

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN INDONESIA

A General Introduction

Stanley R. Rambitan

Introduction

First I have to say that the Christian-Muslim relations in Indonesia have since the earliest encounters generally been marked with tension, conflict and various incidents. Forms of religious violation one toward the other are so common that it has become an acceptable and tolerable state of affairs. Particularly, since 1996, conflict has been frequent and widespread. It started in Situbondo (East Java), spreading to Solo (Central Java), Tasikmalaya and Bekasi (West Java), Ketapang (Jakarta), Kupang (Timor), Poso (Central Sulawesi), Ujung Pandang (South Sulawesi) and Ambon (Molucca). All of those conflicts have caused material and psychological damage, even incurring the loss of human life.

Nevertheless, there has also been progress in various ways in developing relationships, such as occasions for dialogue and cooperation involving Muslim and Christian scholars and especially theological students. Government, religious institutions and also individuals have initiated these events (which involve also other religious representatives such as Hindus, Buddhists and Confucianists).

As far as the tension or conflict is concerned, I would like to draw your attention not only to problems concerning Christian-Muslim relations occurring in Indonesia recently, but also, and more important, to the roots of these problems. In other words, I would like you to see not only the fact that there has been religious persecution committed by Muslims toward the Christians and vice versa, but also what the deeper perspectives and feelings are within the hearts of Muslims and Christians toward each other. It is also necessary here to answer the question concerning what makes recent Christian-Muslim relations in Indonesia so violent and cruel. I note, however, that what I describe concerning Islam and Christianity below are only the

factual and general tendencies. We all realize that religious doctrines and practices in the Islamic community are as diverse as in the Christian community.

I would like to go further and explain first the general Muslim understanding of and attitudes toward Christianity and the Christian, and secondly, analyze Christian perceptions of and attitudes toward Islam and the Muslim. The discussion here will mainly highlight the perceptions which have been the theological background of the conflict between Christians and Muslims. Finally, I will discuss the reasons why Christians and Muslims in Indonesia need to create and improve their relationships.

Muslims' Understanding of and Attitude Toward Christianity

Since the earliest confrontations between Christians and Muslims, misunderstanding, suspicion and intolerance have characterized the relationship between them. Concerning an intellectual, dialogical relationship, Muslims have been quite polemic and apologetic. We can recognize this from Indonesian Islamic literature that discusses other religions (particularly Christianity), and from speeches delivered during Friday prayer meetings in many mosques. In this living, dialogical-confrontational relationship, there have been many incidents in which Muslims' attitudes proved to be reactive, aggressive and destructive toward Christians. The fact that Muslim groups have destroyed or burned many churches (more than 500 since 1945) confirms this. On the other hand there are places, for example in Kupang and Ambon, where Christians did the same thing, destroying and burning mosques. However, these incidents are of more recent occurrence after Indonesia started experiencing economic, social and political crises.

There are several important reasons for such Muslim attitudes. The first is theological. This theological reason stems from Islamic traditional, fundamental teachings, particularly those derived from the Qur'an and *Hadith* (or the attitude displayed by Muhammad during his life). Christianity is mentioned in the Qur'an and *Hadith* both in negative and in positive perspectives. Nevertheless, the images highlighted by (Indonesian) Muslims have so far been mostly the negative ones. They deem Christianity a misguided religion. This is primarily because of some Christian doctrines are considered untrue and unacceptable, such as the doctrine of the trinity. However, there is a kind of misinterpretation and misunderstanding within Muslim perception of such Christian doctrines. One example is the view that

Jesus was biologically God's son, with Mary being his mother. Such problems occurring between Muslims and Christians, based on the Qur'an and Mohammed's teaching, are thus purely dogmatic. It appears virtually impossible that we will solve the problem unless Muslims are willing to apply a new approach toward interpreting the Qur'an and the *Hadith*. Based on such a narrow interpretation of the Qur'an and Mohammed's teaching, Christians are then considered as orang kafir, unbelievers. (Although in the Qur'an, the Arabic word *al-kuffirun* does not refer to Christians—in the Qur'an they are called the people of the book or *ahl al-Kitab*—many Indonesian Muslims consider Christians as unbelievers.) Toward these unbelievers, Muslims have to be cautious. Concerning this Muslim theological issue on Christianity, the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) produced a formal statement in the early 1980s, prohibiting Muslims to attend Christian celebrations, particularly Christmas celebrations.

Secondly, there are reasons derived from socio-political and historical points of view. When Christianity was brought to Indonesia (early Of 17th century), Islam had already been a religion of most of the people in the archipelago. In most places, Islam had become a religion of states or kingdoms. There were several well known Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago during 14th to 17th centuries, for instance, the kingdoms of Malaka, Demak, Cirebon, Ternate and Tidore. Muslims regarded the arrival of Christianity in areas they considered Islamic domains or kingdoms as a threat, the coming of an (old and new) enemy. Deep resentment against the Crusades of earlier centuries was still present in the minds of Muslims (although I do not deny that Christians retained sentiments spawned by the Crusades). Moreover, Christianity came to Indonesia along with Western (particularly Dutch) colonization. Because of this, Muslims felt themselves threatened by both socio-political and religious colonialism.

In Islam, religion and state are not separated. A Muslim will feel irritated (or threatened) when new religions and people arrive and live in an area they consider Muslim. That is why building a church in an area considered a Muslim area is very difficult for Christians.

During the era of colonialism, the missionaries who brought the Gospel to Indonesia and later the Christians themselves did not actually become involved in political affairs, for example, by openly supporting colonialism. In fact, sometimes the colonial authorities did not even allow missionaries to spread the Gospel within certain Muslim areas, such as Aceh, Eastern Java, Solo and others. Nevertheless, Muslims still considered

missionaries part of pro-Western colonialism. Consequently, Christianity was (and still is) considered as the religion of the colonial powers. So, from this point of view, Muslims have held an antipathy toward Christians. This feeling seems to have been very deeply rooted in Muslim hearts. The call for Jihad or religious war against Christians has quite often been heard in Muslim gatherings, especially since the incidents in Kupang and Ambon. This is the historical burden that Christians have had to bear in their relationship to Muslims. Thus, we can conclude that theological, historical, socio-political and economic reasons played a major role in shaping Muslim perceptions and attitudes toward Christians.

Christian Understanding of and Attitude Toward Islam

In contrast to Islam, in Christianity there is no biblical basis on which Christians can refer specifically to Islam. However, Christians typically apply their traditional theological perceptions concerning people of other faith traditions to Islam, namely, that the other's faith is not a true religion, other religions do not have a guarantee of salvation for their people, and salvation is only to be found in Jesus. There is no other name, no other way—Christianity is the best. This exclusive and superior theology of religions have been applied within Christian community since the early coming of Christianity.

The Western Christian (missionaries) considered Indonesian people, including the Muslims, as their field of missionary work, and thought they should civilize these native people by converting them to Christianity.

Based on such ideas, the attitude of the early missionaries and most Christians until now toward Islam and Muslims have also been negative, superior and aggressive. Christians, influenced by western attitudes of superiority and by Christian triumphalism, understood Islam and other beliefs as uncivilized religions. Therefore, Muslims (and people of other religions) should be civilized by converting them to Christianity. This perspective still exists in the minds of most Indonesian Christians today. Along with this point of view, some Christian activities in spreading the Gospel and in conducting their daily lives have made Muslims feel disturbed, irritated and threatened. As a result, they become very reactive and offensive. Clearly, Muslims - mostly from the grass-roots level - do not need a very rational reason (and so often you do not understand the reason) for persecuting Christians. I understand this attitude as a syndrome of the majority who feel threatened by

the minority group. Thus, we might say that the theology and attitude of most Christians have also played an important role in the ongoing religious tension or conflict in Indonesia.

The Role of the Government and the Constitution

There are also external reasons why religious violence can occur very easily in Indonesia, namely, the role of the government and the applied law and constitution. Since the independence of Indonesia, the Constitution has lacked adequate and clear provisions concerning religious matters. In religious communities the Constitution has been regarded only as complementary to religious teaching. As long as the Constitution agrees with religious teaching, they can accept and apply it. In social and political affairs, Indonesian people still often ignore or belittle the Constitution and regard it as secondary to their religious teaching. For instance, although the Indonesian Constitution declares and supports religious freedom, it is in fact not implemented properly, neither by the people nor by the government.

There has, moreover, not been a stable and capable government. Concerning religious relationships, the government has thus far expressed support for the idea of religious harmony and has tried to improve such harmony in interreligious relationships. Yet, while the sentiments of religious tolerance and harmony have been sounded particularly by the government, they have mostly only put them into practice when it was beneficial to the government, i.e., for socio-political stability and for the sake of economic development. In some ways, even religion and religious groups (particularly Muslims and Christians, since both are easily influenced) are used only as a tool for political purposes.

Some Positive Developments in Interreligious (Christian-Muslim) Relations in Indonesia

To be objective, we cannot ignore the fact that there has been an improving of relationships between Christians and Muslims. In particular, some Muslim and Christian scholars and students supported this at an intellectual level. There have been many joint discussions by Christians and Muslims (and other religious groups) at the national level as well as in local areas. Notably we can refer to the role of *Kelompok Ciganjur* or Ciganjur Group (which has the home base at K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid), the *Interfidei*

in Yogyakarta and *Madia (Masyarakat Dialogue antar Agama)* or the Society of Interreligious Dialogue in Jakarta (in which the writer has been taking part).

The themes discussed in those inter-religious dialogues have been varied, dealing with religious, cultural, social, political and economic affairs. Still, they view all issues theologically according to the teaching of each religion. More recently topics dealt with in such dialogues have largely been related to the current problems or crises that Indonesia has been facing. Besides those rather formal intellectual dialogues, we should also note that there is an ongoing living dialogue being carried out by individuals in their daily life, including dialogue through the Internet. We can identify the results of these dialogues in the fact that the relationship between Muslims and Christians (though still mostly among the elite-intellectuals) is improving. Moreover, since all the people of Indonesia are facing the same common crises, cooperative efforts, both through social and political as well as religious institutions, are intensified. This trend had already come to the fore at the time when Indonesia was fighting for independence. Christians and Muslims (with the Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists and others) joined hands in the struggle.

Conclusion

To conclude, I may say that since the very beginning of Christian-Muslim relations, there have been negative attitudes toward one another. By looking at the discussion above, I can say that traditional theological doctrines that we misunderstood or interpreted narrowly and the burdens of history have caused Christian and Muslim relations in Indonesia to be colored by suspicion, tension and conflict. In other words, we may say that there has been a lack of understanding and mutual recognition of and respect for one another. However, we have also identified socio-economic differences and political affairs as causes of this tension and conflict. Concerning the religious violence and riots which took place recently in some areas in Indonesia, we can say that the reasons have been very complicated: theological, socio-political, economic, and so on.

Besides the tension and conflict between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia, we should note that there have been positive developments as well. This is identified by an increase in dialogue and in actions undertaken jointly by Christian and Muslim individuals and at an institutional level.