

‘Harmonious’ Coexistence and Mutual Ignorance: Exclusivity in Religious Education in Indonesia

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Abstract

Religious education and national interest often interrelate that its long process leads to an unpredicted outcome or side effects in the future. This paper seeks to analyse the unawareness between religious denominations, particularly Muslims and Christians in Indonesia which may be resulted by the religious education programmes and state policy involvement. A variety of literary sources is used to support the argument that religious harmony in Indonesia is not based on people's self open-mindedness but more on the state authority's strategy to advocate stability and coexistence between religions. Finally, it is suggested that the tolerance between religious communities should be motivated instead by a process of learning and acquiring knowledge of themselves and others by deepening their understanding of each and other's faith.

Keywords : Religious education, Indonesia, Religious harmony

A. Introduction

Education and state has been closely linked by many scholars and this issue brings a great number of debates about the state's significant role in influencing education. In many cases states have managed to control and shape peoples' worldviews. Religious education is also one of the fields which is adjustable to the need of the people and for in the interest of the state in particular. Indonesia as one of the most diverse nation in the world has been facing the dynamics of religious education scheme throughout the history and contemporary development. The slogan of the national ideology, which is Unity in Diversity, coined by the founding fathers particularly Sokearno, the first president, in August 1945, after claiming the independence from the Dutch colonisation, is already internalised in the people's mind. This ideology seems having to be formulated in order to be able to build one aim and vision for the stability and integrity of the country. However, ethnic and religion difference remains a critical issue and has always been the cause and still significantly potential for conflict to emerge within the society. Sometimes, this conflict is overlapping and is triggered by the series and escalation of sentiment of either one of both of these two elements. There are more than 300 ethnic groups and also five recognised religions which are of 88.2 percent Muslim, 5.9 percent Protestant, 3.1 percent

Roman Catholic, 1.8 percent Hindu, 0.8 percent Buddhist, and 0.2 percent others including indigenous religion and atheism which are out of state acknowledgment¹.

The religiosity of the country is also obvious and resembled in the national state's first five principles in Pancasila, 'Believing in One God'. Thus religion is an important aspect in the life of the nation and the religious study is almost compulsory in the formal and informal educations. Religious study is provided in all level of formal education from kindergarten to university and students can only take the class which is dealing with their religion. Since the role of religious education is influential in the way people perceive their beliefs and also in the way they see other religious believers, there are conflicts that are partly caused by this certain conception. The apparent conflict between religious denominations throughout the history and contemporary development has been mainly between Muslims and Christians. One might be wondering what is happening in the religious education in Indonesia in view of the fact that some conflicts between people are based on religious sentiment and which can even lead to violence and wider community quarrel and civil war. Thus the question raised in this paper is 'To what extent does the religious education in Indonesia promote religious harmony between different religions, particularly between Muslims and Christians?' and 'What are the roles of state in religious education in shaping the perceptions that lead to exclusivity and lack of open mindedness between the two group of religious believers. This paper will examine, using library research, the religious education in Indonesia generally and analyse its impact on the religious harmony in the society. The role of the state and society is analysed to understand the exclusivity and mutual ignorance that has led to long standing tension between these two groups.

B. Religious Education and The State

The state had been taking control strongly during the authoritarian regime of the New Order era (1966-1998) which had the interest of maintaining the state power and stability of the country through suppressing any discourse that can lead to potential conflicts of ethnic and religion. The government took this matter seriously and promoted the avoidance of any talk in public about any of these topics which are shortened in the famous acronym of SARA (Suku: ethnic, Agama: religion and Ras: race). This societal and political discourse also had been included in the civic education in all schools and universities.

¹ US Department of State. 2007. *International Religious Freedom Report* 2007. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90137.htm>

Meanwhile the religious concept in religious education was also transcended towards the identity of Indonesian Muslim and Christian with the Pancasila ideology as the civil principles. In general the purpose of this policy was to preserve the social stability and national integrity through the tolerance among religions. On the other hand, the New Order regime had used political instrument through education to suppress any student movement that might be opposed to the status quo of the ruler. The curricula, for example, 'were designed in accordance with government guidelines. The aim was to mould the consciousness of the students ensuring that they chose to work for rather than against the government'² (Nugroho, 2005: 150-151). As a result of this, students would inevitably went to the pragmatic approach in their study which is to pass the examinations, obtain the degree and get a job as soon as possible³.

The curriculum of education had been directed by the Soeharto's authoritarian regime since the early beginning of his government in 1968. Thus the standardisation of curricula was prevalently applied throughout the country with the assistance from the Ministry for Education and Culture in 1970 and the team was formed under the Directorate of Higher Education to build a system of education in several areas including religious study⁴. It was possible for the state to undertake any actions and set policy for religious education since it was legitimised in the Act of Number 4 year 1950 concerning the education and teaching⁵. The Act stated that 'Indonesia is a religion-based country. The government has the right and is obliged to arrange religious education starting from kindergarten to university and the time allocated for this is 2 (two) hours per week'⁶. Therefore, it was evident that state has a significant role in the shaping the religious education and instrumentalisation of this entity is not something impossible. As noted by Leirvik⁷ that mass education had allowed the nation building to be sustained through the mass national identity and its symbols and to transmit them to the whole society. Besides national cohesiveness which is achieved, it also leads to other effects of religious education on personal and societal levels as well national in the broadest scope.

Religious education is, in addition, not only involving state policy but also community authority which in this case is the religious leaders among the people. Leirvik⁸

² Nugroho 2005, pp.150-151

³ Ibid. p. 151

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ketut Tanu et al. 2008, p.1

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Oddbjørn Leirvik, 2004, p.223

⁸ Ibid. p.228

asserts that the preparation of curricula is worked on together by the Ministry of National Education and the representatives of religious communities. The religious education given in schools and universities are thus to some extent political and the interest inserted in it can be both from the political and societal level of interest. Students are thus indirectly imposed by certain ideology for the national interest and certain religious orthodoxy which to a great extent affect the whole overview of the religious life in Indonesia. The advantage again is national integrity and constructed religious harmony between different religious groups. The quality of religious coexistence, however, is not a guarantee of a sustainable harmony and good understanding between different religions since it is based on one exclusive religious point of view towards other beliefs which are more tolerated based on the national unity rather than based on religious belief itself. As a consequence, conflict between religious communities is still potential to occur by considering that at some points religious conviction can outweigh the national ideology and religious belief can be a drive as well to overpower the national identity.

C. Community Conflict

Although Indonesia is well-known as a tolerant nation where various religions exist together, especially Muslims and Christians, it, according to Magnis-Suseno SJ⁹ can also be misleading. There have been serious tension and conflict between Muslims and Christians especially in the eastern part of Indonesia. Muslims and Christians relation to some degree is the most critical in the history of religious life and community in Indonesia (Ibid.). However, if it is traced back, the relationship between Muslims and Christians, the causes of conflict have never been due to 'dogmatic intolerance' between the religious groups in Indonesia in general, including the 'easy-going' Muslims and the 'santri-Muslims', which are religiously intense and pious. He suggested that 'religious conflicts in Indonesia are not the result of principle dogmatic considerations, but of frictions between communities'¹⁰. And this is what happened in the eastern part of Indonesia and the rest where a friction leads to communal conflict and violence or even civil war as between Christians and Muslims mixed with the result of people's perception that associate religion with certain ethnic groups in Molukkas in Maluku Island and Poso in Sulawesi¹¹.

⁹ Magnis-Suseno SJ, 2006, p.27

¹⁰ Ibid. p.35

¹¹ Ibid. p.35

The conception of Muslims towards Christians and vice versa has been as well going through the deep historical events that coloured the world history and it seems to be difficult to erase this memory from people's mind. The hatred it may create also one of the defining factors of identifying self and others based on religious belief. Suspicions and prejudices, according to Magnis-Suseno SJ¹² also exist and people are living in 'a very difficult common history which became part of their collective identities. It is 'a history of crusades and colonialism, of Arab invasion and 300 years of the 'Turkish threat' to Christian Europe'. Thus, until now 'Muslims in Indonesia are suspicious about Christian intentions since Christianity came with the colonialists'. Christians also are suspicious that fundamentalist Muslims will try to take power in the country and will oppress them when they become rulers and limit their religious freedom¹³.

The concept of infidelity also play significant role in the tension between Muslims and Christians. Muslim students, no matter where they learn their religion, from school or from religious leaders, still have confusion about the idea of 'infidel' or 'kafir' or disbelievers which are stated quite frequently in the Quran and there are tenets which are tricky and can lead to a real conflict if they are just interpreted according to one single orthodoxy and without comprehensive understanding of what they really mean. It is considerably common that Muslims consider Christians as infidels and they will not enter paradise forever, thus they are not good or trustworthy brothers and sisters or friends in the social relationship. Similarly, Christians regard Muslims as misguided and astray because they have deviated from the Jesus teaching and have created a new religion brought by Muhammad. All of these conceptions indicate that tolerance taught in the religious study is not sufficient for the existence of good quality and sustainable harmony.

D. The impacts of the Religious Education

A self-centered type of religious study since the dictatorship era would still provide even more suspicion and tension between Muslims and Christians. Muslims consider Christians as infidel and vice versa but they live in tolerance with each other under the national unity ideology. Religious education was intended to encourage good morality, honesty and conformity and the hope was students would behave in ordered manner so that political stability can be maintained. According to Nugroho¹⁴, the irony of this kind of religious education was that 'education worked against the teachings, appreciation and

¹² Ibid. p.36

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Nugroho, 2005, p.151

practice of pluralism. As the teachings in this subject tended to be normative, students were placed in socially exclusive religious groups.' These normative teachings taught students about 'good' and 'evil' in respect with their own belief and the final result would be against religious harmony itself though they have the concept of tolerance towards different religions¹⁵. The thirty two years of the intensive national unity concept programme from 1966 until 1998, particularly the policy of religious education and the impacts on the society religious harmony, is now still relatively prevalent and affecting the later generation of the more open and democratic state and society. This is reflected in the newer curriculum of 2004 which says that religious education is to 'develop and enhance the faith of the students through providing and cultivating their knowledge, apprehension, performance, and experience on Islam'¹⁶. This national schema may cause students to be too focused on their own religion without sufficient knowledge of others.

The more spacious rooms available for freedom of expression after the reform in 1998 nonetheless should be a good opportunity to promote more comprehensive understanding and new approach in the religious education with open mindedness and engagement between different beliefs. Muslims and Christians should understand better where they have something in common and where they are principally different. This will encourage more appreciation and tolerance between them. Magnis-Suseno SJ¹⁷ argues that it is the responsibility of both formal and informal education institutions and also the religious leaders in the level of smaller communities. He says people should 'be convinced that religious tolerance is demanded by their own religions' and 'in the religious tolerance one can find exclusive and inclusive elements. Very often, because of psychological reasons, the exclusive ones are more popular and better known than the inclusive ones'. What is needed is 'deeper theological point of view', he added. This is all done to advance both the understanding of religion and faith and good quality of tolerance¹⁸.

E. Conclusion

The religious education in Indonesia particularly in high school and university levels to a great extent do not demonstrate a sense of engaging and understanding between these two major denominations. The relationship between Muslims and Christians are good

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ (Pusat Kurikulum 2003a, 8) in Muhammad Zuhdi, 2005, p.6

¹⁷ Magnis-Suseno SJ, 2006, p.37

¹⁸ Ibid.

only in the level of social daily routines and secular activities. Muslims and Christians consider each other's religion as alien and they have nothing in common at all. Each mutually regards the other as infidel and only that who embraces one of the religions is the believer and will enter paradise. This sense of infidelity is one of the causes that raise the tension between the Muslims-Christians relationship. Religious subjects in school are taught exclusively within their own discourse and context without opening any connection and meeting point to other religions.

Despite the fact that Islam came later after Christianity, no matter which Christianity it is, Islamic and Christian beliefs in fact share some common ideas though there are also principal differences. The ignorance of what other and how others believe will surely increase tension and hostility. They live together, spend time together, but talking about one's religion is a very sensitive issue and close to taboo which should be avoided as much as possible. They prefer not to talk about their different religions at all. This attitude is good in short term but not in long term relationship between them. This unawareness and alien perception, with the tolerance and harmony sustained by the ideology of 'Unity in Diversity', and though they are living together, will not provide solid stability and long term harmony because the principal conception of infidelity towards other and the suppressed fanaticism they have is like a radioactive buried under the sea and will explode at any time through small friction. If not as such at least there will always be hidden hatred and suspicion that is prone to wider tension and conflict between Muslims and Christians.

The generally well known Indonesian saying may denote and suggest a positive meaning for the Muslim-Christian relationship, *Tak kenal maka tak sayang*, which means 'there is no love unless after knowing well each other'. Better understanding of each one's belief will lead to appreciation of self and other and also, if they like, constructive criticism towards each other. Each group will no longer conceive other religious believers from a narrow point of view or based on prejudice and stereotype. They should have enough knowledge and understanding and thus good quality of tolerance and harmony will be achieved. It is a tolerance and harmony that comes from one's own conscience and this should promote better harmonious religious coexistence. Religious education should also address and encourage learners to think individually, be critical, analyze, and to be independent.

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