

RECURRING ISSUES IN INDONESIA'S ISLAMIC EDUCATION: THE NEEDS FOR RELIGIOUS LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays an important role in Indonesia, not only in religious schools but also in all schools and in community development. A number of studies show that Indonesian religious education currently faces challenges in managing the problem of religious radicalism, especially in the context of a conservative society. This research focuses on various religious problems in the community that teachers often encounter during their interactions in schools and communities, with specific reference to Islamic education. This research was conducted using the Focus Group Discussion method which involved 28 religious education teachers from DKI Jakarta, Banten, and West Java. This research explores recurring religious issues in Indonesian society that require further attention in developing religious education programs. Looking at it from the perspective of religious literacy, this study found that multiculturalism, tolerance, and prejudice are the most recurring problems in society. Recognizing the growing challenges to Indonesia's plural society, religious literacy can be used as an alternative destination for religious education. Religious education must be directed towards students' correct understanding of various religious beliefs and traditions, in addition to strengthening the faith and practice of students' own religious beliefs.

Keywords: *Religious literacy, multiculturalism, tolerance, prejudice, religious education*

INTRODUCTION

Religious education has been and continues to be an important part of Indonesia's national education system. As it is mandated by law, every school should provide religious education teachers that share the same belief with students (Law No. 20/2003). The purpose of religious education in Indonesia is to strengthen the beliefs that students bring from home. In other words, religious education in Indonesia is directed towards maintaining and strengthening faith, instead of understanding the faith within the context of a multi-faith society. That is why the Education Law mandated that students should learn and practice their own religion at school.

The reason why Indonesian religious education is intended to strengthen faith is the assumption that all religions promote moral values that society needs. Thus, teaching religion means teaching people to have good behavior and actions in accordance with God's words. This positive assumption of religious education goes from generation to generation along with the fact that people of different religions live in harmony in Indonesia.

As a religion of the majority, Islam has been taught in Indonesian schools from the very beginning of the country's history. Muslim students learn about this belief system and how to practice their religion without disturbing other's

beliefs. Indonesian Islam has long been known as Islam with the “Smiling Face” (Azra 2014: 1) because it is considered successful in promoting a peaceful Islam that is compatible with modernity and democracy (Van Bruinessen 2013: 1). The social harmony between various religious communities in the midst of different ethnic groups and languages makes Indonesian Muslim communities known as friendly and tolerant Muslim communities. This reflects the values of Pancasila (the country’s five principles) that laid down the basic values of the Indonesian society to live and interact with each other. These values become a strong adhesive for the realization of the Indonesian nation. The first principle of Pancasila says belief in one God, meaning that Indonesian people are people that believe in religious faith. They may have different beliefs, but their religious beliefs guide them to live their lives responsibly, and hence it is important to maintain and strengthen religious beliefs among the people through education.

The third principle of Pancasila says the unity of Indonesia. This implies that Indonesia is not a single community. Indonesia consists of various ethnic and religious groups. It is this spirit of unity that drives Indonesians to unite in one big country. The birth of the Indonesian state was inseparable from the imagination of the nation's founders who had succeeded in uniting various ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions into a large community, namely the Indonesian nation. The Indonesian nation has proven successful in maintaining harmony in its diversity. However, maintaining a harmonious life in a very diverse society does not work without challenges. There are a number of challenges that continue to be faced by the Indonesian people in an effort to maintain unity in diversity. Conflicts between different groups of people and the threat of state disintegration are some of the serious problems that the country continues to face. Political and economic interests often trigger conflicts that can damage Indonesia's diversity and peace (Betts 2004: 2; Schulze 2017: 2096).

The relationship among followers of different religions in Indonesia always faces new challenges. Despite the fact that the majority live together harmoniously in social diversity, a number of conflicts between religions and between groups within religion have shown that various ideological interests can lead to social conflicts. Conflicts such as Muslim-Christian disputes about building a church in Bogor, West Java (Hamdani 2012: 1), Ahmadiyah-Sunny conflict in Pandeglang, Banten (Tempo 2011: 1), Muslim-Christian conflict in Bekasi, West Java (Kompas 2010: 1), Muslim-Christian conflict in Ambon, Maluku (Betts 2004: 1), Sunny-Shiite conflict in Madura, East Java (Raharjo 2015: 1) and indigenous Muslim conflicts with Chinese descendants in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra (Harahap and Hasibuan 2017: 31) indicate that relations among religious adherents in Indonesia need serious attention. Despite the fact that religious education in Indonesia has been part of its education system for a long time, social relations adherents of different religions often create tension. It is important to note that the relationship between certain religious adherents and adherents of other religions is not part of religious education in Indonesia. As a result, religious education does not make people of different religions closer to each other, but rather creates distance between one religion and another. This phenomenon shows that interfaith understanding is an important issue that needs to be addressed by religious education, which implies the importance of religious literacy.

A number of studies on religious literacy indicate that religious literacy is now becoming an increasingly important issue throughout the world, although many countries make religious education a part of their curriculum. Religious literacy is not only about one's understanding of one's own religion, but also includes the understanding of other beliefs and religious practices. Moore (Moore 2015: 1) identified that religious illiteracy is one of the social problems currently facing the world today. Lack of

understanding about beliefs and other traditions can lead to disrespect towards others.

Confirming the case of religious education in Indonesia, other research shows that religious education does not always lead to religious literacy. Ashraf found that a number of Pakistani religious teachers reject the idea of religious literacy because they only believe in their religion, and that is the only truth they can accept (Ashraf 2019: 1). So why bother understanding other people's beliefs. Dinham and Shaw argue that the review and reform of religious education in schools is needed (Dinham and Shaw 2017: 13). This is because existing religious education does not lead people to better social relations, as this study will explain.

As a Muslim majority country, the Indonesian model of Islamic education receives a lot of attention from scholars around the world (see Lukens-Bull 2001; Raihani 2016; Woodward 2015). Despite the role that religious education has played in promoting nationalism and unity, the current development of religious lives in Indonesia raises the question of religious literacy. The main question is how Indonesia's Islamic education contributes to religious literacy? This article will not ambitiously answer this big question with a comprehensive approach. It will rather analyze the issue of religious literacy through the lens of religious education teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Religious Literacy: an Islamic Education Perspective

The increasing awareness of Muslims towards the importance of religious education is marked, among others, by the increasingly widespread religious issues being discussed in the community. The rise of religious issues in the public sphere, on one hand, provides awareness and insight to the community, especially Muslims about actual religious issues. On the other hand, it can also lead to sharp differences of opinion among Muslims that potentially put the country

at risk of disintegration. Nowadays, Indonesian Muslims seem to be divided as they offer different responses to various religious issues. Holidays' greetings and celebrations, for instance, become a serious issue for a certain group of Muslims, and not for others. Allowing people of different faiths to take public spaces as places for worship is also problematic. These and other issues reflect the importance of religious literacy in order for society to understand and respect each other's faiths and traditions. However, before going further about educating religious literacy, it is important to first understand the concept of religious literacy.

Literacy is a very important skill in education. Its initial meaning is the ability to read and write since these are the keys for a person to be educated. The word literacy has now been used to include the ability to comprehend concepts and applications of other aspects beyond language. Terms such as financial literacy, information technology literacy, political literacy, and cultural literacy are used to explain one's understanding of certain concepts and use the concept to guide his/her daily life. Recognizing that understanding different religious beliefs and practices is very important in the multicultural world, religious education experts argue that religious literacy is an important part of education. Education must be able to guide young people to respect religious beliefs and practices (Hobbs 2011: 1-5).

Religious literacy is generally understood as knowledge of religion, religious practices of people of different religions, and the ability to understand differences between religions and have positive interactions with people of different religions (Ashraf 2019: 1). So, religious literacy is not only knowledge about the religion that people believe, but also an understanding of various other religions that exist in society.

Moore underlines two basic features of religious literacy: the first is a basic understanding of world religious traditions that includes history, central texts, doctrines, and practices. The second

is the ability to understand different religious manifestations in people's social, political, and cultural lives (Moore 2015: 3). In a more detailed explanation, Dinham and Shaw emphasize that religious literacy includes extensive content regarding knowledge about world religions. The contents of religious literacy must contain but are not limited to, understanding various religious and non-religious doctrines, the study of religious changes and beliefs in different contexts, contemporary discourses about religion, religious contextualization in human life, and religion as identity and tradition (Dinham and Shaw 2017: 11).

The importance of religious literacy for an increasingly multicultural world must be transmitted through religious education. Religious education teachers must realize that introducing only one religion to students can end in ignorance about other religious beliefs and practices. Ashraf cautiously reminds, "learning about one particular belief by rejecting all other people's beliefs will keep society away from a shared understanding of religious beliefs and human rights" (Ashraf 2019: 13). This is important to avoid the separation of social life and neglect of the rights of others in society. The increase in religious conservatism is an indication of the lack of religious literacy in society. There is growing concern about the upheaval over the issue of religious conservatism vis a vis religious liberalism which has been going on for several years and will spread to Islamic educational institutions. There are at least two factors that must be seriously considered in responding to this problem. First, the very multi-interpreted contents of Islamic education. Second, religious education teachers that are very influential in shaping the understanding of Islamic teachings among students (Burhani 2013: 105).

The majority of Indonesian people value religion above other aspects of human lives. Religion has a very important role and affects many aspects of life not only about worship but also in social and political aspects. Schools can be an ideal place for the spread of various ideologies,

through the curriculum and the teachers' role as educators. Teachers' understanding of their own religion and other religions are very influential to the way their students behave as religious persons. It is, therefore, the government has a very important role to suppress the influence of conservative interpretation through the curriculum of religious education in schools, particularly in private schools where religious education can be different from what the government prescribed (Zuhdi 2018: 12).

Religious education in Indonesia has a very long history, even before the existence of Indonesia as a country. At the beginning of the formation of its education system, religious education was not considered important in Indonesian education (See Law No. 4/1950). Later, however, after going through a long debate in the parliament, the Indonesian education system values religious education as an important part of the national education, as reflected by Law No. 2/1989 on National Education System. Law No. 20/2003, which is currently in place, goes even further by stating that religious education can only be taught by teachers that believe in that religion that they teach. It means that Islamic education should be taught by a Muslim teacher and so on. However, there was a change in the content of religious material being taught which was changed to Religious Education and Citizenship, so that it was considered not to provide much space for religious material (Zuhdi 2005: 4).

There are two different ways to explain the practice of religious education in Indonesia. First, religious education or Islamic education as a subject and part of the school curriculum and this applies in formal schools. Second, religious education in religious schools whose orientation of learning is about mastering certain religions, such as Islam (Zuhdi 2018: 5). Islamic education in regular schools is included in Islamic Religious Education subjects. Although only mentioning one subject matter, but the material is the same as in the madrasa, namely; Quran-Hadith, Aqeedah and Morals, Fiqh, and History of Islamic Civilization. The difference with the curriculum

in madrasas is in the allocation of fewer hours, which is 3 hours per week, while in madrasas 2 hours for each subject or about 10 hours per week (Elihami 2016: 211).

At the level of practice, religious education in Indonesia still needs particular attention. Although the religious curriculum is good enough to accommodate the religious needs of Indonesian people and respecting other believers, the challenge is how to provide students with teachers that are open-minded and offer moderate interpretation to the religious teachings. Otherwise, teachers can open space for conservatism, prejudice, and various other narrow-minded traits. Elihami said that the practice of religious education in Indonesia still widely applies the model of "religious education in the wall" (Elihami 2016). This model means that teachers only introduce one religious tradition without relating it to others. In this case, teachers deliver the delivery of material without contextualizing it with the context of Indonesian multicultural society.

Teachers have different understandings about how religious education should be taught in a multicultural society like Indonesia. Some teachers may argue that it is important for students to have a solid foundation about their religious teaching and practices in order for them to maintain their faith in the future. Understanding other religions are not only unnecessary but also harmful for students as it can lead them to be skeptical of their own faith. On the contrary, some other teachers may argue that introducing students with other religious beliefs and traditions is very important in a multicultural society. Students can be more respectful to other beliefs and traditions, and thus strengthen the harmony of the inter-religious relationship.

Recurring Issues in Islamic Education

In order to understand the actual views of Islamic religious teachers on religious issues in Indonesia today, a focus group discussion was conducted involving a number of religious teachers from various cities in Jakarta, Banten,

and West Java. The accumulated discussion raised several issues which, according to the teachers, were very important to be examined and made a special concern in Islamic religious education.

The first is *multiculturalism*. Islamic religious teachers view that the issue of multiculturalism is one of the problems that creates a challenge to Islamic religious education. The teachers share several cases in which society cannot accept differences within ethnicity, culture, or religion, and so on. Here are some examples. First, it is forbidden and considered heresy for a group of Muslims to practice a traditional gathering such as *tahlilan* (collective prayers to remember dead people) and *yasinan* (reciting the Quran together for certain purposes). Second, a group of people holding excessive traditional celebrations that make other communities feel disturbed, but can do nothing. Third, some religious leaders are ignorant of the rights of people who have different beliefs in delivering their preachings, arguing that they are just telling the truth.

Cultural diversity and religious traditions that exist in Indonesia constitute the cultural wealth of the archipelago. The diversity can be seen as a mosaic that makes the beauty of the country. It can also be seen as a cohesive factor for the unity of the country so long as it is properly carried out and reasonably accepted. However, it could also be a danger when people cannot accept differences and aggressively make their own culture as a priority. This is where the values of multiculturalism are important to develop.

The second issue that needs to be paid more attention, according to the teachers, is *tolerance and intolerance*. A lot of people misunderstood the term tolerance as merely letting other people behave as they wish. Tolerance becomes a problem in Indonesia because a lot of people argue that they are tolerant while acting intolerance. Intolerance happens as a result of not properly implementing multicultural education practices in religious education. The discussion among teachers raised the issue of tolerance between

religious communities in Indonesia, and they were concerned that the word tolerance is lately misunderstood, or even unused. There are a number of examples that represent the problem of tolerance. First, the destruction of places of worship of other religious communities, such as Buddhist temple in Tanjung Balai North Sumatra (Harahap and Hasibuan 2017: 31), Church bombing in Surabaya case, the damaged mosque in Sampang, East Jawa (Rachmadhani 2013: 31) and mosque destruction in Papua (Rosyid 2015). Second, there was a group of people who prevent others to hold a celebration, because their group does not believe in it. Third, while exchange greetings among Muslims by saying *assalamualaikum* is advised, and replying to such a greeting is compulsory, some Muslims believe that they are not allowed to respond to such greetings offered by a person of a different faith. Some other groups even went worse by advising a bad reply to such a greeting offered by other people.

Tolerance cannot be seen merely as allowing people to do whatever they wish, but more importantly, accepting different traditions and respecting other people who believe in and practice the traditions. The challenge is when the tradition is considered good for one group and harmful for others. The key for tolerance is two things: accepting the fact that other people believe in something that is unacceptable to others, and the belief, as well as the exercise of such a belief, does not excessively disturb others.

The third issue that teachers often found in their society is *prejudice*. The *prejudice* of opinions and suspicions of a person or group of people often happen between people of different religions or different denominations. Jennings (2014: 1) interestingly raised a question of the paradox between the positive images of religion and the prejudiced behavior that the followers show. Burch-Brown and Baker (2015: 784) suggested that specific beliefs, attitudes, and religious practices are very influential to the community's attitudes towards other groups.

Hence, a community could either be a promoter against or towards prejudice, depending on the three above-mentioned factors.

Prejudice is usually born from hatred or rumor that develops and influences public opinion. Inevitably, prejudice will emerge when people fail to understand the differences that others have, be the differences in religion, race, ethnicity, beliefs in practicing worship, and so on. During the discussion, some teachers suggested that the judgments of other groups often occur in the community. Here are some examples of prejudice that teachers share. Nowadays, it is easy to label someone or a group of people as radical because of their clothes, or similarly consider other groups to be heretical because they have different practices.

Prejudice often comes out as a result of misunderstanding or ignorance of others. Different religious groups certainly have different believe system and different cultures. Without knowing these differences, it is difficult to understand others, let alone to respect. In a country that different religions exist, competition between religious adherents is inevitable. Some groups will aggressively be recruiting new adherents or converts, others may be just defending their followers. As a result, there will be distrust among different religious believers, in such situation prejudice will take place among believers of different faiths. For example, when a certain religious group is helping other people of other faiths, there will be a suspicion that the religious group is trying to convert whoever they help. When the distrust has spread among different religious groups, social cohesion is at stake, and hence the unity is in danger.

The Challenge of Islamic Religious Education in Conservative Communities

One of the challenges of teaching religious literacy is gaining support from conservative groups. The results of the discussion among religious education teachers indicated that the main issues that they raised related to the issue of religious literacy. Religious issues actually have

long been discussed and discussed but continue to be debated. Aside from the above discussion, there are four categories of issues that teachers continue to face in teaching Islamic education.

First, the existence of hardline fundamentalist Islamic mass organizations or what Van Bruinessen called "semi-clandestine Islamic study groups" such as the Tablighi Jama'ah, the Salafis, and LDII (Van Bruinessen 2013: 29). The participants of the discussion were in agreement that this kind of group has a problem for multicultural societies such as in Indonesia. This is because these groups tend to present an exclusive face of Islam, which creates a distance and gap between people in society. Moreover, this kind of group also has a tendency to aggressively judge other groups that are opposite them, causing hatred from other groups.

Second, addressing the different religious interpretations that affect social lives. Religious teachings are written and developed based on the human understanding of holy books. For Muslims, principal resources for Islamic teachings are the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadith). However, Islamic teachings are not merely the Quran and the Prophet's traditions. Islamic teachings also include the interpretations of the two prime resources of Islam. It is Muslim scholars who explain and elaborate the general guidance of the Quran and the hadith into different branches of Islamic teachings.

As it involves human interpretation, differences of understanding and application are undeniable, especially in cases that did not exist during the era of the Prophet Muhammad. Take religious greetings as an example. Every year-end, Muslims (in Indonesia) are divided into responding to the Christmas celebration. The dispute is not about whether Christians can celebrate Christmas, in which every Muslim agrees that their Christian fellows have the right to celebrate. The dispute is about Muslim extending Christmas greetings to the Christians. Some groups of Muslims do not have any objection

to sending a warm Christmas wishes to their Christian friends or colleagues, others strictly prohibit any Muslim to send such a greeting as it means saying an agreement to what the Christians believe in.

In such a case, one can see the differences in the literacy of religions. While those who accept that sending Christmas greeting is nothing to do with the faith may not have good religious literacy, as they may just do it out of tradition, but those who feel their faith will be disturbed by sending greetings need to learn more about other faiths. This is important in order for them to know how someone can become a convert to a certain religion. So, the dispute came from the different interpretations and use of religious text. The first group argues that there is nothing harmful to any Muslim's faith by sending Christmas greeting or other religious celebrations, even the Quran itself wishing Jesus a peaceful birthday (QS 19: 33). So, sending Christmas greeting does not mean agreeing Christian's theology which is certainly different from Islam. The second group, on the contrary, maintains that the main difference between Islam and Christianity is the status of Jesus, so sending Christmas greetings means extending an agreement to the Christians' theology of Jesus. The worst thing comes when the second group judges the first group as having deviant faith.

Another example in this case is the Javanese tradition of *slametan*. *Slametan*, according to Kistanto is the world's most popular religious tradition. It is basically a family or local religious ceremony to thanking or asking the almighty to bless the good intention of the host (Kistanto 2016: 292). There are a variety of forms and reasons for having a *slametan*. It could be an expecting mother wishing her baby to be delivered well, a family sending prayers to other family members who just passed away, a community expecting a successful event, and so many other reasons. Now, although *slametan* has been a long time tradition in Indonesian, especially Javanese Muslims, not all Muslims can accept the tradition to be part of

religious traditions. For many Muslims, *slametan* is an implementation of thanking God by reciting prayers together in the community. The Quran teaches Muslims to express their gratitude to Allah (QS 14: 7), and *slametan* is one of the ways to thank God. For some other Muslims, *slametan* is a kind of heresy, because it does not have a basis in the holy book, nor it was practiced by the Prophet. Thus, different interpretations of holy texts make different religious practices in society.

Third, *justification of truth*. It is a common agreement to say that religion is a justification of truth, based on divine revelation and religious authority. In a multicultural society, however, a religious person may have to accept that the truth is not singular, it can be plural, truths. This means, although people who believe in religion may claim that their religion is the only true religion, they have to accept the fact that other people who believe in different religions will make the same claims. Some Muslim preachers, as true to some preachers of other religions, sometimes use strong words to explain the difference between their religion and others. The word *kafir* (non-believer) is very popular among the preachers in explaining the status of non-Muslims. The use of strong words or other expressions to explain about people of other religions can in turn harmful to society because the concept of the otherness will develop very strongly. Therefore, Nahdhatul Ulama recommended that the word *kafir* is not suitable to be used in Indonesia, because people of other religions can live together with Muslims (Syeirazi 2019: 1).

So, the justification of truth is not merely a claim without argument. It should be based on both literal and rational arguments. More importantly, justification of truth cannot be used to falsify other beliefs, as different claims of truth are based on different religious texts and traditions. In other words, one cannot falsify a truth claim with another truth claim using only one's perspectives. This is important to be noted in order for people of different faiths to respect other beliefs and live side by side in society.

Fourth, *tolerance*. Following the acceptance of other truth, tolerance is a non-negotiable attitude towards others. Tolerance, as we mentioned earlier, is accepting the actions of others who are considered wrong as fairness. For Muslims, religious activities of believers of other religions can be wrong, because they have different definitions of God and worshipping God in unacceptable manners according to Islam. So, tolerance means allowing those people to perform their religious duties without disturbing their activities. In fact, good Muslims should protect other believers to practice their religions. The problem is that not all Muslims can accept this attitude and try to exercise what they believe is right, as it is true to some other religions that try to persuade Muslims to change their faiths.

In Indonesia, tolerance is a light word to say. Everyone seems to have an agreement to be tolerant of others. However, it is easier said than done. Some people cannot accept different beliefs and practices in their neighborhood. Let alone different religions, even different traditions within the same faith can be a social problem. Tolerance is certainly not without limit. One can accept differences of faith and religious practice in a society with certain conditions. The major condition is so long as their religious and social rights are not distracted. When a religious practice violates the rights of others, the word tolerant can no longer be used. One of the recurring cases in this matter is the establishment of a house for prayers such as *masjid* and church. A religious community has the right to build a house for prayer or use an existing property to become a house for prayer, however, it is important to ensure that different communities of religious believers or non-believers can accept the existence of such a house. Thus, in this case, tolerance means believers of other faiths can accept the existence of a house for prayer that has nothing to do with their religious, and the existence of house for prayers does not violate the rights of believers of other faiths to maintain their faiths and to live comfortably in the area.

RESEARCH METHOD

this study aims to reveal how teachers deal with the problem of religious literacy in the communities where they live. The research data was obtained through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) attended by 28 religious education (Islamic) teachers from DKI Jakarta, Banten, and West Java. They are teachers in elementary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools who have had teaching experience for at least five years in their respective schools.

The main question raised through the FGD is how Islamic education teachers find religious problems in the community and relate them to religious education in schools. The identification of religious issues in society is important because religious education cannot be separated from the religious attitudes of the community.

The nature of the discussion is a semi-structured discussion, which means that participants are asked about certain social problems about religion they find in society, and they deliberately exchange opinions and share experiences. The opinions and experiences they share are examined internally among teachers to find the most popular and recurring problems that exist in different ethnic communities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

realizing the importance of understanding religions in the multicultural world, religious education experts propose the issue of religious literacy as a competency that a person must possess to create a harmonious multicultural society. In a research report, Biesta and others examine the possibility of religious literacy as the future direction of religious education. They found that the term "religious literacy" is actually not a new term in religious education. This term became increasingly popular after the publication of 'Religious Education in Andrew Wright High School' in 1993, although the term itself was used in several other documents long before (Hannam et al. 2020: 19). Religious education experts argue that because religion is not only believed

and practiced by religious education teachers, the responsibility of religious literacy does not only belong to religious education teachers. Hannam asserted that if religious literacy is considered important, it must be the goal of all education, and not just religious education (Hannam et al. 2020: 30). Dinham and Shaw also argue that teaching and learning about religion can occur inside and outside religious education (Dinham and Shaw 2017: 11).

It is undeniable that Indonesia is a diverse and multicultural country. Azra said that diversity in Indonesia is not only limited to multiculturalism but also is home to various religions that can live side by side in harmony and peace (Azra 2013). Echoing Azra, Alwi Shihab also said, that Indonesia is well known worldwide as a country that has different religious communities but can live in harmony. However, it is unfortunate that Indonesia is lately facing challenges from religious, ideological, and political conservatism. To maintain peace is not only the duty of Muslims but also a shared duty of followers of other religions (Shihab 2015: 167). Azra reiterated that acts of radicalism or terrorism up to the war that took place in various parts of the world, especially Indonesia, did not originate from the teachings of any religion, they (the perpetrators) were referred to as people who "thought astray and were on the edge of that religion" (Azra 2013: 207).

This study found several crucial issues that remain important to take care of within the context of religious education in Indonesia. The first is the issue of diversity and multiculturalism. One of the issues that will continue to attract scholars to explore is the diversity and multicultural society that Indonesia has. The important thing about the issue is not only important and supported by the abundance of data, but also it is increasingly important as the interaction between communities of different religions and ethnicity is also increasing. The cases of conflict between communities of different religions or different religious sects that Indonesia experienced in the last twenty years indicated that the awareness of diversity and multiculturalism remains a serious

problem. The main problem is not because Indonesian people do not agree with diversity and multiculturalism. It is commonly understood that Indonesian people are aware that Indonesia is a multicultural country and that the country is a home for religious diversity. Nobody seemed to refuse that the government officially recognize six different religious beliefs and also protect other “unofficial beliefs” that its citizen may have. The problem is how to interact and appreciate people with different identities. It intensifies when the conflict of interests occurs between people of different social identities. Commemoration of the country’s independence in August every year is a good example of how diversity seems to emerge. People of different religious and ethnic backgrounds work and celebrate together with the spirit of unity. The diversity can become a problem when political interest takes place. Contestation for a leadership position, for instance, can be a moment where different religious identities could be a serious problem.

Religious education should be able to provide a space for dialogue in cases such as the above. Actually, Indonesian Muslims are now more aware that Islam respects differences. Not only limited to knowledge and theory, but also in the practice of daily life, because multiculturalism does not conflict with Islamic teachings (Zuhdi 2013: 8). However, research showed that religious education was still unable to provide a full understanding of the concept of multiculturalism. One factor is that teachers who teach Islamic subjects do not seem to have a capable understanding of the concept of multiculturalism and practice. They also found the fact that, in some religious education schools, subjects were very minimal in demand and tended to be boring.

The second is the issue of tolerance. This problem arises as a result of the failure of solving the problems of multiculturalism as the above. The major issue of tolerance is a different understanding of the meaning and the application of tolerance. A major understanding of tolerance within the context of Indonesian society is

allowing other people to believe in and practicing their religious doctrines without making any connection with other beliefs. This sounds like a fair position in a pluralistic society. However, if we dig further, there are a number of issues that one religion intersects with others. This certainly has to be openly discussed among religious believers. Take the issue of *Nyepi*, for instance. There is a tradition among Indonesian Hindus to celebrate their New Year with a silent day, when everyone should stay at home and did not use any electronic devices, including burning fire for cooking. When *Nyepi* takes place on Friday, there will be a potential problem with Muslim communities that have to perform their collective prayers in masjid, similarly for Christians that may have to attend a mass in church. Another example is the destruction of houses of worship of other religions, or houses of worship of different religious groups are examples of how tolerance can easily be broken.

It is therefore there must be a dialogue about how far one religion can tolerate practices that affect other religions. Tolerance does not only mean letting others practice their beliefs but also understanding and for some people paying homage to other beliefs. Without mutual understanding, tolerance does not have a solid basis for standing and risking social conflict. Religious education or all forms of education must be able to facilitate students, who then become citizens who are fully responsible, to know and understand various beliefs in society. Dialogue between adherents of different religions must begin as early as possible to create mutual understanding and build mutual respect that can serve as a basis for tolerance. This lack of understanding and failure to respect other beliefs has created a number of cases of intolerance experienced by teachers (the subject of this study).

The third issue is prejudice. Lately, the issues of radicalism and terrorism have been widely discussed all over the world, including in Indonesia, and become a concern of most governments of all countries. Although one may say that majority of Indonesian Muslims condemn

radicalism and agree that radicalism is against religious teachings, the problem of identification of a radical person raises the issue of prejudice. This is a highly sensitive issue in Indonesia and around the world, and often becomes the background of conflicts. Radicalism is often associated with Muslims with the dark-spotted forehead, long beard, and fully-veiled women. In many cases, people with such appearances received discriminative treatments (Koura 2018: 4). There are a number of reasons why people tend to be prejudiced with others. One of the reasons is religious doctrines. Jennings found that religious preaching, songs, blind study of religious texts, and social interaction are very influential to shape people's actions and reactions towards different groups (Jennings 2014: 3).

Because a religious group can influence to spread prejudice among its members, the group can also be a significant driving force to reduce prejudice. Burch-Brown and Baker argue that religious groups can influence to reduce prejudice among its members. They further state that the effectiveness of influence depends on certain beliefs, attitudes, religious practices of the community, and interaction between the religious community and the wider community in which they live (Burch-Brown and Baker 2016: 799). It is interesting to discuss further the potential of religious groups to provoke or reduce prejudice. This is very important because many prejudices stem from misconceptions about religious beliefs. Therefore, the role of religious leaders is very important in directing society to be inclusive and more open to others or more exclusive and suspicious of others.

The key to openness in religious communities is interfaith understanding and readiness to accept differences. As far as we know, many Indonesian Muslims are reluctant to accept and suspect other believers for two main reasons. The first is the fear of becoming infidels or converting. The second is the fear of being separated from their religion and less concerned with religious matters. A further implication for this is the weakening of religion, namely Islam, the spirit

among Muslims. Fear arises because they do not have enough understanding of their own religion and other beliefs.

These are major challenges that teachers must seriously deal with in the midst of the development of social media and technology. Instilling a critical and open-minded attitude is needed to prevent these problems to grow. It is also very crucial to cultivate an attitude of not being overly fanatic about certain figures and blind faith (*taqlid*), and not instantly justifying various issues, information, and problems. Interfaith trust also needs to be cultivated and maintained so that religious people cannot easily be provoked. Getting used to having dialogues with different communities or entities and maintaining good communication can foster mutual respect and tolerance in students.

CONCLUSION

religious education has been part of the Indonesian education since the very beginning of the country's development. While in principle religious education teaches morality and good attitudes towards others, religious education continuously facing challenges that involve negative behaviors towards people with different faiths. Religious sentiments often reduce people's ability to have critical thinking and constructive attitudes. The case is worse when religious sentiments are combined with political and economic interests. Religion potentially becomes a unifying factor that makes society peaceful and harmonious, but it could also become a destructive factor that can make a society divided and conflict.

The long-run religious education that exists in a lot of countries needs to be revisited and reoriented towards the betterment of the pluralistic society. While it is important to teach religious knowledge and doctrines that make people more aware of the direction of their lives, being respectful towards others and the environment, it is equally important to introduce people with different religious beliefs and

traditions. It is, therefore, religious literacy is an important concept to consider in reviewing the direction of future religious education.

Proposing religious literacy as a future direction of religious education does not mean to weaken one's understanding of his/her own religious beliefs and tradition. In fact, by understanding other religious beliefs and practices, one can better understand the uniqueness or the distinction of their own religion. At the same time, one can also offer more respect and appreciation to other religious beliefs and traditions.

The issues of religion in society that teachers of Islamic education share through this research indicate the critical needs of religious literacy. Intolerance and prejudice can be best reduced through a better understanding of different religious traditions. Likewise, multiculturalism and tolerance can be nurtured through education that promotes religious literacy. As a number of scholars argue in this paper, religious literacy is not the sole responsibility of religious education teachers. Because despite that religious education teachers certainly teach religion, other teachers can also serve as religious education teachers through their own subjects. It is, therefore, before sending the messages of religious literacy to students and society, it is crucial to educate teachers about religious literacy, not only religious education teachers but also teachers of other subjects.

The effectiveness of religious literacy education is certainly depending on the policy of religious education. In the case of Indonesia, the objective of religious education should be reformulated beyond understanding and practicing students' own religious traditions, but also to include understanding and respecting the beliefs and practices of other religions. Moreover, religious education should also be able to guide students, as future members of society, to critically examine social issues that can be related to religions. So, critical and objective thinking skills need to be inserted within the context of

religious education.

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