

Promoting Islamic Religiosity in Connection with Local Cultures and the Nation of Indonesia in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract:

This study investigates how religion (Islam) is understood, confessed, and practiced to interact positively with local cultures and the concept of the nation as a uniting factor of the people in Indonesia. This research uses a qualitative method by reviewing relevant literature, observing, and interviewing informants in various higher education institutions on Java Island. Data were taken from Islamic Religious Education (IRE) or Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) course, interview with students and lecturers, and the course's accompanying programs administered by public and private universities in Java. The study results show that Islamic religiosity and appreciation of local cultures within the frame of Indonesia as a nation can go hand in hand. This mindset is achieved through a religious education course and its extra or co-curricular programs at universities in Indonesia, which aligns with the agenda of building the nation through being religious and maintaining harmony in diverse Indonesian society.

Keywords: Islamic Religiosity, Religious Education, Local Cultures, Nation-State, Higher Education Institution

INTRODUCTION

In the Indonesian context, Religious Education (RE) is taught according to students' beliefs, in a confessional way, based on one of the major religions in Indonesia such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The students and their teacher would share the same religion. Providing Religious Education (RE) subject is compulsory. Islamic Religious Education (IRE), like the other religions, is taught at elementary, secondary, and higher education (undergraduate) levels. It teaches students about Islamic belief, which is usually divided into three categories, creed (*aqidah*), law (*sharia*), and manner (*akhlak*). Although this division is debatable, it has become a standard categorization among religious scholars and laypeople when talking about Islam.

Religions taught in educational institutions may imply Indonesian people's religiosity. People, in general, see religion as an essential part of their life, and having a religion is highly valued. Religiosity is the whole function of the individual soul that includes beliefs, feeling, and behavior that is consciously and sincerely directed to one's religion. This can be in the form of rituals according to one's experience and knowledge. According to John L. Esposito, something is said to be religious when it is inseparable from religious practices and the elements that make it up in the form of religious experiences, myths, or symbolic stories (which are usually portrayed in a belief system that is adhered to or the scriptures believed by their adherents), religious rituals, community, and morality, as well as religious leaders (Esposito et al., 2014).

Similarly, Stark and Glock also explained that the dimension of religiosity consists of belief, experience, ritual, knowledge, and solemnities (Stark & Glock, 1974). Furthermore, Fetzer Institute pointed out that the religious dimension includes daily spiritual experiences (individual awareness of something transcendent that can influence a person's daily life), meaning concept (meaningfulness or desire to live meaningfully), values concept (influence of faith on daily life), belief concept (beliefs in something conceptualized by a religion), forgiveness (acknowledging mistakes or sins committed), religious support (an aspect of the social relation between an individual and other fellow believers), commitment concept (the extent an individual attach importance, commitment, and contribution to his religion), organizational religiousness (participation in a religious organization), and religious preference (the extent an individual makes choices within his religion) (Fetzer Institute, 1999).

People who confess to religion usually believe in the Ultimate or God and practice the rituals. Their actions might, in general, be influenced by the teaching of the religion they adhere to. This state of personal commitment toward their religion is thus called 'religiosity' in this study context. In Indonesia, religion is taught in all educational institutions. It is stipulated in the government regulation (PP No. 55, 2007) concerning Religious Education (RE). Chapter 1 Article 1 of the regulation says that Religious Education (RE) provides religious knowledge to form a character, action, or attitude and must be organized at least in the subject at a formal school or educational institution. Furthermore, Chapter 2, Article 2, and Article 3 state that Religious Education (RE) functions to form Indonesian people who have belief and piety to God have noble manners and can maintain peace and harmony between different religious communities. The educational institution must also administer religious Education (RE) at all levels (primary to undergraduate).

The legal aspect of Religious Education (RE), including Islamic Religious Education (IRE), is clear. Still, developing what and how to teach religion to achieve the goal

stipulated in the regulation is not decisive. Various religious understanding can perhaps fill this gap, including the so-called rigid or 'radical' view of Islam. The survey shows that there were many students and Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers who were exposed to conservative-fundamentalist, or what they call 'radical' interpretation of Islam that had an impact on tolerance in plural Indonesian society (Chamidi, 2020; Maulana, 2017; Nisa et al., 2020). In addition, there were growing exclusivist and radicalized outlooks in schools promoted by religious teachers and their textbooks which also featured a highly literal understanding of Islam (Abdallah, 2016).

Many studies have demonstrated that the Islamic resurgence emerged after the Indonesian reform in 1998. The current trends of Islam in Indonesia may be traced back to the 2000s, where Islamic movements started to spread nationwide. The activities endeavored to re-establish Islamic norms and values through social and political channels, although they did not aggressively challenge the existing form of Islam and the government (Rosyad, 2006). Likewise, in the last decade, Islam's face has become a more conservative interpretation in many aspects of Indonesian people's (Van Bruinessen, 2013). Thus, Islam is practiced in a way that shows the religious identity and forms an exclusiveness that tries to promote specific teaching or interpretation of Islam. It campaigns for the 'right' or 'pure' Islam by negating some socio-cultural-political elements considered not part of true Islam. Islamic movements such as the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and Ikhwan al-Muslimin through the *tarbiyah* movement take different forms and strategies in spreading their ideologies. They have mainly used the Campus Dakwah Student Organisation (LDK) in many colleges and universities in Indonesia to promote their aspirations (Mohamed Osman, 2010; Muhtadi, 2009; Rijal, 2011). Although the two movements have different approaches, the goal is similar, i.e., to replace the secular nation-state with the so-called Islamic polity to achieve a 'complete' Islam (*kaaffah*). Similarly, the Salafi activism among university students and in general often view that many aspects of social and cultural practices in Indonesia are not by the teaching of Islam, propagating the 'pure' Islam (Chaplin, 2018; Yakin, 2018).

Although the existing studies indicate that many schools and university students have been exposed to such a problem of ultra-conservative understanding of Islam, it cannot be generalized that the same situation is occurring within all educational institutions. Thus, further study is necessary. This research seeks to discover whether there are other trends or tendencies in understanding Islam in educational institutions. The focus of the study is to examine how Islam – as a religion and as a mandatory subject in all higher education institutions, especially public or state universities – is understood, practiced, and considered compatible with the local culture of the archipelago, particularly in Java Island. Internalization of Islam as being consistent with local culture and the view that substantially the religion and local tradition or culture share many common values is promoted systematically in public or state universities. This research is based on the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) or Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) course, with or without its extra-curricular program in Higher Education institutions on Java Island.

The data were collected from universities in the province of Jakarta, West Java, and East Java. Interviews and Focus Grup Discussions were conducted to find out the views and understanding of lecturers and students about Islam in four universities, Universitas Indonesia (UI) in Jakarta, Universitas Islam Malang (UNISMA) in Malang, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) in Bandung, and Universitas Negeri Malang (UM) in Malang. Beforehand, preliminary research was carried out using a questionnaire to map the contents

or materials taught in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course. The results of the questionnaire will be discussed briefly in the findings section. The observation was also used to gather data related to activities of students in the IRE course and co-curricular activities to see how religion, local culture, and nation discourse were conceived. Interviews were conducted with lecturers and students of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the four universities. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was also used to complement the interview result. The qualitative data obtained were then processed and analyzed to picture the facts and their relation to the phenomenon under study.

DISCUSSIONS

The main conceptual framework to analyze the data was drawn from the literature that conceptualizes the interaction between religion and culture. According to Abdurrahman Wahid, religion (Islam) and culture have their respective independence, but at the same time, both have overlapping areas (Wahid, 2010). The overlapping of religion and culture will occur continuously as a process that will enrich life and society. From there, the idea of the *'pribumisasi'* or indigenization of Islam becomes very urgent because this concept illustrates how Islam, as normative teaching originating from God, is accommodated into cultures that come from humans without losing their respective identities. This 'indigenization' is an effort to keep the Islamic teaching relevant to the culture it interacts with. The 'indigenization' or localization of Islam thus makes religion and culture not defeat each other. Still, it manifests in religious reasoning patterns that no longer take the textual form of religion and try to bring together bridges that have separated religion and culture. Thus, there is no inherent conflict between religion and culture. In practice, this concept of indigenization is intended to provide an opportunity for diverse interpretations in the understanding and practice of religious teachings in different regions.

Many Islamic movement activists from the HTI, Ikhwan al-Muslimin, and Salafi groups would oppose what Wahid and other similar modern Muslim scholars suggest. For the HTI, the system of government is not Islamic if it is not based on the Khilafah system, a symbol of Islamic political dominance throughout the 8th and 11th centuries under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties to the 15th century under the Ottoman. For the Ikhwan al-Muslimin's *tarbiyah* in Indonesia, the spirit of Islam should be formally expressed in all aspects of social and political life because Islam is both the religion (*al-din*) and the state (*al-daulah*). The Salafis, however, more often oppose the social and cultural practices in Indonesia, which they believe to be rooted in Hindu traditions, which according to them, are highly un-Islamic. The Salafis reject, for example, the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (mawlid *Nabi*) because it is considered a heretic innovation in Islam (*bid'a*). They also condemn the visit to Muslim Saints' (*wali*) tomb and the religious feast and prayer gathering (*slametan* or *tablilan*) to commemorate the seventh, the hundredth day, and a year of a person's death (*haul*). The historical past of Hindu-Buddhist tradition in Indonesia (Ali, 2011; De Casparis & Mabbett, 1993) perhaps has justified them to even more fiercely denounce any religious rituals that are not explicitly prescribed by the Qur'an or hadith. For them, religious practices must strictly follow the examples of the Prophet and his companions in 7th century Arabia.

The findings from the four public universities studied, UI, UNISMA, UPI, and UM, show that none of them had the kinds of understanding promoted by the three major Islamic movements in Indonesia. From the questionnaire, out of 68 respondents, 67

answered that the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course was taught by integrating multicultural values and appreciation of local cultures as part of a hidden curriculum, i.e., not explicitly stated in the syllabus. Meanwhile, one respondent answered that he had not integrated multicultural and local cultural values into Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning. It means that most actors in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teaching and learning appreciate diversity in understanding the religion and tend to look at the compatibility between religion and local cultures.

Data from the field to confirm the answers from the questionnaire were collected through studying the documentation such as the profile of the universities and, more specifically, by observing the contents in the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course outline. The first step was identifying study materials or lecture materials of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the universities, whether they contain multicultural values or local cultural values, such as kindness, justice, equality, and other values deriving from the local traditions. The second step was identifying the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning activities that lead to the understanding of the relation between religion and local cultural values.

Here are some findings from interviews and FGDs with the lecturers in the four universities. HA from Universitas Indonesia (UI) says that local cultures are an essential part of Indonesian society, where religion will inevitably interact with vast and various local traditions. Thus, in learning religion, there must be exploration and relatedness or relevance of how religious teachings are understood within the context of plural Indonesia. The concepts of Islam and traditional values are not contradictory. They are similar and complement each other such as the tolerance or *tasamuh* in Arabic words or Islamic values (interview with HA, a lecturer of IRE at UI).

Correspondingly, the informant at UNISMA also says that Indonesia has many local cultures, and the forms of local culture between regions are different. Still, differences are not used as a differentiating tool. Instead, they become a unifying instrument between ethnic groups and religions. Local culture can be used as a miniature character of the Indonesian people. Every Indonesian community has the same right to implement its local wisdom in developing the civilization and value of the Indonesian nation, as long as it refers to the four pillars: the Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, the Republic of Indonesia, and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (FGD with SM, CS, MA, and AS, IRE lecturers at UNISMA).

Furthermore, the university regularly organizes religious events; one *istighathah*, or congregational invocation to God, which allows students from different Islamic schools of thought or religious organizations to gather in one place. This is an indirect effort to promote unity despite various religious views. It gradually reduces the extreme truth claim that can lead to fanaticism or religious radicalism at worst. Students from different faiths are also enrolled in the Islamic university, reflecting Indonesia's harmony and heterogeneity. UNISMA does not have an extra-curricular program in its Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course. However, the dominant influence in the university still comes from the largest socio-religious organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which has long a long-standing attitude of harmonizing between religion and local culture.

Similarly, at Universitas Negeri Malang (UM), with regards to harmony between Islam and local culture, YH and AT assert that there is an appreciation of local culture in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), along with learning activities about *taubid* or monotheism, *mu'amalah* or good social interaction, and *akhlak karimah* or noble manners by prioritizing *al-wasatiyah* or moderatism values, the value of *rahmatan li al-'alamin* or mercy to

all beings, and the ideology of the nation (loving motherland is part of faith – Arabic sayings), by respecting differences across religions, cultures and national ideology since it is believed to be part of the Islamic faith. At UM, there is a standard norm to celebrate differences and accept local cultures that are not in conflict with the 4 pillars; Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, the nation-state of the Republic of Indonesia, and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (the national slogan which means Unity in Diversity) and that contain the aspect of usefulness and the greater good or *maslahah* (Interview with YH and AT, IRE lecturers at UM).

Likewise, in Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI), according to AA, in fact, in Islam, cultural and religious differences should not become an obstacle in people's lives or religion. The holy Quran explains, he asserts, according to Surah al-Hujurat verse 11, that humans are created with various characteristics of gender, social, ethnicity, and culture in the framework of the spirit of knowing self and knowing each other. Not only that, but this concept also suggests that humans interact extensively and intensively with people of different backgrounds, especially Muslims and other people. Islam in its development spread outside the region of the Arabian Peninsula to areas that were different from the culture in which Islam emerged. The interpretation of Islam and the cultural context is very important in understanding religious teachings. For example, EF adds, that in the hadith, the Prophet's companions were recommended to wear '*imamah*' or a headgear, a kind of turban during a prayer. And in another story or narration, what is meant by '*imamah*' is metaphorically the pride of the head or symbol of a community or a nation. This hadith is then applied according to the cultural context where in the case of Sundanese society, something traditionally worn on the head is called *iket* or blank in Javanese. So, the essential use of this type of clothing accessories is the same even though the physical shape is different. One can wear any headgear according to the tradition or culture of the community (interview with AA and EF, IRE lecturers at UPI).

In addition, regarding respecting differences, students at the Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI), in the extra-curricular program, were gathered with other students from various regions and different religious backgrounds. Little by little, as they interacted, they realized the diversity of Indonesian people. They begin to erode claims of a single truth or stop undermining people with different traditions and religious understandings. The difference in religious views and practices among Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdhaltul Ulama (NU), and others have also been experienced at the campus. They started to value diversity in Indonesian traditions, cultures, and the variety of religious understandings or interpretations (FGD with RN, AD, CT, and IRE students at UPI).

IRE, Its Co-Curricular Programs, and Multiculturalism

The Religious Education (RE) course, particularly Islamic Religious Education (IRE), is one of the compulsory subjects that all students must take from all departments. It is called general university courses (MKU), which consist of Religious Education (RE), Pancasila, Civic Education, and the Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia). The Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course that is offered in Universitas Indonesia (UI) and Universitas Islam Malang (UNISMA) is delivered without its extra-curricular or co-curricular program as in Universitas Negeri Malang (UM) and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). In Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) and Universitas Negeri Malang (UM), the case is a little bit different. Both universities have co-curricular programs

to complement the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course. It tries to relate the religious teachings with local cultures, although it is not explicitly stated in the course outline or syllabus.

Besides Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as the main subject, they organize a systematic program that is participated by students at a later stage of their study. In UPI, it is called SPAI. They manage extra sessions and the organization of religious learning outside the main class. The mentors are taken from senior students trained by the IRE lecturers at the university and must meet specific standards, including religious views, knowledge, and a 'moderate' understanding of Islam. This makes it possible that there is no room for a religious organization such as the Campus Dakwah Student Union (LDK) that can be influenced by the Ikhwan al-Muslilmin-inspired *tarbiyah* movement that idealizes the Islamic polity or the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) that promote Khilafah as the right government system, to promote their agenda. Instead, students are exposed to differences and diversity when they gather with other students from different cultural backgrounds during the university's religious sessions managed by the SPAI program.

The condition in the religious teaching at the university indirectly internalize the students to a more 'moderate' understanding of Islam. They respect differences and diversity in understanding religion. The program teaches them to see from various perspectives and values from local cultures that align with Islamic teaching. However, there are still challenges in the process since it is not easy for many young Muslims to think of the harmony between religion and local culture as both tend to be seen as separate and contradictory rather than sharing the same essence and complementing each other. It requires an intellectual exercise in understanding Islam from its original context in 7th century Arabia to the 21st-century Indonesian socio-cultural-political context. By understanding that *syariat* is a vast divine principle that guides humans in the world, which needs to be interpreted according to the time and location through *fiqh* – a continuous non-static process of comprehending the *syariat* – (Salim, 2008), the religion and culture can intertwine in inspiring the virtue in society.

Towards a Non-Dichotomous Understanding between Religion, Culture, and Nation

The teaching of Islam at the universities under study shows no contradiction between what is seen as wisdom in local culture and what Islam has brought to the society as sacred teaching from God or religion. So, this is in line with what Wahid said, religion (Islam) and culture have their respective independence, but both also have overlapping areas (Wahid, 2010). The overlapping culture-religion will occur continuously as a process that will enrich individual and social life. From there, the accurate idea of *pribumisasi* or the 'indigenization' of Islam (understanding Islam within the Indonesian context) becomes crucial because Islam, as normative teaching which comes from the divine message, is accommodated into a culture that shapes or is shaped by humans, without negating each other's characteristics.

The concept of 'indigenization' or localization of Islam allows culture and religion to intertwine by taking the essence of the traditional local value and understanding the context of religious teaching. This makes it possible for people not to fall into the literal understanding or take only the formal aspects of religion. Instead, it attempts to build a conceptual framework, on the one hand, where faith comes whether to accept, adjust, or negotiate with the existing local cultures or traditions to agree on the common ground.

Therefore, there is no innate conflict between religion and culture. In practice, this concept of indigenization, on the other hand, can provide an opportunity for the diversity of interpretations according to each different region.

Thus, by seeing the historical facts since the 7th century Arabia and the spread of Islam further outside the Arabian Peninsula, local culture and traditions have always been intertwined with religion, as seen in the development of theology and jurisprudence among Muslim scholars (different decision on some issues in extra time and place). In other words, Islam comes either to confirm, change, or adjust cultural ideas or practices in society. It did not emerge out of its contexts. This concept of cultural Islam extracts its substantive values and applies them to the current situation. There will not be a contradiction if Islamic teaching is viewed with its essence, not from its formality.

CONCLUSION

The growing Islamism with its various forms spreading across the places, especially in educational institutions such as public schools and universities, has marked some of the developments of Islamic religious understanding in Indonesia. The role of social agencies that appear in various figures, including teachers, lecturers, and other personas of religious authority, has a role in disseminating specific religious teaching and its interpretation. Although it seems to be a severe threat to the harmony of religious life in diverse Indonesian society, there are still more opportunities. The data from the recent studies on radicalism and intolerance among young people and religious teachers remain debatable because most people still regard the government system in Indonesia, the national principle, the Pancasila, and its constitution to be valid and not immediately contradictory to Islam. Conservative or fundamentalist view of Islam is perhaps a better term for the phenomenon. It is a problem of the intra-ummaic Muslim community that many cannot accept a different interpretation of Islam or variation of its school of thought. The Islamic Religious Education (IRE), as a mandatory subject at school and higher education levels, serves as a custodian of a more 'moderate' understanding of Islam despite its potential to be appropriated for different tendencies. The higher education institutions discussed in this study, through the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course, with or without its co-curricular program, have promoted Islamic religiosity in connection with local culture and multiculturalism. Islam is not seen as contradictory to the concept of the archipelago's Indonesian nation-state, democracy, and cultural heritage. It intertwines to make universal moral values with a complementary relation between Islamic religiosity, Indonesian identity, and its culture and tradition.

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