



ASIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
POLICY CENTER



Waging Peace Through Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation

79th Edition of the Globalization Lecture Series

2 September 2008, 1:30 – 4:00 pm (Manila time), 12:30-3:00 pm (Jakarta time)

AIM-WB Global Distance Learning Center, Asian Institute of Management

123 Paseo de Roxas, Makati City, Philippines

WAGING PEACE THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

(An Indonesian Experience)

By Ahmad Syafii Maarif

Introductory notes

Though Indonesia is well-known as the largest Muslim community in the world, Indonesian Islam as a cultural, intellectual, and political expression has never been a monolithic faith system. The same phenomena can also be observed in other Muslim countries. Derived from two major sources—the Qur'an and the examples of the Prophet — Muslim thinkers, theologians, philosophers, and political theorists have for centuries built up and developed diverse, complicated, and even contradictory interpretations of the two in dealing with the issue of interfaith relations and dialogues. In the case of Islam in Indonesia, we are fortunate because of the fact that the great majority of Muslims are in favor of waging peace through interfaith dialogue and cooperation, as I will elucidate further in this paper. Indeed, a tiny minority of Indonesian Muslims opposes it and say that endeavor is futile. This sort of attitude happens, in my view, due to their limited, subjective, and *ad hoc* understanding and interpretation of the same sources. The militant and radical splinter groups from whose wombs terrorists may have bred are actually a new dark panorama in Indonesian Islam. Albeit a minority, they are extremely vocal and harshly aggressive. Therefore, some outsiders have made a false conclusion as though they are the true representative and real face of Indonesian Islam. Here lies the danger in observing the complex socio-religious phenomena from afar.

The Muslim mainstreams as an umbrella and protectors

Based on my own experience and involvement for years in promoting and fostering peace through interfaith dialogue and cooperation in Indonesia, one thing is conclusive. That is, creating a sincere brotherhood between different faiths is not only possible but necessary – and surprisingly beautiful. My intimate and warm friendship with non-Muslim minorities – be they Catholic cardinals, bishops, and laymen, Protestant fathers and priests, Buddhist and Hindu monks, and Confucian top figures – has deeply convinced me that humanity is really one. More than that, my other important and more striking point to note is that believers should not only cooperate among themselves, but should also be ready to coexist with and accommodate non-believers and even atheists, and vice versa. The only condition required for this peaceful coexistence is that each party must have mutual respect and no any hidden agenda to eliminate each other.

Once I touched the issue of atheism to be accommodated, certain Indonesian '*ulamā*' (Islamic traditional scholars) and intellectuals began to feel angry and then soon questioned my theological

position as a Muslim. One of them was deeply disappointed and restless and was even ready (through his friend) to request a religious advice (*fatwa*) from the Central Board of Muhammadiyah regarding my statement on atheism. But after I explained to him the Qur'anic background of my view, he and his friend became silent until now. This may mean that he and many others like him have very little and limited knowledge of the Qur'anic texts in relation to the theological recognition of human free will and free choice. According to my reading of the Qur'an, God in fact offers freedom to all human beings to believe or not to believe, and the risk becomes their business with God in the hereafter. In other words, one who claims to be an atheist, or an apostate, cannot be brought to the court to face a religious punishment, as many classical Muslim *fuqahā'* (legal theorists) adhere to such a view. In Indonesia, this issue is still far from reaching any fixed religious solution. It seems that there are not many '*ulama'*' who have the religious courage to rethink of and reopen the Qur'an more contextually and freshly. In my opinion, the progress or otherwise of Islamic civilization will largely depend on the ability of Muslims themselves to creatively respond to the challenge of the day. Any interpretation of religious texts is always time-bound. Because of this, even a scholar of caliber has no right to monopolize the truth. The Qur'an strongly prohibits mankind to be blind followers of the '*ulama'*'.

The militant and radical groups are, however, ready to die in bloodshed to defend the *fatwa* of classical Muslim jurists at all cost. Let alone the Bali and Marriot bombers as blood-thirsty personalities who deliberately killed innocent people would feel upset once the right of punishment on atheists and non-believers is totally abrogated from Muslim classical legal documents. For these terrorist groups, killing other people who differ ideologically from their religious view is in some cases their way to earn money. Therefore, what really happens here is none other than a misuse of religion for the lowest worldly interests and purposes. The Qur'an is firm that killing one single human being means killing all humanity. I quote: "... if anyone slays a human being – unless it be as [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth – it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of mankind."¹ To be fair, not only certain helpless Muslims monopolize the practice of suicide-bombings, some other religious disciples have also done almost the same thing. The feeling of humiliation and acute despair experienced by certain people may be responsible for these kinds of wrongful acts.

When moving strategically towards the direction of a humanistic understanding and interpretation of Islam, the Muslim mainstreams in Indonesia, represented by Muhammadiyah and NU (Nahdhatul 'Ulama) will face a great historical challenge in the near future. The non-Muslim minorities, in particular, have a sincere and serious hope that Muhammadiyah and NU will continue their important role to become an umbrella for all people in the country, regardless of their faith, creed, and other spiritual denominations. I think Indonesia as a nation, and even the world at large, should show their gratitude to these major streams that are moderate, open-minded, and modern in their worldview, sharply distinctive from their counterparts in many other Muslim countries. In hunting down terrorists, for example, we fully back the Indonesian police so that they can effectively accomplish their job. Though the Indonesian archipelago remains fertile for terrorist activities and attacks, the space in which they may move freely has become limited and narrow from day to day, due to the police's tight and shrewd strategy to immediately end domestic terrorism. The police's strategy will be more effective in dealing with terrorism if the whole population, including the government officials, are obliged to give support to it. Some anti-terror police complained to me that the support they expect from the government is not adequate. Nevertheless, what they have done so far to barricade the terrorist territory has been successful. International observers have acknowledged

¹ See the Qur'an chapter 5 verse 32. The translation by Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*. Dār al-Andalus, 1980, p. 147.

the great achievement of the Indonesian police in coping with these dangerous and uncivilized actions.

In the meantime, one cannot ignore the fact that rampant corruption and other social ills undermining the basic pillars of Indonesian contemporary culture contribute to the terror activities among the poor and less-educated Muslims who are the real victims of a corrupt political system. In Indonesia, my observation says that corruption also breeds terrorism. Once corruption is successfully and effectively eradicated and the principle of social justice as strongly commanded by Panca Sila (the state's socio-political philosophy in Indonesia) becomes a reality, the moving space for terrorism will surely disappear within a relatively short time. Of course, external factors, such as the plight and suffering of Palestinians, Afghans, and Iraqis, are also responsible for triggering terror activities in Indonesia to show solidarity in wrong ways. But in my observation, domestic factors are more dominant. My non-Muslim colleagues and friends always regard Muhammadiyah and NU as their protectors from any religious extremism, though many of the Muslims themselves have become the victims of terrorism. I have often made statements that terrorism in all forms is the true enemy of human civilization.

From dialogues to concrete actions

The Indonesian interfaith leaders are not only busy in religio-moral intellectual dialogues, but working on the ground to help enlighten people at the grass-roots level. When Aceh province was destroyed by the terrible and dreadful wave of the *tsunami* in December 2004, interfaith top figures led by Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, S.J. soon made a visit to the area. We provided some financial aid to the families affected by the tragedy, including helping to restore a traditional Muslim boarding school called *pesantren*, that had been wiped out by the *tsunami*. You can imagine how happy a small and poor *pesantren* must have felt when they were visited by a cardinal, accompanied by other interfaith leaders to console the *santris* (*pesantren* pupils) and their *kiyais* (teachers) who survived the calamity. The visit to this predominantly Muslim province indeed symbolized the interfaith leader's real cooperation and commitment to show deep sympathy and empathy to those who were extremely suffering from a serious natural holocaust.

Another on-the-ground effort that has been going on for the past three years, organized by the Maarif Institute and funded by Ford Foundation, is the Good Governance Project. This was launched in three local districts spread in three provinces: Lampung, Jogjakarta, and Central Java. The interfaith leaders also acted as keen observers to monitor the progress and development of the project. The purpose of this project was to find hard facts of how local governments did their jobs efficiently and effectively in serving people at their own territories. There were three categories used by the Project to measure and evaluate the success or the failure of local governments in executing their functions as public servants: transparency, accountability, and efficiency as prerequisites for creating good governance. Last month, this project came to an end with big success. The success of the project cannot be separated from the significant and crucial role played by the interfaith leaders in the monitoring phase of the project. This was really of great significance.

There are still various dynamic activities in many provinces in Indonesia organized by local interfaith leaders to serve and help the needy, regardless of their socio-religious background. If this positive and constructive trend continues in the future, who knows—Indonesia might become a mirror and good example for other nations to follow. The true function of faith is to bind, not to divide people because of their different religious backgrounds. Once this function runs smoothly in many parts of the world, peace will no doubt be part of our future. When philosophy fails to offer the answer to the true meaning of human life, religion can come to the fore to supply us with a final say.

To understand spiritually the meaning of life and death is not solely the business of philosophy. The more meaningful and true essence of life and death is enshrined in the realm and province of religions.

A final and reflective remark

Alhamdulillah (all the praises are to God), at the age of 73 now, I am still physically healthy and mentally normal. I am trying to be optimistic in the ocean of pessimism befalling poor people in my country whose number has reached the tens of millions. Due to acute poverty, some unenlightened citizens have fallen into the terrorists' trap, but in their hearts they are truly dedicated persons and good Muslims. In my limited capacity, aided sincerely by the interfaith leaders, what I have done and contributed so far to enlighten the minds and the hearts of the people, intellectual and common, is insignificant. But the Award I have received from the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation has once again confirmed the right choices I have made in my life. From the bottom of my heart, I and my wife are thankful to the Foundation's Board of Trustees who awarded me, an Indonesian old citizen who was born in a small and isolated village called Sumpur Kudus, in West Sumatera.

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Manila, Tuesday, 2 September 2008.