

Strengthening Interfaith Relations *Some Thoughts on Humility Strategies*

Siti Syamsiyatun*

* Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga

Email: syamsiyatun1@gmail.com

KEYWORD

Interfaith
Religion
Islamic relation

ABSTRACT

The conversation regarding the above title by confessing deep wonder about human's continuing, never ending endeavor to grapple, to make sense, to find significance, to understand about faith and religion. For ages, since time of immemorial till today, we humans, endlessly experience, and struggle to understand and to theorize special phenomena of important behaviors in response to significant questions of our lives: why we are here, where we come from, what are the purposes of our existence, why we cease to live, what happens after this, etcetera. These complex important phenomena come to be known widely in our today's world as faith or religion. The understanding and experiences on faith and religion, mine and others, are changing overtime, thus my talking points in this document are not my final narratives on the issues of interfaith relations. Hopefully such changes in experiences and understanding lead me to become a better human person, a better member of community, a better global citizen. All the data I use in this short paper is collected and derived from observation and documentation study. Having said these, I sincerely invite feedbacks and input from colleagues participating in this important academic event.

Corresponding Author:

Theresia Lidya Nova
Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau
Email: theresia.lidya.nova@uin-suska.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesian everyday life, the term faith is understood as *iman* and *percaya* interchangeably. The term *iman* usually used with reference to the abstract persona and sacred, extraordinary things, such as *iman* to God, Angel, Heaven, Fire; whereas *percaya* can be used in both realms if we borrow specific terms used by Mircea Eliade and Emile Durkheim, *percaya* in something sacred and profane; for instances we *percaya* to God, to the Power of Dreams, but it is equally common also to say we *percaya* to my friend, partner, teacher. In contrast, we do not hear Indonesian people saying I *beriman* to my colleague.

In academic context, a number of contemporary scholars, such as Lewis Newman in his article on "Faith, Spirituality and Religion: A Model for Understanding the Differences", and Rodney Stark on his book entitle *The Triumph of Faith*, have distinguished between faith and religion, while others just simply used the terms interchangeably. The debate over a separation between the 'secular' and the 'religious', 'material' and the 'spiritual' is of course a false and sterile debate, for we are aware of their interdependence (Ariarajah, 2003:12). According Webster Dictionary, faith means belief and trust in and loyalty to God; belief in the doctrines of a religion; a firm belief even in the absence of proof; complete confidence on someone or something.

Faith and Religion in Everyday Life and Academia

Whereas religion, there are several definitions provided as follow: a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or

agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. From this dictionary-based definition, we find aspects that differentiate religion from faith, for instances on the involvement of devotional and observances that are usually done in communal setting, rather than individual, such as congregational mass or prayers, wedding and funeral rites.

In fact, all communities have their own understanding on religion, and how they define it. There are undoubtedly many definitions on religion; and how these definitions are to be implemented in empirical, social actions even invites further diversity. The use of grammatical features in academic discourse in college contains a relational value for a particular purpose (Kusumanegara, 2016:11). Different understanding and approaches to religion is not exclusive to lay people in our communities; in fact, probably they more varied among the academia.

In our everyday life we often listen or find conversation about religious concepts and narratives, in which these concepts seem to be well accepted and believed without being questioned or examined. For instances conversation about God, Angels, Revelation, Holy Spirit, Heaven, Fire, Salvation, Nirvana and Castes thought to be self-evidently right and understood, and need no further explanation and examination. Why such is the case? In our experiences we believe and accept things because they are narrated and transmitted by our trustful, authoritative people, for examples our parents, teachers, professors, priests, healers, etc.

Phenomena of accepting concepts and narratives without feeling a need for detailed explanation are not exclusive to religion and faith. In fact, we can find people talking about many concepts in socio-political spheres or sciences without knowing what they mean. In the contemporary discussion, there is an aversion that religion made as a foundation of development, because religion is often used as a trigger of any conflict that is why it causes violence both psychologically and sociologically (Sazali, 2015:16). There are politicians who preach about social justice, economic reform and national unity without even explaining what they mean by these concepts, how to create public policy to implement them in our empirical life. There are also scientists who refer to narratives or concepts of others for truth and faith without knowing exactly what they mean by those concepts. In short, human's faithful and religious behavior have its parallel in their other behavior.

If we examine these ways of thinking among Muslims in Indonesia and across Southeast Asia using the theory of Mohammad 'Abid al-Jabiry, we find clear resemblance of that of the Arabs in a sense that reliance to narrative or bayan is a common practice. Some Muslims use other verses of the Qur'an to support the condemnation of interfaith dialogue (Shafiq & Abu-Nimer, 2011:9). Narratives or texts that are thought to be received from most authoritative Power and Persons must be accepted without questions. In the traditions of popular world religions, such Power thought to be God, and such Persons are known to be Prophets, Messengers, Gurus, Popes, Brahmins, and so on. In political realm such persons are emperors, kings, healers, shamans and others.

Why Tensed and Messy Inter-religious Relations?

Many religious concepts, doctrines have been developed in historical contexts with specific causes and purposes: environmentally, geographically, economically, socially, politically, technologically. Relevant to the contexts of Southeast Asian regions, we could comprehend why Buddhism have been understood, developed and implemented variably in Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia, for instances. Why Balinese Hindus have observed rituals, and created doctrines different from the Hindus in Singapore. Being Catholics or Protestants in Indonesia would require attitude and behavior that might be different from those of Catholics and Protestants living in the Philippine or Timor Leste.

In most cases, the dominant ruling power in any given society has greater chances or advantages to select, dictates the interpretation and meanings of religious teachings, including their interpretation and empirical application of these selected interpretations. The dominant ruling power have almost all resources and modalities to promote and enforce the adoption of their interpretive versions of religious teaching to all societies. Consequently, changing authorities in social, political landscapes will have significant impacts on the changing narratives in religion, even in science. Consider the experiences in Europe with Christianity and Jewry, in Africa with the politics of Apartheid, Arab with Sunni and Shi'a Islam, in Indonesia local and incoming religions, as well as modern civilizations. Also, each activity was designed to build, expand, deepen, and connect with other activities and to contribute cumulatively to the overall objectives (Fernandes, 2013:21).

Tensed and messy relationship between and among the followers of these religions might come from our faith in concepts narrated by our trusted sources or people. When our trusted people told us that it is only our religion which is right, and others are wrong, for example, we tend to believe in what he or she narrated to us as a truth doctrine, no need further explanation or clarification. We could imagine, if these people trusted by their

respective communities collaborate with politicians in order to collect and mobilize support for national leadership, together they launch massive negative campaign about people or teachings of other religions, and call us for actions to discriminate and persecute them, then violence can take place very easily.

We have seen a lot of such instances of socio-religio-political violence in almost all countries in Southeast Asian, in Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines, Malaysia, and so on especially when national election for leadership is taking place. Family and fellow citizens are torn apart, even killed, property and public facilities are destroyed, friendship and courtesy are gone because of such campaign.

In order to reduce or eliminate such blind followership, we need to adopt some sort of critical attitudes developed relatively better in the area of philosophy and sciences. Philosophy teaches us to question concepts and things critically into detail we possibly understand, even to people we usually trust. If all and each person in our communities adopt this kind of alert question about religious concepts and narratives propagated by different agencies, particularly those with regards to others, we can hope to see prolonged process of digestion over these conceptual narratives, and delay of violent actions.

People need to question and ask themselves what it means to be a religious, faithful person; what my faith means to my family; why there are some traditionally-trusted people demand us to discriminate our own family, neighbors, fellow citizens our country, on what reasons. It should be noted that it was not only religious voices, but also private opinions, that were encouraged during the nineteenth century to evolve outside of public space (Jürgen Habermas in his review, however, fails to recognise a place for religion or the cultivation of beliefs and ideologies within the private sphere) (Ezell, 2010:70). It is very likely that actually, we and the trusted people have no clear and justifiable answers to the questions we pose.

Building Respectful Interfaith Relations: Common Humanity and Humility

In my observation, critically questioning our own understanding of religious concepts and teachings, and acknowledging our lacks, is a beginning of humility. The implications of such connections are that it should essentially make individuals feel less marginalized, and feel more welcome in their community, and therefore less likely to engage in or support violent extremism (Miller, 2018:227). Studying history and philosophy is very crucial to enhance such critical attitude. Thousands or even millions of years have passed, in which time human have struggles to make senses of the reality of their lives and environments. Legacy of religious traditions of the Hindus, Buddha Gautama, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammad, and other prophets have been sustained by people living in today's Southeast Asian countries.

In this long history of human, many special persons, such as Guru, Kiai, Priests, and Bikkhu have been able to develop new concepts and doctrines from within these religious traditions, and narrate them from generation to generation over time; and today we have so many diverse teachings from different religious traditions. In order to have the greatest impact, development workers need to focus on collaborative efforts with local community members, and cooperation between different ethnic, social, or religious groups within the community (Grace, 2020:47). Within Christianity we have many ordos associated with the Catholics, hundred of denominations within Protestantism, many streams of thought within Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, many groups within Buddhism, Hinduism or Confucianism. A significant number of books on theories on religions, on intra and interfaith relations have been produced, consider books by Karen Armstrong, Talal Asad, Daniel Pals, Reza Aslan and Yuval Noah Harari on these issues of God, religions and human's endeavor.

If we are able just to acknowledge how little time we have, and how little we know about these vast, ever developing human's intellectual heritages on the sphere of faith and religion, then again, we might be able to slow down in our judgment, and be a little more patient and humble with our limitation. Despite all difficulties presented by different problematization the main question is that would it be possible to develop a strategy which will enable us to claim a sustainable resolution and preventing potential conflict in future (Akyol, 2008:32)

If in the past, the roles of people who earn trust from their community are determinant in providing concepts, narrative of religious teachings, as well as their interpretations for common people. They believe that each of local ethnic cultures has its own geniuses that are instrumental in the maintenance of socio-cultural stability and harmony (Azra, 2019). For them, increasing conservatism among followers of religion does not reach the level of the real threat of followers of religion by acting out of bounds to oppress other groups (Kusuma & Susilo, 2020:10). Adherents or followers of particular religions have their trusted, faithful person, from which they learn and receive instructions. In order to manage the transmissions of such knowledge and religious traditions monasteries, ashrams, seminaries, schools are developed. For millennia such hierarchical patronage had been regarded as norms, ideal and proper.

Nowadays, with the advancement of information technology, such hierarchy rumbles. The authority and privilege of the community of learners in monasteries, seminaries, pesantren, ashram are being challenged and contested by a generation of digital technology. This new generation have been successfully created computer-based programs to do things unimaginable decades before. With computer and internet people can write, edit, change, translate, compute and many more with ease, and access to electronic library and documents are just one click away.

Authority of information, including of religion is shifting, in line with the shifting mode of learning. Young people, also followed by the older ones, began to learn religion via internet from people they mostly do not know in person. As participants shared their story and their definition of interfaith dialogue, it was evident that through participation, their individual faith or non-faith identity was strengthened. For some participants, this started in the home they were raised, for others, this spiritual journey did not occur until college (Krebs, 2014:130)

Likewise, people can make contents on religious teachings as freely as they wish, or preaching them out in the internet. Internet-based traffic of narratives is going wild, that we cannot control. Development of cooperation through internet provides explanation and justification that suggest that distance is no longer an obstacle to a country's cooperative trade efforts (Tobing & Virgianita, 2020:101). We have seen in recent years how youth filmed their brutal actions of killing people in houses of worship, in schools, and in public transportation or facilities; we also read a number of news of suicide bombers learnt how to make bomb from internet-based tutorials. We have witnessed hate speech and hate spin in the social media polarize and destroy our civil, decent life as fellow citizens of one country.

Despite all these worrying effects of internet and social media, I could not dream to stop the development of scientific technology. While religious and political leaders looked to theological, legal, and ritualistic differences among religions, Gandhi defined religion in inclusive terms (Howard, 2020:3). What I could hope of is the rectification of the roles of faith and religion for making us a better person. The goal is to test the theory with one case and explore to new dynamics which would be potential for the theory development about the interfaith dialogue, its vitality, possibility or promise for the peaceful coexistence (Sahin, 2009:708). If we are able to make internet technology and social media under the control of ethical, respectful and humble human then we might have hope brighter future for living together in this tiny planet, beloved earth.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, I would like to mention again that those people who are developing religious concepts and narratives and preaching them out, for promoting peace and justice, or for agitating hate and violence, they are all human after all. Likewise, followers and supporters of these opposite messages are also human. Human, past and present, share so vast genes and cells, and hormones that influence our life. So focusing on our common good for the happiness and goodness of our life, our genes, our offspring seems appealing for me.

Contemporary world witnesses the advent of humanity, to the point of creating a world of humanism, in which human become the source of power. The emergence of these movements not only highlights contradictions and conflicts in society but also demands a shift in our methodological orientations (Sur, 2019:23). Human's scientific and technological inventions have changed the way things operating and done; including in the realm of religion. The potency of using this new power for better life or for the destruction is equal. Thus, in my view, it is very important that we intervene, cultivate the good potency of humanity, together. People with good heart and good intention, together, could provide counter narrative for those who campaign for hatred and destruction.

Social violence and destruction do harm not only to the targeted person, but also harm the whole community, and destroy delicate, cordial relations among people, of same or different religion, intra and interfaith. Since internet and social media connect things means we are entering a world of synthesis in which we cannot work individually to eliminate violence, instead we must work together, inter-religiously, interculturally, internationally.

References

- Akyol, H. (2008, November). An Alternative Approach to Preventing Ethnic Conflict: The Role of the Gulen's Schools in Strengthening the Delicate Relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds with Particular Reference to the 'Kirkuk Crisis'. In *texte publié à l'issue de la conférence "Islam in the Age of Global Challenges, Alternative Perspectives on the Gülen Movement," Université de Georgetown*.
- Ariarajah, S. W. (2003). Religious Diversity and Interfaith Relations in a Global Age. *Quest*, 2(2), 11.
- Azra, A. (2019). Cultural Pluralism In Indonesia: Continuous Reinventing of Indonesian Islam in Local, National and Global Contexts. *Asia-Pacific Journal on Religion and Society*, 2(2), 56-60.
- Ezell, D. (2010). *Diplomacy and US-Muslim world relations: the possibility of the post-secular and interfaith dialogue* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham).
- Fernandez, E. S. (2013). Christian Hospitality in a World of Many Faiths: Equipping the New Generation of Religious Leaders in a Multifaith Context. *Theological Education*, 47(2), 21-26.
- Hargis, G. (2012). Christian-Muslim Relations in Kenya: The Importance of Interfaith Peace-Building for Development.
- Hadi Kusuma, J., & Susilo, S. (2020). Intercultural and Religious Sensitivity among Young Indonesian Interfaith Groups. *Religions*, 11(1), 26.
- Howard, V. R. "Heart Unity": Gandhi's Dynamic Approach to Religion, Education, and Personal Transformation for Interfaith Relations.
- Kusumanegara, A., Santoso, A., & Sunoto, S. (2016). Nilai Relasional Dalam Fitur Gramatika Wacana Akademik Di Perguruan Tinggi. *Jurnal Pendidikan: Teori, Penelitian, dan Pengembangan*, 1(1), 11-17.
- Krebs, S. R. (2014). *Voices of interfaith dialogue: A phenomenological analysis* (Doctoral dissertation, Colorado State University. Libraries).
- Miller, A. D. (2018). Community Cohesion and Countering Violent Extremism: Interfaith Activism and Policing Methods in Metro Detroit. *Journal for Deradicalization*, (15), 197-233.
- Sahin, Z. (2009). Interfaith Dialogue Organizations as Actors of Peace Building: Case of Rumi Forum. In *Conference titled "Islam in the Age of Global Challenges"*. Washington, DC.
- Sazali, H. (2015). Rethinking of Interfaith Communications in Building the Strengthening of Religious Tolerance in Religious Development (The Analysis of System and Actor). *Jurnal Al-Hikmah: Ilmu Dakwah dan Pengembangan Masyarakat*, 13(1), 13-22.
- Shafiq, M., & Abu-Nimer, M. (2007). *Interfaith dialogue: A guide for Muslims*. International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT).
- Shamshudinova, G., Altybassarova, M., Seifullina, G., Turlybekova, A., & Dyussebekova, G. (2019). State model of interconfessional tolerance in modern multiethnic societies. *Space and Culture, India*, 7(1), 117-127.
- Tobing, F. B., & Virgianita, A. (2020). Functional multi-track and multilevel economic diplomacy to strengthen trade relations between Indonesia, Chile, and Peru: Conditions for success. *Regions and Cohesion*, 10(1), 88-107.