RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN INDONESIA

ABSTRACT

This article gives an overview of the historical conditions which have combined to produce an "Indonesian Islam" which is characterized by its openness to pluralist thought and religious diversity. It outlines some of the debates surrounding the role of Islam in the constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, and the delicate balancing act between a constitutionalized space for "religion" and the maintenance of religious pluralism.

During the past summer, the "Council of Indonesian Ulama" issued a series of *fatawa*, one of which declared "pluralism of religion" to be *haram* (forbidden) for the Islamic community.[1] This occurrence, combined with recent events such as the Bali bombing in 2002 (and sadly again in October 2005) and reports about the activities of extremist Islamic organizations, may suggest to many outside observers that the country with the world's largest Islamic population[2] has taken a turn for an exclusive and insular view of religion. Such a development could only bode ill both for open-minded Indonesian Muslims and for minority religious groupings in Indonesia. But as demonstrated by a subsequent storm of public discussion following these *fatawa*, the view of the Council was hardly held or accepted by a majority of Islamic intellectuals or the public at large. Leading Islamic figures took to the airwaves and print media to condemn the *fatwa* regarding pluralism in no uncertain terms (some commentators going so far as to suggest that it was the Council itself which was deviating from Islam). Indeed, for many, the *fatwa* against pluralism was seen as running counter to a long experience of religious multiplicity in the archipelago and certainly to the richness and diversity both of Islam itself and of religion in general within the present day Republic of Indonesia. For most observers of Indonesian Islam, its most remarkable features are nothing less than its creative and progressive outlook and its support of the pluralistic social reality that makes up present-day Indonesia. In order to properly understand this openness to plurality, but also the forces presently at play which threaten it, one must begin with a great deal of historical contextualization. It is crucial to be aware of the many waves of religions which have touched the shores of the various islands, the unique manner in which Islam has developed, and certainly the dramatic social and political changes which have occurred since the Republic of Indonesia declared its independence from the Dutch on August 17, 1945.

(I) A small history of a large and ancient society

As the great Buddhist temple at Borubudor (late 7th/early 8th century A.D.), or the majestic Hindu complex at Prambanan (10th century A.D.)) suggest, there is a long and varied religious history to Java and other islands in the Indonesian archipelago. With European mercantile and colonial expansion, largely by the Dutch, but also by the Portuguese, both Protestant and Catholic Christianity worked their way into the historical religious mosaic of this region from the 16th century onwards. Predating, and to some extent, continuing alongside these "new" religions were various ancient and indigenous forms of what might be termed animistic practice. It would be remiss not to mention here also the very early contact with traders from China (perhaps as early as the 4th century A.D.) and their Confucian-Buddhist orientation, and there is to this day a sizable indigenous Chinese community in Indonesia (about 3 per cent). But without doubt, the most significant religious arrival in the area has been Islam, brought by punctuated waves of Indian, Persian and Arabic traders since perhaps as early as the 9th century. In a slow, and largely peaceful spread throughout the region (though not entirely lacking in violence),[3] Islam became by far the dominant religious characteristic (in numbers, if not in political power) of the region by the early 17th century. This continues to be the case today, with Islam being the religion of close to 90 per cent of the population.

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Much attention has been paid to the way this transplanted Islam developed. A most seminal and controversial text in this regard is *The Religion of Java*[4] by Clifford Geertz which catalogues his field work in eastern Java in the 1950's. The fundamental claim of Geertz is that Indonesian Islam is "syncretic", consisting of various interwoven strands of differing practices, emphases and traditions within an overall religious unity. Geertz gives a typology of three distinct religious "variants" *within* Javanese Islam: *Abangan* (characterized by an acceptance of the Javanese animistic under layer of Indonesian Islam); *Santri* (marked by an emphasis on the clearly identifiable "Islamic" elements) and *Prijaji* (distinguished by its focus on certain Hindu elements mixed into Javanese Islam). While Geertz has been criticized for everything from bad methodology to an impoverished or narrow understanding of Islam, it is hard to deny that something "unique" occurred within the Islamization of Java and other Indonesian islands, and that a good deal of this uniqueness has to do with the contextualization or "enculturation" of Islam in this radically pluralistic environment. Far from the traditional centres of Mecca and Medina, and of theological orthodoxy such as Cairo, it is not surprising that unique forms of practice, learning, and transmission of the faith did occur throughout the archipelago.

This development of what might be termed a genuinely specific "Indonesian" Islam has spurred debate within the Indonesian Islamic community itself about its very Islamic identity. The foundation of the two largest mass-organizations of Muslims in Indonesia, Muhammidayah and the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), capture the subtlety of this debate. Founded in 1912, Muhammidiyah is often referred to as "modernist", though rather like Protestantism in Christianity this group might best be seen as "conservative revolutionaries": they embraced new scientific and secular knowledge, but at the same time wanted to go back to the basic sources of Islam, the Koran and the Hadith (Prophetic traditions). Hence Muhammadiyah (with about 30 million members at present) promoted a real openness to the "modern" world, but that very openness was to be rooted in the fundamental principles of the Koran; hence, this organization also maintains a literalist or puritan streak – a streak which can be in tension both with the acceptance of "modernity" and of "non-Islamic" indigenous elements.

The NU (formally established in 1925 and which presently claims approximately 40 million adherents), on the other hand, is often termed "traditionalist". However this too must be understand somewhat paradoxically: as representatives of some of the very specific features of Islam which had developed in Indonesia, and especially of the pesantren (boarding school) style of education in which there was emphasis on traditional learning (e.g. medieval and local interpretations of the Koran), the NU does defend a "tradition," and hence might be seen as conservative.[5] But the very tradition it defends is a "pluralist" one - rooted in the incorporation of a variety of diverse historical and local experiences and interpretations of Islam. Given the multi-faceted and in some ways overlapping aspects of these organizations, it is not surprising that the distinction between the two has become less obvious over the past decades, with all sort of accommodation being made by one or the other. From different points of departure, both organizations represent to some extent a blend of local tradition or custom (*adat*) with a concern for an authentic and genuine understanding of Islam. In short, these two organizations, both in their internal debates between members representing one particular emphasis within their own general 'orientations', and in their debates between each other, form an overall picture of an Indonesian Islam that is dynamic, open to question, debate, and new articulations. In different ways, both organizations emphasize the specific context of religion: in the case of Muhammidiyah, the context of the modern world; in the case of NU, the historical context of development of Islam in Indonesia.

Indeed, for many, the *fatwa* against pluralism was seen as running counter to a long experience of religious multiplicity in the archipelago and certainly to the richness and diversity both of Islam itself and of religion in general within the present day Republic of Indonesia.

(II) Islam and politics in post-colonial Indonesia

Despite the heterogeneous nature delineated above, the now "encultured" or "indigenized" Islam came to play a substantial role in the collective, common identity of the peoples of this multi-ethnic society. In places such as Aceh, this Islamic identity assumed a significant political aspect too – forming a core around which resistance to Dutch colonialism could be wrapped. In fact, throughout the archipelago, the influence of Islam as a unifying, anti-colonial force leading up to the declaration of independence in 1945 cannot be overestimated. In the 1945 debates around the constitution for the soon to be proclaimed Republic of Indonesia, "Islamic" nationalists who had played such a significant role in the anti-colonial movement were full of hope that a new constitution would in some way recognize Islam as the basis of the newly established state. Needless to say, this was strongly opposed by "secular" nationalists (most of who were not very "secular", but were in fact Muslims who simply disapproved of embedding Islam in the constitution). Constant discussion in the spring and summer of 1945 led to an agreement referred to as the "Jakarta Charter." This compromise aimed to satisfy the secular nationalists in that it named "five principles" (*Pancasila*) as the foundation of the state, but was acceptable to the Islamic nationalists because one of these principles was

formulated as "Belief in God with the obligation to practice shari'a for its adherents." This "Islamic" clause and its delineation of a foundational constitutional role for Islam was viewed as a threat by some non-Muslim "Indonesians", while Muslim supporters claimed that it simply expressed the Islamic nature of 90 per cent of the population. Moreover, it exempted other types of believers and hence was claimed by its supporters not to be damaging to religious tolerance.

To the chagrin of the Islamic nationalists, and the relief of many secular nationalists, this "Islamic clause" was dropped in the constitution finally adopted in 1945, and in subsequent variations of the constitution.[6] The five-principled *Pancasila* which was actually adopted and which in some form or another has laid at the basis of the self-understanding of the Indonesian state did include "Belief in the One and Only God", as well as formulating four other principles which can be summarized as "humanity," "national unity," "democracy" and "social justice." Even with the fall of the regime of Soeharto in 1998 and subsequent discussions of the constitution, there has been no foundational inclusion of Islamic law in the constitution and there has been the retention of the idea that among the founding principles of the state is the "belief in the One and Only God." Herein lays one of the most striking features of the contemporary Indonesian religious mosaic: a "constitutionalized" monotheism.

Of course, in some ways this feature may not appear so unique; in the Canadian context, for example, the preamble to the Charter enacted in the Canadian constitution of 1982 makes an explicit statement about the "supremacy of God."[7] And as in the Canadian case, the Indonesian constitution has always had a "qualifying" clause guaranteeing freedom of religion. What is different in the Indonesian case is that (in contrast to the Canadian tendency to avoid filling in this phrase with much content) the constitutional provision of "freedom of religion" has always been understood in the context of the principle expressing "belief in the One and Only God." As a result, there have been some limits on the public expression of religion: religious beliefs that promote polytheism for example, have essentially been unconstitutional. The public promotion of atheism too is clearly circumscribed by this constitutional monotheism. In some ways, the massacres of "atheistic" communists in 1965/66, while largely a politically rather than a religiously motivated occurrence, can be contextualized within the cultural realities which have lead to this constitutionally enshrined monotheism.[8] Simply put, the vast majority of Indonesians take religion seriously, viewing it as an essential component of both private and public life. The constitutional framework in Indonesia can be seen as expressing the worldview of a religiously oriented culture, rather than as some sort of "mandating" of a religious stance on the part of a citizenry. Nevertheless, this constitutional and legal expression of an already existing world view does condition and shape the development of public sphere, and the ongoing debate in Indonesia can largely be seen as one about the degree of specificity to which the majority religion should be expressed in this public space.[9]

(III) Religious pluralism "on the ground"

The monotheism expressed in the constitutional principle of "Belief in the One and True God" can be taken to express at least two significant facts about the role of religion in present-day Indonesia. First, the vast majority of Indonesian citizens, including members of non-Muslim religious communities, adhere to some form of monotheism. Second, there is a general consensus that religion has a public function, though this does not necessarily mean that it should drive the political process. This point is perhaps well summarized in the slogan popularized by the recently deceased Muslim intellectual Nurcholish Madjid: "Islam - yes; Islamic political parties - no". In an interesting way, it could be claimed that in its own unique context, the majority view in Indonesia is an expression of a desire not dissimilar from some of the original motives behind the so-called "separation of Church and state" in the United States; namely, the *protection* of religious life from undue influence by the state.[10] This religious life which is "protected" in *both* its private and public forms is itself "plural" – that is encompassing variously contextualized forms of Islam and other religions as well.

This is not to make the naïve claim that all of Indonesian Islam is benign and supportive of a pluralistic social reality, or that there has been no inter-faith conflict in Indonesia. The most recent bombings in Bali on October 1, 2005 form just one counter-example to the relatively peaceful existence of pluralized forms of both Islam and religion in general in Indonesia. But as in many places in the world, much religious conflict must be seen against larger political and economic factors. A good example of this is the recent Christian-Muslim conflict in the Moluccas. While this may appear on the surface to be a conflict between religious communities, the obvious question to raise here as in other cases is the following: Why do communities which have lived together peacefully for centuries suddenly erupt into violence? While there is never an easy answer to this question, in the case of the Moluccas Suharto's policies of "Javanization" (the exporting of people from the most populous island of Java to other islands with a different ethnic make-up) is at least partially to blame. This internal movement of largely Muslim Javanese affected the delicate demographic and economic equilibrium between the Muslim and Christian communities in the Moluccas; and there were only too many groupings with a purely political agenda which were willing to stoke this new state of affairs into open conflict. It was religious leaders of the two communities, acting in unison, who spoke out most strongly against the violence largely instigated by outside forces and stressed the traditional tolerance that had allowed these faith communities to live side by side for centuries.

(IV) Whither religious pluralism in Indonesia?

The official motto of the Republic of Indonesia is "Unity in Diversity." Given the vast geographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious variations within the archipelago, this motto is not only a national ideology but also a fair description of the diverse reality of Indonesia. The thrust of this brief exposition of this complex reality has been to

suggest that there is a lengthy and rich story of religious pluralism in Indonesia. Given the overwhelming presence of Islam in the archipelago, this religious pluralism is arguably rooted within a pluralistic sense inside Indonesian Islam itself. As is often experienced, both by individuals and communities, a pluralized identity can be an uncomfortable characteristic to bear, and both individuals and communities can be overtaken by the desire to solidify such an identity into a fixed, homogeneous and ultimately, exclusive unity. Such desires are at work within Indonesia today. For some Islamic nationalists, Islam remains a possible, and perhaps the only possible, dominant characteristic of a unified Indonesia. Within Islam itself, there are calls by some for a sweeping away of what some have called the foreign, "liberal" virus within the Islamic community, and which they view as affront to its very nature of Islam. Despite these tendencies, the vast majority of Indonesian Muslims remain explicitly or implicitly dedicated to the unique, historically determined nature of Indonesian Islam as accommodating a certain flexibility of practice and a variety of local customs and norms.

This openness to a plurality within itself is certainly one of the reasons that the majority Islamic religion has been so resistant to calls by some of its own members to enshrine "Islam" in an overt way in the constitution. At the same time, the seriousness of the religious outlook of the people of Indonesia means that some sort of purely "secular" public society and the relegation of religion to the private sphere is not an option. Hence, a complicated balancing act is undertaken in which both the majority religion of Islam and the minority religious communities of Christians, Hindus and Buddhists occupy a genuinely shared collective space, in which the specific varying practices are collectively fostered. The importance of the continued survival of such a uniquely constructed and collectively nurtured public space for a *plurality* of religious experiences matters greatly – for the communities themselves, for Indonesia, for Islam beyond the archipelago, and given the uses and abuses of religion throughout the world, for all of us.

Notes

[1] In issuing 11 *fatawa* on July 28, 2005, the Council ("Majelis Ulama Indonesia" or MUI) also took the opportunity to condemn "liberalism" and "secularism", as well as looking askance at many forms of inter-faith prayers and certainly roundly forbidding all interfaith marriage [this was in some ways the most peculiar of all the *fatawa*, since it seems to run against the Koran itself [5:5] which does allow the marrying of Muslims males to non-Muslim females "of the Book" (that is, Jews or Christians)]. At the same time, the MUI declared the 200,000 or so followers of Ahmadiyah (an Islamic "sect") to be "apostates".

[2] Of the just over 240 million inhabitants of Indonesia, approximately 213 million are Muslims; 14 million Protestant Christians, 7.5 million Catholic Christians; 3-4 million Hindus centered in Bali; 1-2 million Buddhists, and according to census figures from 2004, there were 411,629 members of "other" religions.

[3] M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 13.

[4] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[5] Geertz picks up on the Indonesian self-description of "kolot" to delineate this conservatism.

[6] The 1945 formulation of *Pancasila* was slightly altered in the preamble to the constitution of the "Republic of United States of Indonesia" which was in effect briefly from 1949 to 1950, and in a new "provisional" constitution in effect from 1950 to 1959, when the 1945 formulation was reaffirmed. The important point is that monotheistic religion is given a foundational, constitutional role, but the formulation of the principle "Belief in the One and Only God" makes no explicit reference to any particular religion.

[7] The reference to 'God' is in the preamble of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and reads as follows: "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law." Being Part I of the "Constitution Act, 1982", being Schedule B of the "Canada Act, 1982" (U.K.) 1982, c.11

[8] An excellent summary of the complicated religious and political intrigues, both behind Suharto's role and rise to power in 1965/66 and subsequent "Islamic" politics is found in Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[9] One of the pleasant features of the "public space" occupied by religion is the preponderance of official religious holidays marking all the major feasts in the Islamic, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist calendar

[10] As is well known, the general understanding of this separation has largely reversed itself in the subsequent two centuries, to where it is now thought that it is the state which needs protection from religion.