
Pluralism, Co-Existence And Religious Harmony: Indonesian Experience in the “Middle Path”

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“Ummatan wasatan [middle people, by extension “middle path”] has been the paradigm adopted to establish a new image of Islam and the Muslim world... This trend of searching for a moderate and quality oriented ummah has been implemented by Southeast Asian Muslims for decades...(Taher 1997:85)

“And if your Lord had willed, whoever is in the earth would have believed, all of them, all together. Would you [O Muhammad] then constrain the people, until they are believers” (Qur’an 10:99).

“Islamic revelation presents a theology that resonates with the modern pluralistic belief that other faiths are not merely inferior manifestation of religiosity, but variant forms of individual and communal responses to the presence of the transcendence in human life. All persons are created in the divine nature (fitrat Allah), with a disposition that leads to the knowledge of God, the Creator, to whom worship is due simply because of the creation” (Sachedina 2001:14).

The September 11, 2001 tragedy in the United States has brought the world to seemingly endless conflicts. The American military operation in Afghanistan, followed by its war against terrorism, and later its military campaign in Iraq has cornered Islam and Muslims in particular into a dark place. Even though the “new cons” regime in Washington D.C. has tried to distinguish radical elements among Muslims with the bulk moderate, tolerant and peaceful majority of the believers, many in the world, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, feel that there is now a significant increase of conflict between Islam and the West.

Therefore, there is an urgent need not only for a better mutual understanding among people in the world, but also for reconciliation among peoples and cultures. For that purpose there should be concerted sincere efforts among concerned people of the world to create a synthesis that would be able to bring peace at international, regional, and national levels. One of the syntheses would be the recognition of social, cultural, and religious pluralism among peoples and nations.

Islam has basically recognized pluralism among peoples and nations. The search for authenticity among some Muslims, however, has led to the rise of religious literalism and radicalism. The proponents of such an interpretation of Islam even believe that there is only “one”

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Islam, a monolithic Islam; they maintain that different interpretations of Islam have corrupted Islam and weakened Muslims vis-à-vis the West.

Southeast Asian—or particularly Indonesian—Islam has long adopted the Islamic paradigm of “middle path” (*ummah wasat*). In the political field this has been translated into the adoption of the national ideology of Pancasila (“five pillars”). The Pancasila, adopted during the days of the proclamation of Indonesian independence on August 17, 1945, has been (and still *is*) the common platform among peoples of different religious, social, and cultural backgrounds in the country. This paper attempts to discuss a number of important subjects such as “pluralism”, “Islamic roots” of pluralism, and the Indonesian Islamic experience in the middle path.

Pluralism and Endless Religious Conflicts

The term “pluralism” is increasingly becoming one of the most important catchwords in the era of globalization. As Sachedina argues that pluralism of our present world whose diversity of cultures, belief system, and values inspires both exhilaration at the endless shadings of human expression and dread of seemingly irreconcilable conflict, even among the followers of religion. The invocation of pluralism has become as much as a summons as a celebration; an urgent exhortation to the citizens of the world to come to terms with their increasing diversity (Sachedina 2001:22).

It is unfortunate that in addition to endless political conflicts among nations and countries, the world continues to see the seemingly endless conflicts between Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, Tamils and Buddhists. Worse still, religious conflicts have taken place among followers of one single religious tradition; between Sunnis and Shi`is or even among Sunnis within Islam; between Catholics and Protestants; among Hindus, and the like.

All of these hard realities have imparted the urgent need of better recognition and management of religious pluralism. One of main reasons is the recognition of religious pluralism among the followers of religions promises to advance the principle of inclusiveness, which would enhance accommodation, not conflict, amongst competing claims to religious truth in religiously and culturally heterogeneous societies. Such an inclusiveness, not exclusiveness, should lead to a sense of multiple and unique possibilities for enriching the human quest for spiritual and moral wellbeing.

Furthermore, as further pointed out by Sachedina, recognition of religious pluralism appeals for an active engagement with the religious other not simply to tolerate, but to understand. Toleration does not require an active engagement with the other; it makes no inroads on mutual ignorance. In a world in which religious differences historically have been manipulated to burn bridges between communities, recognition and understanding of religious differences require all the believers to enter into knowledgeable dialogue with one another, even in the face of major disagreements. A morally and spiritually earnest search for common undertakings within any particular religious traditions can lead for society as a whole. Religious pluralism can function as a working paradigm for a democratic, social pluralism in which people of diverse religious backgrounds are willing to form a community of global citizens (Sachedina 2001:35).

With respect to Sachedina’s argument above, Khalil Masud (2002:135-6) is right when he states that pluralism is a part of the project of modernity that favors the freedom of individual. According to Masud, pluralism does not stress multiplicity per se as much as it is concerned with

questioning the traditional monopoly of certain persons, groups, or institutions on prescribing ethical values authoritatively. In this sense, pluralism is not against the idea of unity and universalism on the basis of rationalism and humanism. This does not, however, mean that pluralism should ignore religious or local values. In fact, pluralism derives its legitimacy and acceptance by justifying universal values in local context.

Islamic Roots of Pluralism

Historically and sociologically speaking, Islam and the Muslims have actually witnessed differences and pluralistic views among themselves. Theologically and doctrinally, there are many factors responsible for this; multiple, different and sometimes conflicting interpretations of the texts (the Qur'an and Hadith). The texts have been interpreted in many ways and at various levels and from different perspectives. The interpretations of the Qur'an include the exterior (*zahir*, or *shari'ah*) and the interior (*batin*, or *tasawwuf*), the real and the metaphorical, the certain (*qat'i*) and the uncertain (*zanni*). As Moussalli argues, around the sacred text of the Qur'an, many sciences and schools of language, tradition (*hadith*), exegesis (*tafsir*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), Sufism (*tasawwuf*) and ethics (*akhlaq*) were shaped, developed, legitimized, and delegitimized (Moussalli 2001:85).

Thus, the contextual interpretations of many verses of the Qur'an are multiple, but in contemporary Muslim discussion and debate, the point of departure is increasingly the Qur'an itself and not the many layers of scholarly interpretations that have accumulated over the centuries. It would be wrong to assume that there is a single, monolithic view among Muslims concerning religious pluralism and other issues.

It is important to keep in mind that while the text of the Qur'an as a divine revelation is a source of different interpretations among Muslim scholars, it has justified differences, diversity and pluralism. To put it in a different way, it is the Qur'anic text itself is a main factor that establishes the legitimacy of differences, diversity, and pluralism. While only a limited number of Qur'anic verses that speak of political disunity; many others speak positively of diversity of tribes, sects, nations, and peoples as well as races and languages. The verses of the Qur'an also acknowledge the natural differences in the intellectual and physical capabilities of human beings. They view the different ways of living as a natural and even a divine aspect of creation.

Therefore, a forcible unification is not called for by the Qur'an, as cited in the beginning of this paper. A number of verses of the Qur'an offer a distinctly modern perspective on tolerance, pluralism and mutual recognition in a multiethnic, multicultural and multicomunity world. In a similar with the verse of the Qur'an cited above, another states: "To each among you, We have ordained a law and assigned a path. Had God pleased, He could have made you one nation, but His will is to test you by what He has given you; so compete in goodness" (Qur'an 5:48). Another verse once again emphasizes this: "Had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind one nation; but they will not cease differing" (Qur'an 11:118). Pluralism is time and again emphasized by another verse: "O mankind, We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribe, that you may know one another (Qur'an 49:13).

Pluralism among Muslims is of course also related to the different historical, social, cultural, political and economic conditions of Muslims. In fact, I would argue, there are now at least eight cultural realms among Muslims that reflect the very pluralism of the Muslim world.

The six cultural realms are; Arab, Persian, Turkic, Sudanic (Black Africa), the Indian sub-Continent, Malay-Indonesian, Sino-Islamic, and the Western hemisphere. Each of the cultural realms, to a certain degree, represents distinctive cultural expression of its own Muslim population. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that Muslims are monolithic phenomena; in contrast, pluralism is a fact of life among Muslims.

Islamic doctrinal, theological and sociological roots of pluralism, however, have been contested by truth claims among Muslims themselves, by putting forward certain verses of the Qur'an that emphasize the truth of Islam above any other religion. One of the most oft-cited verses states: "Whoever desires another religion (*din*) than Islam, it shall not be accepted of Him; in the next world he shall be among the losers (Qur'an 3:85). As Sachedina observes, a number of Muslim commentators have used this verse to argue for the finality of Islam over all other religions, thereby pressing the case for intolerance. Thus, this verse has been interpreted, in both historical and modern commentaries, as restricting salvation to Islam only. This kind of interpretation and self-understanding has led to intolerance, even to the exclusion of the other from the divine-human relationship. Such an exclusivist theology can envision a global human community only under Islamic hegemony; Islamic tradition, so interpreted, becomes an instrument for the furthering of Muslim political and social power over other nations (Sachedina 2001:39, 44).

The apparent contradiction between some passages of the Qur'an that recognized the existence and validity of other religions, and other passages that declared Islam as the sole source of salvation has to be resolved in order to establish a stable system of peaceful coexistence with these religions. This tension between the pluralist and exclusivist strains of Islam can be resolved only through the reexamination of the specific contexts of the rulings, the ways in which they were conditioned by the beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears of the classical age, so that we might compare them with contemporary issues and reapply them with a refreshed historical perspective. Muslim scholars should disentangle Qur'anic perspective on pluralism from medieval interpretation in order to elaborate and formulate new Muslim participation in plural global society.

Indonesian Islamic Pluralism

Pluralism and diversity are striking reality in Southeast Asia. As Hefner (2001:4) argues, few areas of the non-Western world illustrate the legacy and challenge of cultural pluralism in a manner more striking than in Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. J.S. Furnivall, a British administrator and political writer before World War II in fact introduced the concept of plural societies, and identified the countries known today as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as its most striking examples.

According to Furnivall, a plural society is a society that comprises "two or more elements of social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit". He further maintained that this situation is accompanied by a caste-like division of labor, in which ethno-religious groups play different economic roles. This social segregation in turn gives rise to what Furnivall regarded as these societies' most unsettling political trait: their lack of "common social will". Facing this unfortunate situation, Furnival asserted that unless some kind of formula for pluralist federation could be devised, Southeast Asian pluralism seemed doomed to a nightmarish anarchy (Furnival 1944:446, 468-9; Hefner 2001:4-6).

Furnivall's "doomed scenario" by and large fortunately failed to materialize itself. In contrast, post-war Southeast Asia saw the establishment of independent Indonesia, and Malaysia Federation in which Singapore was a part. But, this national independence has been assumed to stimulate the rise of ethno-religious sentiment in the struggle for control and power of the new states.

As a result the region has been marked by horrible ethno-religious conflict and violence. Malaysia was swept by fierce communal violence in the years following World War II and again in much larger scale in 1969. Chinese dominated Singapore witnessed ethnic riots in 1964, and in 1965 pulled itself out of two-year federation with Malaysia after a dispute over the rights of Malay and Chinese citizens. Indonesia saw outbreaks of communal violence in the late 1950s and 1965; more shocking yet, Indonesia was shaken by bitter, though intermittent, ethno-religious violence since 1996—the final years of President Soeharto in power—up until today.

Indonesia is indeed one of the most pluralistic societies in terms of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious differences. The Indonesian archipelago—the largest one in the world, which consists of more than 17,800 island, isles, and islets—and its history make Indonesians an extremely pluralistic society. Reflecting the diverse ethnic groups living in the country, Indonesians speak over 525 languages and dialects.

As far as the religious life is concerned, according to some latest estimates, the total population of Indonesia is about 255 million people of which 87.21% Muslims, 6.04% Protestants, 3.58% Catholics, 1.83% Hindus, 1.03%, and 0.31% other religions and spiritual groups. Up until today the Indonesian government officially recognizes the five world religions of Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Confucianism.

Despite its religious diversity, Indonesia has until recently been generally known as a country where a number of great world religions meet and develop in peaceful co-existence. The early history of the spread of Islam and Christianity in the archipelago had been largely peaceful, though bitter contests and struggles took place in certain areas. Consolidation of Islam and Christianity in much of the period of the 12th to 17th centuries had in fact produced clear boundaries among the adherents of these religions (Reid 1993; Azra 2000b).

It is important to point out that although the population of archipelago converted mostly to Islam, the region is known as the one of the least Arabicized areas throughout the Muslim world. Geographically it is also the farthest from the Arabian Peninsula, or more precisely Mecca and Medina, where Islam was originally revealed and developed. Therefore, Islam in the archipelago was regarded by many outsiders as "marginal" or "peripheral" Islam, as "impure" or "syncretic" Islam. Furthermore, Islam in the archipelago was regarded as having little to do with Islamic orthodoxy attributed to Islam in Arabia, or the region is known now as the Middle East as a whole.

The most important proponent of this perception is, no doubt, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Having a great reluctance to recognize the deep influence of Islam in the Java in particular, he called his work "religion of Java" (1960) rather than, for instance, "religion of Islam in Java". In this seminal work, he proposed that there are three variants of Islam in Java particularly and, by extension, in the archipelago generally. The three variants were; *priyayi* (aristocrat Muslims), *santri* (strict and practicing Muslims), and *abangan* (nominal or ID card Muslims). According to Geertz, the *priyayi* variant was heavily influenced by Indic-Sanskrit culture, whereas the *abangan* variant was too indigenous, syncretic, and even animistic. Therefore, in his judgment, it is only the *santri* variant, with its heavy orientation to Middle Eastern Islam, is the real Islam;

and members of this variant are numerically few amongst the population. With that, Geertz implies that the majority of Javanese or Indonesian is not real Muslims, and Islam is adhered to only by a small fraction of the population.

One of Geertz' fiercest critics is Marshall G.S. Hodgson, a prominent expert of Islamic civilizations from the University of Chicago. In his celebrated work *The Venture of Islam* (Vol. 2, 1974) he admits the importance of Geertz' *Religion of Java*. Then come Hodgson sharp criticism:

“...it deals with the twentieth century, and with inner Java in particular, but much in it throws light on what happened earlier and is relevant to other part of the archipelago. Unfortunately, its general high excellence is marred by a major systematic error: influenced by the polemics of a certain school of modern shari`ah-minded Muslim, Geertz identifies “Islam” only with what that school of modernists happens to approve, and ascribes everything else to an aboriginal or a Hindu-Buddhist background, gratuitously labeling much of the Muslim religious life in Java “Hindu”. He identifies a long series of phenomena, virtually universal to Islam and sometimes found even in the Qur’an itself as un-Islamic; and hence his interpretation of the Islamic past as well as of some recent anti-Islamic reactions is highly misleading. His error has at least three roots. When he refers to the archipelago having long been cut off from the centers of “orthodoxy” at Mecca and Cairo”, the irrelevant inclusion of Cairo betrays a modern source of Geertz’ bias. We must suspect also the urge of many colonialists to minimize their subjects’ ties with a disturbingly worldwide Islam (a tendency found also among the French colonialists in the Maghrib); and finally his anthropological techniques of investigation, looking to functional analysis of a culture in momentary cross-section without serious regard to the historical dimension. Other writers have recognized better the Islamic character even in inner-Javanese religion: CAO van Nieuwenhuijze, *Aspects of Islam in Post-Colonial Indonesia* (The Hague: 1959), but Geertz stands out in the field. For one who knows Islam, his comprehensive data—despite his intention—show how very little has survived from the Hindu past even in inner Java and raise the question why the triumph of Islam so complete (Hodgson, Vol. 2, 1974:551).

Recent studies have further refuted much of Geertz’ assertion. As have been shown by Azra (2004) for the period of the 17th to 18th centuries and beyond, and by Laffan (2003), Islam in the archipelago has never been cut off from that one in the Middle East. In fact there is a great deal of intense connections, networks and religious-cultural exchanges among Muslims in the two regions. All these in turn have influenced the course of Islam in the archipelago, including in Java. These also have been shown by such scholars as Hefner (1985), Woodward (1985), Ricklefs (1998), Riddell (2001) and many others. All of them basically argue that Islam in fact forms an obvious layer of Javanese and, by extension, Indonesian cultures.

Even though, Indonesia is increasingly known as the largest Muslim nation in the world, it is not an Islamic state. Politically and ideologically, Indonesia is a state based on Pancasila (five principles): 1. Belief in One Supreme God; 2. Just and Civilized Humanism; 3. the Unity of Indonesia; 4. Democracy and; 5. Social Justice. Proposed initially by Soekarno, the First President of the Republic of Indonesia, Pancasila was (and still is) a compromise between secular nationalists who advocated a secular state and Muslim leaders who demanded an “Islamic state”. After a series of “Islamization” of all the five principles—that was also accepted tacitly by non-Muslim groups—

Muslim leaders lastly accepted Pancasila and regarded it as having no incompatibility with Islamic teaching (Madjid 1994:57-8).

Therefore, Muslims' acceptance of Pancasila is not doubt one of the most important Indonesian Islamic roots of pluralism. For the bulk majority of Indonesian Muslims, Pancasila is, in line with a verse of the Quran, a "*kalimah sawa*", a common platform, among different religious followers. Addressing the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an has this to say: "Say: O the people of the Book [*ahl al-kitab*, that is the Jews and Christians]; come to common terms between us and you; that we worship none but God, that we associate partners with him, that we erect not, from ourselves, lords and patrons, other than God..."(Q 3:64).

As Madjid rightly argues, the Pancasila thus becomes a firm basis for development of religious tolerance and pluralism in Indonesia. Adam Malik, who was once Vice President during the Soeharto period, maintained that Pancasila, in Islamic perspective, is in a similar spirit to the *modus vivendi* that was created by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina after having migrated (*hijrah*) from Mecca. The Prophet laid down the *modus vivendi* in a famous document called the "Constitution of Medina" (*mithaq al-madinah*). The document includes a provision which states that all Medinan factions, including Jews, were one nation (*ummah*) together with Muslims, and that they have the same rights and duties as Muslims. Adam Malik interprets the "Constitution of Medina" as a formula for a state based on the idea of social and religious pluralism (Madjid 1994:64).

Similarly, for Bellah, the American sociologist of religion, the Medinan state was a root of Islamic modernity and pluralism. He argues that Islam in its seventh century origins was for its time and place "remarkably modern...in the high degree of commitment, involvement, and participation expected from the rank-and-file members of the community" (Bellah 1970:150-1). Despite that, the Prophet Muhammad's experiment eventually failed because of the lack of necessary socio-cultural pre-requisites among the Arab Muslims. In other words, the *modus vivendi* failed because it was "too modern" for the Medinan society. Looking to Indonesian experience with Pancasila as a common platform, it is a part of what Bellah believes as an effort of modern Indonesian Muslims to depict the early community as the very type of equalitarian participant nationalism, which is by no means entirely an unhistorical ideological participation.

As a basis of Indonesia pluralism, Pancasila unfortunately had been used by the Soeharto regime as a tool for repression. The forced implementation in 1985 of Pancasila as the sole ideological basis of all organizations in the country had been unfortunate and resented by many Indonesian. Through a special training, the Pancasila was indoctrinated to Indonesians, which in the end gave the Pancasila a bad name. It is clear that for most Indonesian nothing is wrong with the Pancasila as such, but when it was abused and manipulated for the maintenance of President Soeharto's political status quo, then people rapidly lost their belief in the Pancasila as an integrating factor within plural Indonesia.

Religious Pluralism and Democracy

Given the fact that Islam is the single largest religion in Indonesia, it is reasonable to expect that Islam and Muslims play a greater and more positive role in the development and enhancement of a democratic and multicultural Indonesia. Indonesian Islam possesses distinctive traits and characters that to a large extent are different from that one in the Middle East. Indonesian Islam is

essentially a tolerant, moderate, and “middle way” (*ummah wasat*) Islam given the history of its early spread which was basically peaceful and had been integrated into diverse ethnic, cultural and social realities of Indonesia. The bulk majority of Indonesian Muslim belongs to moderate mainstream organization such as the Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and many other regional organizations throughout Indonesia. All of these Muslim organizations support modernity, and democracy. They oppose the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia as well as the implementation of shari`ah in the current Indonesian nation-state.

All of these moderate and mainstream organizations are basically civil society organizations, which play a crucial role in the development and enhancement of democracy as a means of peaceful resolution of conflict. These organizations are very active in the dissemination of the idea of democracy, human rights, justice, gender equality, and other ideas that are crucial for the modern society.

Not least important, mainstream Muslim organizations have been very active in conducting religious dialogues with Christian and other non-Muslim organizations at local, national, and international levels. Through cooperation, they put a lot of pressures on the government to find ways to resolve communal conflicts that in the end would affect national life as a whole. Through these kinds of efforts, they are able to anticipate possible communal violence and play their part to put an end of certain current communal conflict.

There is a number of small and fringe groups of radical Muslims which had captured a lot of media imagination such the Islamic Defense Front (FPI), the Jihad Troops (Lasykar Jihad), the Council of Jihad Fighters (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia), and the Muslim Brotherhood of Indonesia (Jama'ah Ikhwan a-Muslimin Indonesia). These groups were potential to create tension not only among Muslims, but also with non-Muslim groups. With the leadership mostly in the hands of non-native Indonesian Muslims, or more precisely figures of Yemeni origin, these groups had in fact very limited influence in Indonesian as a whole. One should not exaggerate their influence and have some sort of exaggerated fear against them. Moreover, following the bombing in Bali on October 12, 2002 up until now, most of these radical groups have either disbanded themselves or been forced to lay low.

In the end, I believe that one of the most important keys to address the tendency of radicalism among Indonesian Muslims is the strengthening of democracy, the enforcement of law and order, and economic development.



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