passive acceptance of oppression. Neither is it an escape from conflict nor evidence of an inability to engage in dialogue (Aliano et al., 2023; Viyo et al., 2024). From the perspective of Christian teaching, forgiveness lies at the heart of Jesus’ message. Christ never advocated violence or intolerance (Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024). Instead, He taught love (cf. Matthew 26:52) and instructed His disciples to forgive “seventy-seven times” (cf. Matthew 18:22), symbolizing unlimited forgiveness. At the same time, Jesus encouraged His followers to persevere in truth while extending forgiveness even to those who persecute them (cf. Matthew 10:34–36). The New Testament consistently echoes this teaching by encouraging believers to correct opponents with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:25) and to reject slander and quarrels in favor of kindness and humility (Titus 3:2; Acts 2:47; 4:21, 33; 5:13).

Forgiveness protects both individuals and communities from the destructive consequences of anger. Communities possess a future only when they are bound together by fraternity rather than revenge and hatred. Pope Francis insists that no society should

legitimize revenge, even through legal or collective agreements (Fratelli Tutti, no. 242). Revenge resembles a small spark capable of igniting a devastating fire, preventing emotional wounds from ever healing. Forgiveness extinguishes the flames of vengeance and restores wounded hearts (Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024).

5. Religion as an Agent of Peace

Every individual and community bears responsibility for promoting peace free from violence, political manipulation, and particular interests. Influential leaders and public figures play a decisive role in fostering social harmony. They have a moral obligation to ensure that marginalized and forgotten groups continue to perceive themselves as valuable members of the national community.

The poor and victims of conflict deserve particular attention because they are frequently excluded from society. Pope Francis recognizes that social inequality often drives marginalized people toward alienation and rebellion (Fratelli Tutti, no. 234). Friendship and solidarity with the poor and those who have suffered oppression create opportunities for reconciliation and healing. Consequently, social restoration should begin with those who have suffered most—the poor, the wounded, and the marginalized (Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024).

Conflict is unavoidable and is often deliberately provoked. According to Pope Francis, the Church must clearly and courageously define its position amid social tensions (Fratelli Tutti, no. 226). Forgiveness should never permit oppression to continue; rather, it seeks to break the cycle of injustice by preventing oppressors from perpetuating violence and dismantling the structures that sustain it (Fratelli Tutti, no. 241). Forgiveness therefore remains fully compatible with defending victims and pursuing justice, truth, and mercy. Even when individuals have caused harm, they should be forgiven while still being held accountable through just legal processes. Oppression should never be answered with further violence but through the pursuit of justice under the rule of law (Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024).

Religion should provide moral guidance rooted in the conviction that every human being possesses inviolable dignity as the image of God. Catholic religious leaders—particularly bishops and priests—need not participate directly in practical politics, but they have a vital public responsibility to promote charity, education, and the advancement of universal fraternity. Pope Francis envisions religion as “a family among families”, bringing faith, hope, and love to God and to humanity, especially to the poor and vulnerable (Fratelli Tutti, no. 276). In this way, religion becomes a nurturing home of love that offers hope, accompaniment, care, and support to every person while breaking down social barriers and divisions (Aliano et al., 2023; Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024; Renna, 2021).

The Diversity of Social Identities in Maluku Society

The people of Maluku Province live within a highly diverse social landscape characterized by ethnic, cultural, and religious plurality. The province is home to several major indigenous ethnic groups, including the Ambonese, Seram, Buru, Kei, Tanimbar, Aru, Leti, and Babar peoples. These ethnic designations are generally derived from the islands or regions in which each community traditionally resides. The Ambonese are indigenous to Ambon Island in Ambon City; the Seram people originate from Seram

Island; the Buru people from Buru Island; the Kei people from the Kei Islands in Southeast Maluku; the Tanimbar people from the Tanimbar Archipelago in Tanimbar Islands Regency; the Aru people from the Aru Islands; the Leti people from Leti Island; and the Babar people from Babar Island in Southwest Maluku Regency (Rahawarin, 2024).

Each ethnic group possesses distinctive cultural traditions and customary institutions. The Kei people are well known for *Larvul Ngabal*, a codified customary legal system that regulates community life based on the principles of humanity, honor, justice, and fraternity. Its primary objective is to preserve social order and harmonious coexistence within Kei society. The Tanimbar people practice *Duan-Lolat*, an unwritten customary law governing kinship relations and founded upon the principle of reciprocal respect and mutual obligation. The Aru people are recognized for the concept of *Ursiw-Urlima*, which refers to the dual customary alliance that structures indigenous Aru society through a strong system of fraternity. Meanwhile, the indigenous people of Buru Island are known for the cultural philosophy of *Kai-Wait* (“elder sibling–younger sibling”), which symbolizes relationships of kinship in which community members regard one another as members of the same family. One cultural institution that transcends ethnic boundaries throughout Maluku is the tradition of *Pela-Gandong*, a customary bond of fraternity established between two villages, ethnic communities, or social groups (Iwamony, 2020). *Pela* refers to a covenant of brotherhood or kinship, whereas *gandong* literally denotes siblings of the same bloodline (Arvanti et al., 2024; Irfan, 2022; Margawati, 2000). Communities united through *Pela-Gandong* are bound by mutual obligations to protect, assist, and care for one another, thereby strengthening social solidarity across communal and religious boundaries.

According to demographic statistics for 2024, the population of Maluku Province totals 1,930,808 inhabitants. Of this population, approximately 51% identify as Muslims, 38% as Protestants, 8% as Catholics, 0.40% as Buddhists, 0.02% as Hindus, 0.003% as Confucians, and 0.43% adhere to indigenous beliefs (*Aliran Kepercayaan*) (Directorate General of Population and Civil Registration, Ministry of Home Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). These demographic figures include long-term migrants from other regions of Indonesia, such as Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and other provinces who have permanently settled in Maluku. Indigenous Maluku communities generally adhere to Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, or indigenous belief systems, whereas followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are predominantly migrants originating from outside the province.

Within the relationship between culture and religion in Maluku, both assimilation and acculturation have taken place. Assimilation refers to the merging of two distinct cultures into a new cultural identity, whereas acculturation denotes the interaction between different cultures in which each retains its essential characteristics despite mutual influence. Acculturation is evident in the integration of Maluku cultural traditions into religious practices, such as the incorporation of traditional dances into religious worship and ceremonies. Assimilation can be observed in the simultaneous use of customary and religious names by individuals, as well as in interethnic and interreligious marriages that give rise to new forms of social identity (Hasudungan et al., 2020; Rahawarin, 2024).

The Maluku Conflict and the Dynamics of Post-Conflict Reconciliation

The cultural and religious diversity of Maluku constitutes one of the province's greatest social assets. This diversity has made Maluku Province a shared homeland for people from a wide range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. As a meeting place of numerous ethnic groups and religious communities, Maluku has developed a unique social dynamic enriched by both cultural and religious values, particularly those of kinship and fraternity. At the same time, interactions among different cultural and religious groups also carry the potential for social tensions. When such tensions are not managed constructively, they may develop into communal conflict. Thus, diversity and social interaction represent both a source of social strength and a potential source of vulnerability if not properly managed.

Maluku bears the memory of one of Indonesia's most traumatic communal conflicts. In 1999, a large-scale horizontal conflict erupted between Muslim and Christian communities, popularly referred to as the conflict between Acang (Hasan) and Obet (Robert). At the time, Acang was a common nickname associated with Muslims, while Obet was commonly associated with Christians. Consequently, the conflict became widely known as the Acang–Obet conflict. The violence began with a seemingly minor altercation between a Christian youth from Maluku and a Muslim youth from South Sulawesi at the Batu Merah public transportation terminal in Ambon on 19 January 1999, during the Muslim celebration of Eid al-Fitr. News of the incident spread rapidly throughout Ambon, accompanied by reports that “Christians and Muslims were fighting at Mardika Terminal.” The rumor quickly escalated communal tensions. Residents began stopping vehicles to identify people belonging to different religious communities, while acts of arson soon followed. Muslim groups burned Christian homes, and Christian groups retaliated by burning Muslim homes. Although the conflict appeared to emerge spontaneously, it was in fact the culmination of longstanding social inequalities and was further exacerbated by manipulation from certain political elites acting behind the scenes.

The conflict soon spread beyond Ambon to other regions of Maluku and North Maluku. For nearly three years, the province remained engulfed in communal violence, creating a prolonged humanitarian crisis. Maluku entered a state of emergency and became unsafe for daily life. Numerous buildings and public infrastructure in Ambon—the provincial capital—were destroyed. Large numbers of residents sought refuge in displacement camps, while others fled the city altogether. Within Ambon itself, religious segregation became increasingly entrenched, with residential areas divided along religious lines as Muslims and Christians settled in separate territories.

The conflict in Ambon unfolded in several distinct phases. Phase I (January–March 1999) began with the incident at Batu Merah Market. Ambon's population, originally about 312,000, declined by approximately 100,000 as residents fled the city, while another 20,000 people lived in 34 refugee camps. The city's streets were filled with the ruins of burned buildings. During this period, government officials, community leaders, and religious leaders worked together to restore peace. Phase II (July–November 1999) witnessed a temporary decline in violence within Ambon, although deadly clashes continued. The conflict expanded into other parts of Maluku, including Tual, the Kei Islands, and Southeast Maluku, continuing until March 2000. Religious segregation

became increasingly rigid. Only Wayame Village remained a mixed community in which Muslims and Christians continued to live together, albeit under constant fear. Refugee settlements expanded dramatically, reaching 119 locations for Muslim refugees and 123 for Christian refugees. During this period, communities also organized armed militias equipped with both homemade and factory-produced firearms and ammunition. Militia groups included the children's Agas Force, the youth Linggis Force, and adult organizations such as Laskar Jihad and Laskar Kristus (Arvanti et al., 2024; Irfan, 2022; Margawati, 2000).

The next phase, extending from late December 1999 to mid-January 2000, was characterized by renewed escalation. Tensions increased during the Muslim fasting period and spread throughout Ambon, Seram, and Buru Islands. The situation deteriorated further during the official visit of the President and Vice President of Indonesia to Ambon at the end of December 1999. Violent clashes resumed in the Batu Merah–Mardika area before spreading to Masohi (Seram), Namlea (Buru), Haruku, and Saparua. The number of internally displaced persons continued to increase, placing enormous pressure on refugee camps throughout Ambon. Phase IV (February–April 2000) was marked by the growing involvement of external actors. Jihadist groups based in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and Bogor entered Ambon, intensifying fears among both Muslim and Christian communities. The conflict increasingly came under the influence of outside groups rather than local actors. Their intervention prolonged and intensified the violence across several parts of Ambon (Ade et al., 2024; Margawati, 2000; Pariella et al., 2023). Despite these developments, peace initiatives continued. The Government of Indonesia, the Provincial Government of Maluku, and members of the international community all contributed to reconciliation efforts. These initiatives included the National Reconciliation Team in Jakarta, mediation efforts initiated by the Dutch Government, peace initiatives supported by the British Government through the United Nations, and the Surya Bhaskara Jaya (SBJ) reconciliation program conducted aboard an Indonesian Navy vessel (Ansori et al., 2014).

Beginning in 2003, security conditions in Maluku gradually improved. Public awareness grew that powerful political interests had exploited communal vulnerabilities for their own purposes. Many came to believe that certain elite groups had manipulated existing social divisions to advance their political agendas. The collapse of Indonesia's New Order regime during the Reformasi period has likewise been identified as one of the structural factors contributing to the conflict. According to this interpretation, elements associated with the declining New Order sought to preserve or reassert their political legitimacy by fostering instability (Ade et al., 2024; Margawati, 2000).

Although large-scale violence eventually ceased, the conflict left a lasting legacy of religious segregation. Many communities continue to reside in neighborhoods largely defined by religious affiliation. Such segregation remains one of the principal challenges facing post-conflict Maluku, as people generally perceive greater security within religiously homogeneous communities. In response, the Provincial Government of Maluku has implemented various reconciliation and recovery programs, including the development of new mixed residential settlements designed to reduce segregation, psychological counseling to address trauma, assistance for children affected by the conflict, initiatives promoting social harmony, and educational programs emphasizing

fraternity based on local cultural traditions, particularly the Pela-Gandong tradition. Religious leaders have likewise continued to promote messages of love, peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Rahawarin, 2024). These reconciliation initiatives were incorporated into the Medium-Term Regional Development Plans (RPJM) of Ambon City for 2006–2011 and 2011–2016, and were further institutionalized in the Long-Term Regional Development Plan (RPJP) of Ambon City for 2006–2026 (Ansori et al., 2014).

The “Safety Valve”: Dialogue, Love, and Forgiveness

Maluku society is inherently multicultural. The province’s rich diversity of ethnic groups, cultures, and religions constitutes one of its greatest social assets. The solidarity demonstrated through indigenous traditions such as *Pela-Gandong*, *Larvul Ngabal*, *Duan-Lolat*, *Kai-Wait*, and *Ursiw-Urlima* reflects the deeply rooted spirit of social integration that characterizes the people of Maluku. These customary institutions serve as social bonds that unite communities despite differences in ethnicity, locality, and religion (Hasudungan et al., 2020; Rahawarin, 2024; Shofiyah & Cangara, 2023). Nevertheless, such diversity also creates the potential for conflict. Whenever inequalities emerge in access to economic, political, or social resources, communal conflict may arise. Conflict resulting from these imbalances may develop naturally, but it can also be deliberately structured. From a sociological perspective, conflicts are frequently engineered rather than spontaneous. Unequal access to resources often reflects the interests of particular groups seeking to monopolize wealth and power, allowing only a small elite to benefit while excluding the broader community. In some cases, conflict itself is intentionally fostered to preserve elite political and economic interests.

Maluku’s multiculturalism is therefore both a source of pride and a potential source of conflict. Diversity enriches society, yet it can also become a catalyst for communal violence when manipulated. The communal conflict that erupted in Maluku in 1999 clearly demonstrated how social differences could be exploited for destructive purposes. The underlying causes of the conflict reflected both realistic and non-realistic forms of conflict, as conceptualized by Lewis Coser (Wahyudi, 2021; Musahwi & Pitriyani, 2022; Nadilla Aleyda Maqhfira Agustin et al., 2023). Social, economic, and political inequalities generated realistic conflict. At the time, strategic positions within government bureaucracy and higher education institutions were concentrated in the hands of certain groups. Political competition during the national elections, separatist movements associated with the Republic of South Maluku (RMS), and growing resentment among indigenous Maluku communities toward migrants from Buton, Bugis, and Makassar, who were perceived to dominate the regional economy, further intensified social tensions. These realistic conflicts escalated into non-realistic conflicts when they became intertwined with religious sentiments (Ade et al., 2024; Irfan, 2022; Margawati, 2000). Once social, political, and economic grievances became associated with sacred religious values, the intensity of the conflict increased significantly. Religious beliefs profoundly shape people’s worldviews and therefore became powerful instruments for mobilizing communal emotions (Wierstra et al., 2025).

Although the Maluku conflict became widely known as the Acang–Obet conflict or simply as a religious conflict between Muslims and Christians, religion itself was not its primary cause. The people of Maluku have traditionally held religious values in high regard, and religion has long been deeply integrated into their cultural identity.

Consequently, conflicts rooted in economic, political, or social grievances became far more destructive when framed in religious terms.

The intensity of the conflict gradually declined around 2003. Although isolated clashes continued thereafter, they no longer escalated into widespread communal violence. One reason why post-conflict recovery required a prolonged period was the persistence of religious segregation (Ansori et al., 2014), together with the weakening of public confidence in existing “safety valves.” Maluku possesses important traditional mechanisms for conflict management, including the *Pela-Gandong* tradition and close cooperation among customary leaders, religious leaders, and government officials. During the conflict, however, political provocation by elite groups and the polarization of social identities significantly weakened these traditional mechanisms (Ansori et al., 2014; Ade et al., 2024; Margawati, 2000). Nevertheless, these safety valves never disappeared entirely. Public confidence in *Pela-Gandong* and in customary and religious leaders remained remarkably resilient. Ironically, attempts to undermine these institutions ultimately strengthened public awareness of a shared Malukan identity grounded in solidarity, customary traditions, and respect for traditional and religious authorities.

Consistent with Coser’s theory, conflict strengthened collective identity (Wahyudi, 2021; Musahwi & Pitriyani, 2022). Indigenous Maluku communities (the in-group) increasingly understood themselves as *orang basudara*—people united as one family through the tradition of *Pela-Gandong*, which is rooted in customary legal systems such as *Larvul Ngabal* and *Duan-Lolat*. The conflict ultimately reinforced *Pela-Gandong* relationships among villages throughout Maluku. It also fostered a renewed awareness that, despite religious differences, all Malukans originate from the same *gandong*, or common womb. As a result, a new socio-religious identity emerged, emphasizing the inseparable relationship between cultural identity and religious affiliation. Expressions such as Kei Muslim, Islamic Tanimbar, Protestant Tanimbar, Catholic Tanimbar, Ambonese Protestant, Ambonese Muslim, Dobo Protestant, and Dobo Muslim illustrate this socio-religious identity.

The conflict also fostered greater social maturity among the people of Maluku. Having experienced the devastating consequences of communal violence firsthand, communities became more cautious and less susceptible to provocations involving ethnic or religious sentiments. At the same time, the conflict enhanced the legitimacy and authority of customary and religious leaders. Before the conflict, maintaining social stability was widely perceived as the responsibility of government institutions and the military. The conflict, however, demonstrated the strategic importance of customary and religious leaders in promoting dialogue and reconciliation. These leaders became enduring symbols of peace and social harmony. Consequently, they now play active roles in regional development planning, while government policies increasingly incorporate customary institutions and religious values because of their recognized social significance (Arvanti et al., 2024; Hasudungan et al., 2020; Margawati, 2000). Government authorities have likewise become more responsive to potential conflicts, regularly implementing conflict mitigation measures to prevent renewed violence.

One of the most visible legacies of the conflict remains religious segregation. Traumatic memories of violence have encouraged many communities to continue

residing within neighborhoods dominated by members of their own religious group. Residential areas in Ambon have consequently become increasingly homogeneous, with clear territorial boundaries reflecting religious identity. Although the government has developed several heterogeneous housing projects to promote social integration, many residents continue to experience feelings of insecurity when living among members of different religious communities (Ansori et al., 2014). This reality demonstrates that while open violence has ended, reconciliation remains an ongoing process requiring sustained commitment.

Reconciliation cannot be achieved solely through dialogue conducted at negotiating tables. Rather, it must reach the deepest dimensions of the human person and embrace every aspect of social life (Callizo et al., 2026; Schliesser, 2022; Worthington et al., 2018). Dialogue and other forms of safety valves are indispensable, yet reconciliation is not merely a collective endeavor—it is also a profoundly personal one. Effective reconciliation must therefore address individuals' emotional and spiritual wounds. It is not simply a matter of clinical techniques, but rather an interpersonal process that touches the human heart (Segal, 2025). Within this context, love and forgiveness become indispensable complements to institutional peacebuilding efforts. A moral approach to reconciliation transforms peace from a merely collective achievement into a deeply personal experience. Forgiveness that begins within individuals provides the moral energy necessary for lasting post-conflict reconciliation. Since forgiveness is fundamentally connected with personal emotions and conscience, collective reconciliation must be accompanied by inner reconciliation, in which every individual is willing to love and forgive those who have caused harm (Fratelli Tutti, nos. 236–270; Neonnub & Kosat, 2026; Ngara, 2025; Pabubung & Harsono, 2024).

Love constitutes the essential foundation of reconciliation. Every person is called to love others, including those who have caused suffering. To love means accepting the imperfections and weaknesses of others. Genuine love must therefore be accompanied by forgiveness (Iwamony, 2020; Turza et al., 2026; Worthington et al., 2018). According to Pope Francis, forgiveness requires transparent, sincere, and patient dialogue and negotiation. Forgiveness need not depend upon collective or social forgiveness but begins with personal forgiveness (Fratelli Tutti, no. 244). Reconciliation is fundamentally a personal act born from individual reflection, offered freely and generously without coercion. Remembering the past serves as an important warning for future generations regarding the destructive consequences of conflict while strengthening moral resilience against future violence. Honest remembrance is preferable to superficial forgiveness that ignores historical truth. Acknowledging past injustices, while simultaneously extending forgiveness, enables societies to reconstruct a more just social order free from destructive cycles of violence (Fratelli Tutti, nos. 236–270).

Pope Francis further emphasizes that justice must always be pursued for its own intrinsic value, out of respect for victims, to prevent future crimes, and to protect the common good—not as an outlet for anger. Forgiveness and justice are therefore complementary rather than contradictory. One may forgive while continuing to pursue justice, without becoming trapped in cycles of hatred or revenge. Retaliation through war does not produce isolated destruction; instead, it destroys society piece by piece (Fratelli Tutti, no. 259). These successive acts of destruction ultimately accumulate into catastrophic devastation. War and revenge therefore represent failures of both politics

and humanity, symbolizing the defeat of goodness before evil intentions.

Finally, religion occupies a central position in providing the ethical and moral foundation for reconciliation. Love and forgiveness are fundamental values shared by all religious traditions. Consequently, religion—and particularly religious leaders—should function as spaces for dialogue, promoters of forgiveness, and agents of justice and healing rather than instigators of conflict (Jamir, 2024).

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between Lewis Coser's concept of the *safety valve* and Pope Francis' theology of reconciliation and to examine their relevance for conflict resolution in post-conflict Maluku. The analysis demonstrates that sustainable conflict resolution cannot rely solely on institutional mechanisms for managing social tensions or exclusively on moral appeals for reconciliation. Rather, lasting peace requires the integration of structural and moral dimensions of conflict transformation. In the context of Maluku, indigenous traditions such as *Pela-Gandong*, together with dialogue and the leadership of customary and religious authorities, function as effective *safety valves* that prevent the escalation of conflict and facilitate social reconciliation. Nevertheless, these mechanisms alone are insufficient to heal the emotional and spiritual wounds left by communal violence. Genuine reconciliation also requires personal transformation through love, forgiveness, and justice, as emphasized by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*. The findings further indicate that Lewis Coser's conflict theory and Pope Francis' theology of reconciliation are complementary rather than competing approaches to conflict resolution. Coser's theory explains how institutional and social mechanisms channel conflict constructively, whereas Pope Francis provides the ethical and spiritual foundations necessary for restoring broken relationships and preventing the recurrence of violence. The integration of these perspectives constitutes the principal contribution of this study by proposing a socio-religious conceptual framework in which institutional conflict management and moral reconciliation operate as interconnected dimensions of sustainable peacebuilding. The case of post-conflict Maluku illustrates that the restoration of social harmony depends not only on dialogue and political agreements but also on the willingness of individuals and communities to cultivate fraternity, forgiveness, and justice. Although this study is grounded in the post-conflict experience of Maluku, the proposed conceptual framework has broader relevance for multicultural societies facing identity-based and communal conflicts. By integrating sociological and theological perspectives, this study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on conflict resolution and peacebuilding while offering an analytical framework that may inform future peace initiatives in similarly diverse contexts. As a conceptual study based on library research, however, its findings remain theoretical in nature. Future research is therefore encouraged to examine the applicability of this framework through empirical studies in Maluku and other post-conflict societies to evaluate its practical effectiveness and contextual adaptability.

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