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## Theology and Pluralistic Ethics

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## THEOLOGY AND PLURALISTIC ETHICS. AN INDONESIAN MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

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### **Introduction**

Religion has been coming to the fore in the debate of how Indonesia should be built so that each of its citizens give the best place to live. For Muslims it is really a problem of theology since they are told from time to time that there is no separation between what is religious and what is secular. For them the reality of a religiously pluralistic state is something new, about which they do not have any reference in their religious tradition. Islamic systems of government have been so far established on the basis of a single faith whereby no competitor was allowed to share the making. Thus, the Indonesian experience in which people of different religious backgrounds share the same rights and duties in front of the state challenges Muslims' religious attitude.

The success of the nationalistic view in making Pancasila the basis of the state – that means the failure of the Islamic model – does not mean the end of the struggle. Many Muslims take as their religious duty to implement the Shariah in the management of public life, although the acceptance of *Pancasila* (the five basic principles of Indonesia)<sup>1</sup> is still growing in the Islamic communities. There is nothing wrong with this attitude among Muslims, as long as its defenders take legal way in their efforts to make their dreams come true. In a democratic state, any group aspiration can be struggled for through constitutional ways. What is dangerous is that religion can be – and has been – misused to reach any objective, be it religious or not. It is, thus, the duty of religious leaders, especially theologians, to give religious perspectives to the believers in the struggle of fulfilling their obligations in the public domain. Religious leaders can do many things, especially provide theological leadership.

This paper will discuss some aspects of the debate, focusing on the religious struggle. It will deal with the following concerns: the very meaning of theological leadership as key concept, the theology of pluralism that has been condemned as un-Islamic by the Council of Indonesian Ulama (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*) together with secularism and liberalism, the concept of chosen people, *Pancasila* as frame for nurturing co-existence of people of different faiths and the emergence of less tolerant religious groups in the scene of present Indonesia.

## 1. The Concept of Theological Leadership

The Rev. Dr. Yahya Wijaya did not give a definition of this term, but an allusion to it as follows: 'Leadership in the context of Muslim-Christian encounters should take into account the need to reinterpret theological resources of both religions, since the early constructions of those resources contemplated a situation with a lesser degree of plurality than that of today.'<sup>2</sup> It seems from this quotation that the leadership of Muslims and Christians who are engaged in the encounters perceive no problem, while the reality is that there are many other kinds of 'leaders' who may engage in such encounters, such as political leaders, communal leaders and family/clan leaders. The gravity of this problem is even bigger at a time when many kinds of 'impersonal leaders' such as advertisements, campaigns and provocations take over the leadership.

The very term 'theological leadership' may pertain, at least, to two different things: (1) the function of leaders in a theological way; and (2) using theology to lead the people. To the second belong the leadership of religious groups where theology is very important, and in his paper the Rev. Dr. Wijaya deals primarily with matters relating to it. One important question is how we – people who are responsible for theology – disseminate the result of theological inquiries and innovations amidst congregations where leaders show exclusivist tendencies.

Concerning the first, it is very important to present theological messages of leadership to the leaders – the personal and the impersonal ones – in a language that can be understood easily as giving benefit to them, while giving room for the betterment of human life. The long history of the existence of religion has proved that religious advice can never have significant effect on leaders who fear losing or reducing their own authority by following the advice.

## 2. A Theology of Pluralism

Accepting the reality of plurality is not a problem, but it is by accepting and appreciating pluralism as a belief that peoples of various faiths can be saved by their own faith. The majority of Muslims in Indonesia – as indicated by the existence of strong reactions to the opposite opinion – are of the opinion that there is only one true religion of Allah, namely Islam, and that it is theirs. Accordingly, they will never accept the possibility of truth for any other religion, since otherwise they would compromise their own belief. In 2005, the Council of Indonesian Ulama issued a *fatwa* condemning pluralism, liberalism and secularism. Their belief of single truth was the most important basis for claiming that pluralism may lead to relativism, lib-

eralism and secularism. Under such influences one may question the essential principles of religion, while secularism will only push faith away from the life of humankind.

There is actually a strong need to speak of such concepts from within the tradition of religion. However, since some terms have provoked bitter reactions already from the Ulamas, other tactics should be created that will give understanding instead of creating pretexts for targeted attack.

### 3. The Concept of Chosen People

There are at least two terms in the Koran denoting the concept of chosen people for Muslims, i.e. *ummatan wasatan* (middle community),<sup>3</sup> and *khayr umma* (the best community).<sup>4</sup> However, when read carefully, the context of both passages will give the notion that these two attributes give Muslims more responsibility than privilege and emphasise more on obligation than on right. The first verse describes the challenge to be witness to all peoples as the proper mission for those who are in the middle, as has been done by the Prophet Muhammad who lived in the middle of the first Islamic community. The second verse gives as obligation for the best community to enjoin right conduct and to forbid indecency.

However, both verses can be understood as stating that 'being the best' is more an ideal state that must be pursued than a given fact for belonging to a certain congregation or religious group. It is only by shouldering the duty that you are called the best community or you are in good position that you can perform what you are obliged to do.

There is no monopoly of God's love. Those who cherish the claim of being the chosen people are like a child thinking that the mother's love to him/her is greater than it is for his/her brothers and sisters. Then, it turns to be the same for all and accordingly the idea is only true in the mind of the child and not in reality (internal faith). Such a claim is fruitful, to some extent, for nurturing one's own religious zeal. However, it may hinder the bearer from recognising the truth outside his faith enclosure. The failure to recognise and appreciate the truth is indeed a failure to know the encompassing love of God.

### 4. Acceptance of Pancasila

The acceptance of *Pancasila* is really a blessing for the pluralistic nation of Indonesia, by which the citizens with various backgrounds of cultures, religions and languages can live together as one nation. It was a fortune, too, that the New Order regime forced mass organisa-

tions to accept it as the sole basic philosophy since the 1980s. This top-down action means the weakening of resistance from Islamic groups to *Pancasila*. When the regime collapsed in 1998 and there was the possibility of basic philosophies other than *Pancasila*, some activists tried to bring Islam to the front. Nevertheless, the majority of the people did not accept this line of action. It is true that this reluctance to have another basic philosophy does not mean their total acceptance of *Pancasila*, but it gives an opportunity to elaborate this formally accepted philosophy of State in order to maintain the very existence of the nation. *Pancasila* is the best choice for this nation, since it gives everybody equal rights and duties before the state.

However, one should not forget the fragility of the acceptance of *Pancasila*. Many Muslims are reluctant to agree that it is 'the source of all sources' (*sumber dari segala sumber*) for all laws and regulations, since they have strong belief that it is the Shariah that is really so. They would not, and even could not, differentiate between the religious instances of life – comprising the personal and congregational – and the public ones.

One important cause for this reluctance is that there is no place for discussion of *Pancasila* and many other civic issues in theological education, at least in the Islamic institutions and systems. Some religious leaders even got their education outside Indonesia and accordingly sometimes do not have enough understanding of what should be done for the pluralistic nation of Indonesia.

There is also a lack of the cultivation of pluralism in religious education, leadership training in a pluralistic way. The plurality of the Indonesian nation has not yet created a commonly accepted awareness that in order to live together in a peaceful way the people should have a kind of pluralism that is not a substitute for religion, but a philosophy of handling diversities.

## **5. The Forthcoming of an Exclusive, Less Tolerant Islam**

The peaceful living together of Indonesia people was disturbed in the 1990s by religion-coloured conflicts and since the fall of the Old Regime people have been witnessing anxiously the irruption of exclusive Muslim groups manifesting a less tolerant brand of Islam. There are some reasons usually mentioned to explain the situation. First, the longing for the lost majesty where Muslims were people of the most powerful class and the feeling that the loss of clout resulted from the unfairness of others, now considered as enemies. Second, the gravity of the hardliners' theology is so strong that teachings of peaceful co-existence seem to be indications of weakness. Third, Muslims' feeling of being treated unfairly, especially by foreign poli-

cies of the USA pertaining to Islamic countries. Fourth, the fact that some Muslims live in 'un-Islamic ways' and that there is much disobedience in public life without any significant action from the government to correct the trend.

The only cure – some say – is to strengthen Islamic identity and to take action by using force. A famous saying of the prophet Muhammad is usually quoted here: 'If any of you knows an atrocity, he should change it by his hand. If he cannot do that by his hand then by his mouth and if he cannot do by his mouth, then by his heart. Anyhow, this last is a sign of the weakest faith.' Some choose the first for it is really the best, sometimes without realising that their action may create other atrocities. Sometimes they do not also understand that to change an atrocity does not mean to beat or destroy the doer or the place.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude I suggest that there be interfaith encounters in the form of dialogues or through studying together different theologies in the framework of building a peaceful, pluralistic nation and humankind. Then, it is not only imperative to maintain the moderate theology by education but also to integrate civic values within the study of theologies. The pluralistic perspective is achieved and formed through cultivation. It is fragile, and risks being influenced by many kinds of insinuation. Accordingly, the supporters of moderate theology have to be patient and alert in maintaining, cultivating as well as spreading pluralistic ideas.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This philosophy constitutes of: (1) believing in the sole God, (2) just and civilised humanity, (3) Indonesian unity, (4) democracy guided by wisdom in consensus and/or representation, and (5) social justice.
- <sup>2</sup> Wijaya, Yahya, 'Theological Leadership in Christian Muslim Encounters. An Indonesian Perspective', in: Stückelberger, Christoph/ Mugambi, J.N.K. (eds), *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005, p. 83. See also Chapter 12 in this volume.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Koran*, Sura 2 (The Cow), verse 143.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Koran*, Sura 3 (The Family of 'Imrân), verse 110.