Interfaith Dialogue Beyond Conflicts

A Muslim Point of View

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Introduction

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world and demographically is the fourth most populous country after China, India and the United States, with 224 million people inhabiting an archipelago of 17,112 islands. Currently, more than 200 million Muslims live in Indonesia. They constitute 84 percent of the country's total population and 13 percent of all Muslims worldwide. However, despite the predominance of one single religion, Indonesia is essentially a multicultural society. Spread throughout the archipelago are more than 214 ethnic groups speaking distinct local languages. Among the 35 million Indonesians who are not Muslim. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism as well as various local indigenous religions are commonly practiced.

Indonesia protects all believers of religions as stated in its Constitution 1945. Such condition came up because the founding fathers of Indonesia – they were prominent Muslims and Christians – did not choose religion as the foundation of the state. Rather, they chose *Pancasila* as state philosophical foundation and at the same time as the guideline in establishing the state's political power. Certainly, such a choice was not made without reason nor was an easy thing to do.

The historical record has displayed and born witness to the fact that the debate of Indonesian founding fathers had torn the group into two severely opposing poles: the nationalists and the Islamists. It was aggravatingly bitter and tough. The former advocated *Pancasila* (adherence to a constitution and statement of national ideals which will be detailed later); the latter wanted Indonesia to be based on the Islamic Ideology. Such heated debate occurred in meetings prior to or in the wake of the Independence Proclamation, especially in the sessions held in the Parliament in the 1945.

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Historical background of Islam and Christianity

Islam and Christianity are not the native religion of Indonesian people. In fact, both religions came from outside Indonesia. Islam is always understood as Arabic religion or East religion; meanwhile Christianity is considered as European religion or Western religion. This misuse understanding brings to prejudice.

Islam came to Indonesia in the 13th century and was spread by traders and preachers who disseminated Islamic teachings throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The key to the success of Islamic propagation in the archipelago was not conquest. That is a fact. Rather, it was the ability of Islamic preachers to adopt a cultural approach to the local traditions, beliefs and wisdom which had been dominated by Hinduism and Buddhism prior to the coming of Islam.

Instead of forcing *sharia* (Islamic law) on the community, the preachers of Islam who became well known as nine saints (especially in Java), developed a cultural Islamic approach by accommodating certain aspects of local traditions, beliefs and wisdom. As a result, there was a process of indigenization of Islam in Indonesia. Throughout the history of Indonesia, Muslims were able to develop mutual respect, understanding and tolerance of others. It is obvious that the development of Islam in Indonesia is very different compared to that of Islam in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Christianity came to Indonesia in the 16th century with colonialism, especially, Dutch colonialism and Portuguese colonialism. The population of Christianity in Indonesia now is approximately 24 million people. The close association of Christianity with Western imperialism and colonialism has made many Muslims always consider Christians as colonialism.

In fact, despite the association of Christianity with colonialism, Indonesians Christians tend to be very nationalistic. Most Indonesians Christians enthusiastically joined in the struggle for independence. It is very important to note that every general election, the Catholic Council of Bishops and the Indonesian National Council of Churches have jointly issued a political statement.

Often, joint statements such as these begin by praising God for the Indonesian nation-state and thanking God for accompanying the Indonesian people in their struggle to realize the ideals of 1945 constitution of Indonesia; namely national sovereignty, justice, prosperity and peace. The statement will then usually state that all Indonesian Christians are called by God to participate in the national elections to choose leaders who are committed to *Pancasila*, the constitution and the national ideals.

Our task as lovers of peace is to help people realize that Islam and Christianity are two religions which carry the universal message of peace, freedom and salvation. Both are present in society, interacting with people all over the world, conveying a new morality for social transformation. Islam and Christianity are a moral force because of their transcendent and humanistic character. Islam and Christianity not only present beliefs in a vertical aspect (between humanity and God), but also carry teachings which contain horizontal aspects (among human beings). So, both religions respect humanity.

How to understand Islam in Indonesia?

While many people commonly speak of Islam and Muslims in all-encompassing terms, there are many interpretations of Islam and many varieties of Muslims. Muslims come from diverse nationalities, ethnic and tribal groups, and cultures, speak many languages and practice distinct customs. The majority of the world's Muslims live in Asia, particularly in Indonesia, not the Arab world. Only about one in five of the world's Muslims are Arabs. The largest Muslim communities are in Asia, including Indonesia. And millions of Muslims live in the US and Europe, where they represent the second or third largest religion in many of these countries.

Because of globalization and emigration, today the major cities where Muslims live are not only exotic-sounding places such as Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, and Mecca but also London, Paris, New York and Milan. Religiously, culturally, economically, and politically, there are multiple images and realities of Islam and of Muslims[2].

Muslim women's dress, educational, professional opportunities and participation in society vary significantly, too. Women in some Muslim societies cannot drive cars, and are sexually segregated, but in many other parts of the Muslim world, such as Indonesia, they can drive cars, ride motorcycles, and even fly planes. Some Muslim women are required by law to cover fully in public, while others are not. A growing number of women are choosing to cover their heads, while others do not.

In Indonesia, Muslim women make up the majority of university students. Indonesian Muslims are convinced that gender equality and women empowerment are consistent with Islamic values[3]. In other parts of the world, Muslim women lag behind men in matters such as

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[2] John L. Esposito - Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, Gallup Press, New York 2007, p. 2.

[3] Musdah Mulia, *Muslimah Sejati*, Nuansa Cendekia, Bandung 2011, pp. 21-57. See also Musdah Mulia, *Muslimah Reformis*, Mizan, Bandung 2004, pp. 273-291.

basic literacy. In Indonesia, Muslim women serve in government and parliaments, and even have headed government to be a president, while in other Muslim countries women still struggling for the right to vote and hold office.

The religious commitment of the founding fathers

As stated, Indonesia is a unique case; despite the fact that the majority of Indonesians are Muslims, Indonesia is not an Islamic state. Indonesia's state ideology is not Islam, but is based on *Pancasila, known as the* "Five Principles": belief in God, a just and civilized humanism, the unity of Indonesia, people's power, and social justice. These five principles are compatible with the universal values of human rights; they are also conducive to building peace within the community.

The choice of Pancasila as the philosophical foundation on which the nation and state are based, witnesses the victory of nationalistic, but moderate Muslims and Christians in Indonesia. This fact is also seen in key figures in the Muslim and Christian communities who have taken into account the importance of maintaining pluralistic and democratic value in shared life as nation in Indonesia.

This fact of pluralism will always be manifested and may not be negated in the life of the state and nation. Also, the active roles played by both Christian and Muslim leading figures, especially those of the founding fathers in embodying peaceful, tranquil, inclusive, and pluralistic respecting Indonesia will always be kept in mind and disseminated. These two ideas are of considerable usefulness and can serve as the inspiration-generator for the efforts to foster peace, justice, and humanity in Indonesia.

Pancasila as the common ground in overcoming prejudice

The founding fathers prepared the Indonesian constitution based on *Pancasila.* This constitution has been amended four times, yet the regulation concerning religion as stipulated in Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution has remained the same. The article holds these important concepts:

1. The state is based on the Belief in One Supreme God;
2. The State guarantees the freedom of each of its citizen to embrace their respective religion and to perform religious duties in accordance with their respective religion and belief.

The provision of the article expressly indicates that Indonesia state comprehensively guarantees the religious freedom of its citizens.

What is worth underlining here is that both eminent leaders of Indonesian Christians and Muslims hold forth an inclusive, moderate, and tolerant disposition. They believe in the importance of maintaining harmonious togetherness as a nation; the significance of upholding human dignity and esteem regardless differences of religion; and the importance of supporting basic human rights, especially those of religious freedom for all inhabitants, including minority and vulnerable groups.

The endeavors made by both the Christian and Muslim communities to establish strong and solid civil society by upholding democracy, reinforcing human rights and promoting justice (including gender justice), have become more apparent. The strong indication towards this tendency was made clear by the advent of a number of legislations and public policies, such as Act Number 39 of 1999 on Human Rights. As far as religious life is concerned, this Act (in Article 22) lays down the following:

1. Every individual has a free choice for embracing his or her own religion and belief and for performing his or her duties in compliance with the religion or belief adhered to.
2. The state guarantees followers of any religion or belief with freedom to observe and perform religious duties in accordance with his or her religion or belief.

In addition, the commitment upheld by Indonesia has become stronger by the birth of Act Number 12 in 2005 on the Ratification of International Covenants concerning civil-political rights stipulated therein the assertion of freedom of advocating any belief.

The problem of Law enforcement

At the level of policy and legislation, the guarantee granted by the state for freedom of advocating any belief in Indonesia is sufficiently adequate. The problem lies in the practical level of law enforcement. Law enforcement on all policies is, to a considerable extent, influenced by the socio-political situation and condition of the government within a given period of time. Should the central government adopt strong and firm measures in the application of laws, then the implementation on all public policies will go as desired. On the other hand, if the central government adopts a weak and inconsistent manner, the implementation of various laws will meet with barriers and handicaps.

In addition, other matters in Indonesia which have often hampered the enforcement of democracy, fulfilment of human rights, and promotion of peace and justice have been related to the current economic

and political gaps. The failure of the government in providing for social welfare and improving the intellectual life of the nation is the reason for certain Islamist groups resorting to destructive acts of vandalism. The community's desperate poverty and ignorance have often been exploited by certain groups for the pursuit of their own political and economic interests. That is terrible.

It is this unfortunate condition that is alleged to have given birth to radical Muslim groups. The advent of radical Muslims is much influenced by a wide variety of factors; among others, by the failure of the government to advance the welfare of the society, especially in the development of public services, such as education and health. In the mind of this radical group, the best and most appropriate solution to solve the prevailing problem is to bring an Islamic state into reality. They consider establishing an Islamic state as the only and most appropriate solution, which they believe will bring the nation towards a better situation.

A number of conflicts related to religion and acts of violence in Indonesia are, in essence, not theological in nature. Rather, they are economic and political in character. To put it more bluntly, those conflicts are the reflection of widespread discontent and negative reactions demonstrated by members of a lower strata of society towards the social division and economic-political marginalization looming large ahead of them. From a religious perspective, this condition is right. Why? Are not the biggest enemies of religion injustice exemplified in the form of poverty, ignorance, and narrow mindedness?

All religious traditions in one way or another speak to the reality of having an aim of providing solutions to various humanitarian problems. Those seen as religious foes and enemies are often thought to be expendable so as not to bring about disasters of greater magnitude and multitude in the life of society. Poverty and ignorance have made it easier to bring the less fortunate and underprivileged members of society away from religion. A communitys poverty and ignorance incline its people to be easy prey for certain groups who will take advantage of them. Religious communities are often divided and exploited in such a way that they may end up fighting with one another. Thus, inter-religious conflicts will arise accordingly.

The role of Islamic and Christian organizations in overcoming prejudice

Every religion, no matter which it is, has four dimensions: spiritual, ritual, social, and humanist. Concerning the first dimension, spirituality is the relationship between an individual and God. Spirituality is also very private and cannot be interfered with by others. The ritual

dimension usually has two aspects. First, it is concerned with the relationship between the individual and God, and secondly, it is to develop a refined personality through noble acts. So there are worldly and spiritual elements. Regarding the social dimension, every religion consists of the same subject matter, but differs in the strategy and form used in promoting this subject matter.

All religions desire a peaceful, safe, prosperous, and equitable society. It is only the strategy to achieve this prosperity which is different. So between spirituality and rituals, a healthy and synergetic social element must be forged. This is like a pyramid structure. If healthy and synergetic social relations are not established, what is left is like a pyramid turned on its head. All religions are similar with regard to the human issues such as peace, justice, honesty, compassion, and other key values.

An interesting phenomenon from both Christian and Muslim religious communities in Indonesia is the presence of progressive or reformist groups. The groups come from the Islamic and Christian organisations, such as PGI (the Indonesian National Council of Churches), KWI (the Catholic Council of Bishops), NU and Muhammadiyah (the two big Islamic organisations in Indonesia). Besides that, there are many religious Muslim and Christian NGOs which voice the importance of peace, democracy, and human rights on behalf of religion of Churches), KWI (the Catholic Council of Bishops), NU and Muhammadiyah (the two big Islamic organisations in Indonesia). Besides that, there are many religious Muslim and Christian NGO's, which advocate on the importance of peace, democracy, and human rights on behalf of religious and humanistic values.

The most prestigious thing progressive Muslims and Christians have done is an effort to reinterpret religious teachings, despite the fact that the attempts of these groups have often received much opposition and resistance from radical groups or the groups maintaining a conservative religious mindset that very often make no accommodation to the reality of plurality and modernity in Indonesia.

In many cases, ICRP, an association of religious leaders of all religions and beliefs in Indonesia, which is actively involved in promoting religion for peace, demands that the government eliminate all regulations and public policies which are discriminatory against minority groups and cause ignorance of the civil rights of the citizen. Christian and Muslim prominent figures in ICRP always promote observance of civil rights for all citizens and observance of human rights, without taking account of religion, ethnicity, nationality or gender differences.

The endeavour to promote peace in the perspective of gender equality is put as the priority to be carried out by Indonesian Muslim and Christian women. They are, amongst others, associated in Islamic

Women's organisations and NGOs, such as Fatayat NU, Muslimat NU, Mitra Perempuan, Perempuan PGI, Rahima, Puan Amal Hayati and Nasyiatul Aisyiyah. These organisations actively carry out training and advocacy for people, especially women. These institutions also train their cadres to develop women activists and thinkers who are progressive, inclusive and highlighted. There are also numerous Christian and Muslim women activists and intellectuals who are actively voicing democracy and gender equality in the bureaucratic state institutions and parliaments.

Promoting interfaith dialogue: developing culture of peace

In my experience, promoting interfaith dialogue must begin from the principle of acceptance of others. For me, this principle of acceptance of others is very important in promoting interfaith dialogue and must be instilled in society regardless of religion, ethnicity and race. Because of that, several steps need to be taken, among others:

- *First*, to reinterpret the religious teachings which are incompatible with the principles of humanity. Worship is no longer understood as only to praise God, but also as having a profound concern for humanity's problems. Here, when possible, religion is seen as a locomotive to free human beings from tyranny and all forms of discrimination, exploitation and oppression.
- *Second*, to increase a moderate religious understanding. The moderate groups in every religion must disseminate a "humanist outlook". It is done in order to give a different perspective on religion which facilitates tolerance and dialogue.

The forms of dialogue show not only the variety of content and the scope of the dialogues but also the quality. Besides this, the participants involved in the dialogues often exhibit different views to the goals of the dialogues. Those involved in dialogues about social issues, for example, have certainly not yet been ready to enter into a spiritual dialogue.

Therefore, interfaith dialogues are an attempt to overcome all forms of prejudice in religious society. Dialogue participants believe that up to a certain point, faith can be discussed by human beings, among human beings and communicated by language. In short, faith is dialogical. Faith is a dialogue first between God and human beings, and second among human beings.

In this context, I do believe that interfaith dialogue is not only possible, but also necessary to engender an appropriate understanding of other religions. Through dialogue, each side understands the problems

faced by other religions and so there emerges a feeling of sympathy and empathy which motivates a desire to work together and to overcome their problems.

In the context of the international society, the term 'culture of peace' has been echoed since 1997. In that year, the United Nations declared the Year 2000 as the "International Year of Peace", and declared that the years 2001-2010 should be "The International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World". So the culture of peace is the integrated approach to prevent violent conflicts which in time will bring and maintain peace. Through the culture of peace, acts of violence can be reduced in order to establish peace between human beings and their surroundings.

In the context of developing a culture of peace, one of the basic points to be considered is how religious communities can take active roles in building platforms for peace and tolerance. The values of universal peace and tolerance, taught in all religions, have the potential to enlighten leaders and lead followers of religions in establishing an everlasting peace, each in their own surroundings.

The problem which has to be considered is the fact that the relationship between people with different religious backgrounds is not always peaceful. Conflicts and violence related to religions can occur anywhere, including in Indonesia. Yet, it is important to note that conflicts between religions are not supported by any religion, but rather as an impact of religious identity mobilisation in the struggle between groups of people, including those who are speaking on behalf of a certain religion, in fighting for justice or in a struggle to win resources and power.

There are many forms of interfaith dialogue that can be carried out by multi-faith communities. I propose a form of dialogue in action where the actions of supporters of interfaith ideologies are used to transform the community to become a more just and humanitarian society[4]. In other words, enlightenment and transformation at a personal level is not enough. Dialogue participants have to make social transformations and this transformation must be carried out across all religions.

Therefore, we can still rely on religious communities as a vehicle to govern one's individual spiritual relationship with God and social relationship with other people and to use them as a force for transformation for individuals and communities in order to gain common progress in all aspects of life, including peace, justice and welfare.

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[4] B.J. Banawiratma, S.J., *Bersama Saudara-Saudari Beriman Lain* (*Together With Brother and Sister in Faith*), *Dialog: Kritik dan Identitas Agama* (*Dialog: Criticism and Religious Identity*), Yogyakarta: Dian/Interfidei, 1993, pp. 26-27.

The development of a culture of peace will only be effective if it is carried out basically in the framework of achieving peace and welfare in the future. Therefore, one of the strategic factors to which we must pay close attention is how the future generation, especially the children, can understand and apply the culture of peace in their lives.

The development of the culture of peace in children is closely related to the educational activities in which they engage in their home, school, and society. So far, education in many countries still indicates some difficulties in assisting students to become whole human beings. There are many factors involved; amongst others are weak educational infrastructure (funds, human resources, curricula, etc.), and overemphasis on cognitive ability while overlooking the impact of the culture of violence which is still strong in our everyday life.

Developing the Culture of Peace through Religious Education

One of the ways to develop the culture of peace is to engineer an educational system that will underpin dialogue between religions. So far, religious education taught in some schools tends to be more dogmatic and focused on rituals. Such education in religion develops a sense of absolute truth, which can not only result in denial of other religions but a deficient understanding of the religion itself.

This approach to educating about religion in school underlines a literal and formalist comprehension. Such an approach may cause the followers to be unable to think and act critically and with appreciation towards their religion as well as those of others. Therefore, it is not surprising that in some religions in various countries, religious differences have resulted in an inability to work together to create a social world that is comfortable for everyone.

So far an appreciation of the plurality of religions has developed well among religious elites in many countries, including in Indonesia, because they have developed a tradition of dialogue and used a phenomenological approach in viewing other religions. The dialogue tradition should enable each believer of a religious tradition to act openly and develop communication with other groups. This is in contrast to the phenomenological approach, which would enable followers of a religion to understand other religions from the viewpoint of the religion concerned. Such an approach will annihilate the sense of certain religious egoism which judges other religions by their own viewpoint.

Right now, the problem is how to encourage such religious attitudes for the public so that an open attitude respecting other religions can be developed not only between elites but for everyone. Our need is to discern how to develop a pluralistic attitude as a common and accepted

one in society so that we can create a harmonious relationship bringing peace to different groups of people. In a broader sense, pluralism also means respecting other groups with their various differences in terms of religion, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, and social status.

Strategically, such education in the plurality of religion must cover the following activities:

- *Pedagogical activity*, where a curriculum for plurality education will be researched, engineered and implemented.
- *Dissemination activity*, where a program of education in religious pluralism will be communicated to stakeholders of education and wider society.
- *Research and development activity,* where the dynamic response by society toward violence, including relationship between religions, can be identified systematically and used for program development.
- *Policy advisory activity*, where we shall give effort to make change in policies in different levels of society towards the reinforcement of plurality in religion, which in the end shall bring peace, justice and welfare for all of God's creation.

In conclusion, it should be noted that education for peace is one of the key ways to develop the culture of peace in promoting inter-faith dialogue. Such educational programmes for pluralism in religion must be developed in respect of the fact that current educational systems for religion taught in schools is ideological, absolutistic and formalist.

Finally, the tradition to develop a dialogue between religions and to take a phenomenological approach in viewing other religions must be intensified. Why? Because it will enable each religious person to act openly and to develop communication with other groups and helps them to understand constructively about other religions. Educational programs for pluralism in religion will also intensify our appreciation of differences of religion, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, social status and other differences that we find in our everyday lives.

Recommendations and solutions

It can be concluded that Indonesia is unique. Indonesian Christian and Muslim communities are intensely influenced by local culture which is tolerant, open and inclusive, as well as respecting humanity. The Indonesian Muslim community is different to those of other areas, especially the Middle East. The Indonesian Muslim community has a long experience of living together – side by side – with people with

different religions. The founding fathers of this country respected humanity and were active in efforts to overcome prejudice and campaign for justice and peace.

Now, what should be done by all Muslims and Christians as their important contribution to the civilization of peace? I propose three concrete actions as follows:

- *First*, Muslims and Christians must work together to continue the efforts of cultural reconstruction through education in its widest sense, particularly, education in family life. These efforts are needed to be implemented because a culture of peace, respect, tolerance and inclusivity cannot emerge naturally and spontaneously in society. It must instead be arranged in such a way through the education system. Why is it important? To reduce prejudice in society, children must be taught to embrace multiculturalism. A few researchers found that prejudice and bias are often learned in childhood. So education is a means to a harmonious multicultural society. Multicultural education can shield people from the negative effects of globalisation. Multicultural education promotes the universal values of religion which teach peace and justice, and promote human dignity. I believe that the implementation of multicultural education will be very useful for a diverse country like Indonesia.
- *Second*, Muslims and Christians must work together to continue the efforts of law reform. We have to reform some laws and public policies which are not conducive to the establishment of peace and justice as well as the upholding of human rights.
- *Third*, Muslims and Christians work together to continue efforts for the renewal of religious interpretation. Current interpretation, as widely practised in the Muslim community, is not at all compatible with the principles of human rights, particularly women's rights and gender equality. So we have to propose a new interpretation of religion which is more conducive to promoting peace and justice, and upholding human rights. It is this type of interpretation which will lead us to eliminate all forms of prejudice, hatred and violence.

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