Globethics Repository



Pluralism as a hard fact of history : a response to Anthony Reid

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Maarif, Ahmad Syafii, 1935-
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-11-14 09:56:17
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/207683

3

PLURALISM AS A HARD FACT OF HISTORY

A Response to Anthony Reid

Ahmad Syafi'i Ma'arif

First of all I would like to highly appreciate Anthony Reid's comprehensive approach to the topic of our discussion this morning. As an experienced, productive, and prolific historian, Reid is really the man who has an undisputed authority when talking about anything Asian, and more particularly, Indonesian socio-political history. However, instead of searching for "religious unity", I prefer to use the term "religious harmony and tolerance", as I will elaborate further.

Why Pluralism?

The term "religious unity", as employed by Anthony Reid, sounds rather pantheistic to me, as if we hesitate to recognize the fact of the unique characteristic of each religion. From the moral point of view, of course, almost all religions share more similarities, rather than differences. No religion, for instance, tolerates its disciples to steal, to make disaster on earth, or to despise others because of their racial-historical background. As to the concept of pluralism, only short-sighted persons can ignore it, because pluralism has been a hard fact of history since antiquity, though in certain periods of history, there have been

kings, sultans, presidents, and other authoritarian rulers, introducing and imposing uniformity rather than allowing plurality.

But this anti-pluralism policy could not last long, because it undermines human rights of freedom of conscience and expression that are perennial in nature. Pluralism is found not only in religions but also in socio-political and cultural expressions. To deny this fact means to deny reality. The one who denies reality is the one who tries to live in a cultural illusive void. Even democracy has different forms, and liberal democracy is only one form as practised in Western Europe, or particularly in the USA. The democratic political system basically recognizes the principle of diversity, not unity, in its implementation in different parts of the world. Therefore, those who want to impose a system of Western liberal democracy as the only choice for all nations are no doubt anti-democratic, since democracy gives freedom to all people to adjust and articulate the rule of the people in accordance with the reality of their socio-cultural environments. True democracy always tolerates plurality.

In Indonesia there are a few Muslims who not only directly condemn pluralism but also consider democracy as alien to Islam. They think that pluralism is the belief that all religions are the same, and one can interchange religions at will and at any time, like one changes his/her coat. Contemporary Indonesia has also witnessed polemics on this issue. In my response to the view that pluralism is a danger to Islam, I wrote: "It has been said that with pluralism one will be free to change one's religion at will (*semau gue*). If this truly happens, I will enlist my name to stand up as an avant-garde to challenge it."[1] Faith is too serious and deep to be played with. This misunderstanding has to some extent created the two poles of Indonesian Islam, but the mainstream as

[1] See Ahmad Syafii Maarif, "Mutlak dalam Kenisbian" (Absolutism in Relativism), *Republika*, December 29, 2006, 4.

represented by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is in favour of pluralism.

According to my interpretation of the Qur'an, human beings should live side by side peacefully with their co-religionists and as well as with atheists. As long as they respect each other and have no intention, deliberately or secretly, to eliminate each other, social tolerance and harmony should be the bounding norms of daily life. The social fabric on this small earth planet will be broken down into pieces, if harmony and tolerance suddenly disappear. The Qur'an says: "And had your Lord willed it, all those on earth would have believed, all of them together. So will you (O Muhammad s.a.w.) then compel mankind, until they become believers? It is not for any person to believe, except by the Leave of Allah, and He will put the wrath on those who are heedless."[2]

I think the Qur'an is the most tolerant Holy Scripture as far as we can trace in human history, although some Muslims in certain places and periods of time did not necessarily follow the dictum of the Book. Those who claim to have the right to monopolize the absolute truth automatically enter into the category of narrow-minded and parochial people. Pancasila as the philosophy of the Indonesian nation-state opens the door to pluralism, which has been accepted by the great majority of the people of Indonesia. This has ensured that any idea of imposing a theocratic state in Indonesia is absurd. In terms of the problem of the philosophical basis of the state, the political climate in this country has changed dramatically, if compared to the situation in the year of 1945 or in the 1950s, during which the debate of the state philosophy was truly lengthy and heated.

[2] See the Qur'an Yunus: 99-100 in Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996), 399.

The Future of Pluralism in Indonesia

I share consciously Anthony Reid's optimism that pluralism in Indonesia has "a very secure base of history as well as ideology".[3] Something that has been deep-rooted in history will last a long time, although in certain periods a politico-religious authoritarianism may attempted to uproot it. But such an effort will surely end in vain. From this perspective, there is no reason to fear that Indonesia is no longer a promising place for a centre for inter-religious studies and laboratory for religious dialogue. The emergence of extreme radical and militant groups with their suicide bombings seems to me as a temporary phenomenon. Once Indonesia is able to overcome its acute socio-economic problems, uncivilized religious radicalism (terrorism) will have no corner in this country to survive forever. Indonesia is too big to surrender to any terrorist persuasion. In other words, a peaceful pluralism was, is, and will be the future of Indonesia. If not, this nation may move gradually but surely to enter the museum of history. Or, in other words, Indonesia will become non-existent on the map of the world. Of course, that gloomy prognosis is rejected by the great majority of Indonesian citizens.

Conclusion

Islam entered the Indonesian archipelago many centuries ago through a peaceful, tolerant and constructive penetration of Indonesian society. This confirmed the peaceful nature of this religion, and its distinction from what happened in other parts of the world, such as North Africa or South Asia. The problem facing Indonesia today is not a problem of religious tolerance or intolerance. Rather it is the problem of how to deal with diversity in responding to the behaviour of a few

[3] Read his paper "Pluralism and the Search of Religious Unity" (Yogyakarta, January 7, 2007), 12.

people who want to hijack God for their own immoral, political and worldly interests. Indonesia does not hold a monopoly on his unfortunate phenomenon. It happens in many other nations, whenever religion ceases to function authentically as it should, as the moral guidance for humankind.

Bibliography

Al-Hilali, Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din and Muhammad Muhsin Khan. *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an.* Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996.

Maarif, Ahmad Syafii. "Mutlak dalam Kenisbian" [Absolutism in Relativism], *Republika*, December 29, 2006, 4.