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Foreword : the value of inter-religious studies in Indonesia

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FOREWORD

THE VALUE OF INTER-RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN INDONESIA

Alwi Shihab

It is indeed a great honour for me to write this foreword to a dialogue between academicians, scholars and religious leaders about how Indonesians deal with religious diversity and the value and importance of inter-religious studies in Indonesia.

It is worthwhile to observe that the Qur'an states that among God's important signs is the creation of heaven and earth with all the diversity and plurality of human tongues and races. The Qur'an thus accepts religious pluralism not as an evil flaw in humanity, but as a sign of God's wisdom in His creation.

Indeed, the Qur'an, far more than most Muslims have recognized, accepts the multiplicity of religions and affirms the unity of faith. It expresses in a number of ways a fundamental tolerance of earlier religions whose faith is similar to that of Islam and centres on the one and only God. Thus one of the doctrinal principles enunciated in the Qur'an is that of religious plurality. From the beginning the Qur'an suggests that it is God who permits more than one religious community in the world. If God had willed otherwise, He would have made humankind one single community. This idea is repeated on several occasions in the Qur'an. "And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community" (5: 48; 11: 118, and 16: 93). In all these Qur'anic passages there is a purpose adduced to religious

8 *Dealing with Diversity*

diversity that is inherent in the divine scheme of things. Thus each of those Qur'anic verses continues with a clear indication of this purpose by saying, "... but (He willed it otherwise than there should be only one religion) in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you" (5: 48). However, the Qur'an goes on to point out that there is human accountability with regard to religious pluralism when it says: "And you will surely be called to account for all that you ever did" (16: 93).

The Qur'an also says that all humans were once members of a single community (2: 213, and 10: 19), yet it recognizes the divergent human views that have appeared in history by God's will, and that these have eventually led to religious diversity. God's decree in this regard was to permit such differences, as is alluded to by the Qur'an when it says: "And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from your sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled [from the outset]" (10: 19). Thus, although human beings have been divided into diverse religious communities, they have not been left without divine guidance. Addressing the various communities, the Qur'an further asserts that "To everyone have we appointed a (different) way and a course to follow" (5: 48). Immediately following this verse there is a command: "Vie therefore, with one another in doing good works" (2: 148). In other words, the Qur'an urges every religious community to strive and compete as in a race for all virtues and good deeds. This strongly suggests that there should be competition, not *against* one another but rather in a concerted effort leading *toward* all that is good. It is abundantly clear that the aforementioned verses that contain religious toleration reveal the manifest Qur'anic principle of inter-faith relations, based on a harmonious religious diversity. This principle is also in tune with other Qur'anic verses that state that God's purpose in creating the diversity of humankind is that people might come to know and interact with one another despite their different tongues and colours. The Qur'an

makes this point emphatically: "O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so you might come to one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him" (49: 13). There is another important principle set forth by the Qur'an, namely the recognition of the existence of righteous people within each monotheistic community and, as such, deserving of divine reward. Again this principle strengthens the idea of religious pluralism and rejects the notion of exclusivity. This fact led Muslim historians, scientists and theologians to begin what we now call the scientific study or the comparative study of world religions.

Among the earliest scholars in Islam to give proper attention to this science was *Abu Raihan al-Bairuni*, who lived in the *Quznawaite* state, in modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan; he was from the beginning very interested in the study of religions and cultures, particularly the religion of India. To that end, he himself went to India and learned Sanskrit directly from the Brahmin priests and wrote his famous book on India that remains an important source of information to this day.¹

After *Al-Bairuni*, the renowned Andalusian jurist *Ibn Hazm Al-Andalusi* (994-1064 AD) directed his efforts toward intellectual activities in exploring religions, and wrote a monumental book titled *Kitab al-Fisaal fil Milal wal Nihal* (The Division of Religions and Sects).² Although *Ibn Hazm* was hostile to Christianity because of his situation in Spain, he nevertheless left us important information on the Christianity of his time. In the Islamic world he is considered an expert

¹ See M.M. Qurashi and S.S.H. Risvi, *History and Philosophy of Muslim Contribution to Science and Technology* (Pakistan Academy of Sciences, 1996); Bruce B. Lawrence, "BĪRŪNĪ, ABŪ RAYḤĀN viii. Indology", in *Encyclopædia Iranica* online: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/biruni-abu-rayhan-viii

² For many, this book represents one of the most forceful works in discrediting Christianity in the history of Muslim-Christian interaction.

on comparative religions, while in Christian world he is known as polemicist skilled in anti-Christian thought.

Among the most important scholars of religions was *Abdul Karim Al-Shahrestani*, who lived in the 13th century. He wrote his famous book *Al-Milal Wal-Nihal* (Religions and Sects). *Shahrestani*, like *Al-Bairuni*, sought to study religions with objectivity and honesty. His work remains an important source for understanding of Islam and other religions in his time. In the late 20th century, Sheikh Abu Zahrah of Al-Azhar is considered one of the most highly renowned scholars of the study of religions. He was a man who followed in the footsteps of scholars from the past.

It is on these important foundations that the West built its own disciplines in the scientific study of religions, beginning in earnest after the *Enlightenment* of the 18th century. However, the study of religions really flourished in the West in the late 19th and early 20th century with such figures as *Max Muller*, *Sidar Blum*, the Swedish Bishop and scholar of comparative religion, as well as the German scholar *Joachim Wach* and later *Mircea Eliade*, and *Wilfred C. Smith* who contributed to the study of comparative religion, and many others. Indeed, the study of religions has become an important aspect of our study of humanity. It is in this context that we must view with interest the development of the comparative study of religion in Indonesia.

It goes without saying that in a very real sense Indonesia typifies the world, in that it contains expressions and followers of all the major religions of the world. Although the majority of Indonesians are Muslim, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and indigenous religions are present in Indonesian society. This, of course, makes the study of religion in Indonesia a natural and important area in the pursuit of knowledge, as well as social harmony and integration.

The interest of the study of religion in modern Indonesia began in earnest with the important works of scholars like Prof. Mukti Ali, who

became at one point in his career the Minister of Religious Affairs of Indonesia. He was an important personality and helped create a cultural centre in Yogyakarta that represents Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as a centre of dialogue and tolerance.

This book grew out of a conference of a distinguished group of scholars who gathered in Yogyakarta to witness the birth of the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS). At this conference there was an engaging exchange of ideas aimed at creating a harmonious religious society in a pluralistic setting in Indonesia. The papers presented eventually issued in the book you are now reading. However the history that led to this book is over 20 years in the making.

In 1990 Prof. Mahmud Ayoub, an Islamic Studies Professor at Temple University was able to attract students from Indonesia to come to study at Temple. Among them were Dr Yusni Sabi of Aceh, Dr Ahmad Haris of Jambi, Dr Soraya IT of Aceh, and myself. Prof. Ayoub recognized that his students would play an important role in the development of the study of religions in Indonesia.

In 1996, I suggested to the minister of Religious Affairs, Mr Tarmizi Taher, that we hold a conference in Jakarta on comparative religion. Prof. Amin Abdullah was named as the chairman of the organizing committee. To that end Prof. Ayoub prepared three drafts for an MA programme in religious study in Indonesia. It was to be a study of comparative religion at IAIN (State Islamic Studies Institute), as part of the faculty of Da'wah; the study of comparative religion in Yogyakarta at Interfidei, and a programme of the comparative religious studies at a regular university level. This draft eventually became the nucleus for the MA programme in the comparative study of religion at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) called the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies (CRCS). CRCS was established in the year 2000 and developed with advice from Prof. John Raines, Prof. Ahmad Mursyidi and myself along with a number of scholars from Gadjah Mada. We all shared a

12 Dealing with Diversity

sense of urgency to establish the programme because Indonesia was experiencing a difficult period of transition that gave rise to many conflicts between religious groups.

With strong enthusiasm we started with initial expenses of US\$ 30,000, shared by three cabinet ministers of the Abdurrahman Wahid government (Dr Yahya Muhaimin, Minister of National Education, Mr Johan Effendi, Minister of State Cabinet and Dr Alwi Shihab, Minister of Foreign Affairs). In January 2007 we were all delighted to witness the beginning of a new and major step in the programme, namely the launching of ICRS, a joint inter-religious, interdisciplinary, international, PhD programme consisting of a consortium among three important institutions in Yogyakarta – Universitas Gadjah Mada, Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University and Duta Wacana Christian University.

This programme is an ambitious doctoral programme that is meant not only to prepare Indonesian students for important careers in religion and general education in Indonesia, but it is an international programme that recruit and accepts students from other countries. At present ICRS has accepted over 60 doctoral students from 12 different countries, including countries in Asia, Europe, North America and Africa.

The comparative study of religion cannot at this juncture of our modern history be studied simply from books. The best approach is one that combines academic research and on-the-ground observation of how diverse religious communities live and interact. In that regard we all hope and will do everything we can to make this programme in inter-religious and cross cultural studies in Yogyakarta an important resource for the study of religions, not only in Indonesia, but for the world at large.

ICRS is still in its infancy, only five year old, but grew very quickly under the leadership of the founding Director, Prof. Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, who is now a full time professor at ICRS and its International

Representative. Dr Siti Syamsiyatun and Dr Wening Udasmoro are the current Director and Associate Director of ICRS, who are leading ICRS into impressive new areas of activity, especially in the area of research. Many organizations from different parts of the world are now cooperating with the leadership and Board of Trustees of ICRS to develop this programme into an international centre of academic excellence. ICRS has become a social laboratory, as it were, made up of the different religious communities in this important city.

Yogyakarta has an ancient history as a city of tolerance. Yogyakarta is the centre of Javanese culture and is proud of the rich development of Javanese expressions of Islam, centred around the Sultan's palace (*kraton*). Yogyakarta was also the birth place and is the national headquarters of Muhammadiyah. Yogyakarta also includes many Christian churches, both Protestant and Catholic, and is famous for the most important, ancient Buddhist monument in the world, Borobudur, which was built in the 9th century CE and is surrounded with many, equally ancient Hindu temples, such as the well-known Prambanan. Yogyakarta is indeed a natural place for a first rate programme in inter-religious studies.

As we all know, the study of religion may be approached differently depending where it is being conducted. In an Islamic Seminary or university like *Al-Azhar* the emphasis is on the arguments in the study of religion in favour of Islam. Similarly a Christian or Jewish or Hindu university will also highlight its own religion or theology.

We can see from the history of Christian-Muslim relations that the negative aspects of this encounter, for the most part, stemmed from the deliberate accentuation of certain exclusive scriptural texts of the Bible and the Qur'an on the part of adherents of both. Some of the early church fathers argued forcefully for religious exclusivism, as expressed in the well-known formula, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (there is no salvation outside the Church), referring to the words of Christ in

Matthew 12: 30) – “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” We find it equally true in a number of verses in the Qur’an that seem to promote exclusivism and rejection. The Qur’an says “O you who have faith, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies. They are allies of one another” (5: 51). These words, which in fact referred to political alliances in a specific time of war, ironically, became normative for many Muslims in spite of numerous other Qur’anic injunctions to seek amity and cooperation between Muslims and the People of the Book. Another good example of the failure of some to grasp the subtlety of the meaning of the word “Islam”, and hence take it to legitimize religious exclusiveness, following the Qur’anic verses “Surely the (true) religion with God is Islam” and “... Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be among the losers” (3: 19 and 3: 85).

As a result of both parties’ positions (Christian and Muslim) in opting for an exclusivist outlook in determining their relationship, misconceptions and distortions have continued to blight perceptions of one another to the present day. Beside the doctrinal disputes that have marred Muslim-Christian relations through the centuries, the failure of leaders of both communities of faith to control the excesses of religious fanaticism among their followers also constitute a potential source of tension. Undoubtedly it is true that the absolutist claim of truth from both communities had many and often tragic ramifications. It was out of this doctrine that the First Crusade was justified. Pope Urban the Second proclaimed a crusade before a large audience in the Council of Clement in November of 1095 “to exterminate the pagan, to free the Holy Land and to aid the Christian inhabitants”. To add a greater stress to this proclamation the Pope declared that “Christ commands it”.³ It was only natural that the Christian fighters would fiercely assault Muslim cities

³ See Matthew E. Bunson, *OSV’s Encyclopedia of Catholic History*, Revised (OSV, 2004); Peter Frankopan, *First Crusade: The Call from the East* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

with great religious fervour. The First Crusade, which was followed by several others, was instrumental in providing the pattern for the long history of hostility and mistrust between Muslims and Christians. The spirit of Christian hostility against Muslims generated by the crusades has been crucial in arousing suspicion regarding every sphere of Christian activity in the Muslim world.

On the other hand, a university setting demands academic objectivity and integrity, in that what we are studying are not arguments or advocacy for one religion over another or all others. We are actually studying religious phenomena as they appear in the different religions of the world. Our study of religion is the phenomenology of religion as a subject. This is to be understood broadly and differently from the beginnings of this discipline.

One of the early proponents of this approach is the philosopher and phenomenologist of religion Edmund Husserl, who argued as did those who came after him and continued this tradition – that in the study of religion one must “bracket” his beliefs and ideas and let the religious phenomena speak for themselves. This tradition came as a reaction to those who see their beliefs as absolutely true.⁴

People have argued at length whether this is possible or even desirable. Since we live together in one country and often in one city as followers of different religions, we must study the religions of the others objectively and with academic integrity, as well as with great interest.

Indeed, we ought to move from the dispassionate study of religion to the tolerant study of religion, that is to say, I must not only know the religion of my neighbour, but I must tolerate it and respect it. But even this is often not enough, I must further accept the faith of my neighbour and learn from it, without in any way affecting or endangering my own faith and commitment.

⁴ See Donn Welton, *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

We must therefore accept the other as one of us in humanity and dignity. So in a sense, the comparative study of religion must always end in what we now call *inter-religious dialogue*. However, we must be careful to make inter-religious dialogue a serious academic study and not simply a kind of platitude or courteous pleasantries. For example, as we discuss the history of Christianity, it must be history as Christians see it. The Muslim, for instance, must enter into dialogue with his/her Christian neighbours on issues of common interests, issues of faith, issues of justice and harmony in society; issues of historical developments in Muslim-Christian relationships and on ways that we can work together to make our situation better. We have only this world to live in and we can make it a world of peace and harmony. The other option is to destroy it and in the process destroy ourselves. Let us hope that the former choice will be what we will choose and work together toward realizing it.

If we can see clearly and work to realize this, it will undoubtedly be of significant value to inter-religious studies in Indonesia.

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