

Democracy, Militancy, and the Challenge of Interfaith Engagement in Contemporary Indonesia

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I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is the home to more Muslims than any other country on earth. The world's largest Muslim-majority country is not Saudi Arabia, where Mecca and Medina are located, or Iran as the home of Shi'i Muslim community, but Indonesia. Arab and the Middle East only cover some 20% of total Muslim population in the world. Indonesia is also the world's fourth most populous country and, according to a former US diplomat in Jakarta, Robert Pringle (2010), its third largest genuine democracy.

Robert Pringle's assessment might be apt at some point. Indeed, the country with some 88.7% of its 240 million professing Islam, witnessed, in the words of prominent anthropologist and Indonesianist Robert W. Hefner (2005: 272), "the formation of a movement for democratic Muslim politics that was second only to post-Khomeini Iran in scale and intellectual vigor" in the final years of the authoritarian Soeharto regime. Just as the Iranian Islamic Revolution that toppled Syah Pahlevi in 1979, the coalition that united to overthrow Soeharto in May 1998 included Indonesians from varied ethno-religious backgrounds with its key role played by a new class of Muslim intellectuals and activists (Hefner 2000) intent on providing solid Islamic bases for democracy, pluralism, egalitarianism, liberalism, and civil society.

If we use analyses of theorists Guillermo O'Donnell and Philip Schmitter, who identify a coalitional structure linking "exemplary individuals" and intellectuals to mass-based organizations in society as most pivotal for a successful transition to democracy (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986), Indonesia in the late 1990s probably was one of the most important centers of Muslim reformation in this planet.

The world witnessed the interreligious collaboration among those middle class intellectuals and activists who succeeded in driving people-power to topple the dictatorial Soeharto regime from his throne in May 1998. Since people power took over and the reformation "opened the door" for Indonesia, freedom has become a cheap thing. People can express their political wants and desires freely. Since then, political parties, NGOs and other organizations have mushroomed because freedom of expression, speech, and association was guaranteed by the law and constitution, an impossible feat in the past

Indonesia when this country was governed by military dictatorial regime.

On one hand, this is good news for Indonesian society, who had lived over 32 years (1966-1998) under brutal state intelligence agencies. Freedom is an "inborn right" for human beings that should be maintained. However, on the other hand, as an outcome of the freedom and of celebration of political liberalism, Islamic conservatives and radical Muslim groups¹ have been growing rapidly across the country (Ross 2001, Galvan 2001; Noorhaidi 2006). The problem does not lie in the growth itself of Islamic militant groups and "uncivil" Muslim groupings, but on what these intolerant groups have done in the pursuit of their objectives by committing violence and utilizing coercive ways to attack religious minority group that directly oppose the principles of human rights, human's universal values, the spirit of Indonesian reformation and pluralism, as well as the country's Constitution (UUD 1945) that guarantees religious freedom and ritual practices for its citizens. To some extent, today's post-New Order Indonesia, thus, has been an arena of competition between religious "radicalism" and "pluralism." Whoever wins the contest, then, will determine Indonesian politics and cultures in the future.

This piece will examine religious radicalism and violence as well as the challenge for democracy, interreligious dialogue and civic pluralism in modern Indonesia. The presentation of both "radicalism" and "pluralism" aims at fully understanding problems being faced by present-day Indonesian people, as well as avoiding extreme stereotypes. It is imperative to highlight that even those who know something about Indonesia tend

¹ The term radical/militant Muslim group refers to any Muslim group that uses violent ways and undemocratic manners to achieve their objectives. These radical Muslim groups, among others, include the Laskar Jihad, formed by the Forum Komunikasi Ahlulsunah wal Jama'ah under the leadership of Ja'far Umar Thalib, the Front Pembela Islam (FPI/Islam Defenders Front) led by Habib Rizq Shihab, the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI/Council of Indonesian Jihadi Fighters) led by Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, the Jamaah Ikhwanul Muslimin Indonesia (JAMI/Association of Indonesian Muslims Brotherhood) led by Habib Husain al-Habsyi, and the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI/Indonesian Party of Liberation), the Jamaah Islamiyah (Abdullah Sunkar and Abu Bakar Ba'syir) (Azra 2006; Hefner 2005).

to be in the grip of contending stereotypes. The first stereotype is that Indonesian Islam is “moderate,” “democratic,” “pluralist,” and “tolerant,” quite different from the terrifying Arab, Middle Eastern, or “Indo-Pakistani-Afghan” variety. The second stereotype is that, notwithstanding the moderation of its Islam, Indonesia is a “fragile, soft state,” at risk of succumbing to a theocratic, extremist, sometimes violent Islamic minority. To go beyond the stereotypes, circumvent apologetic explanation, and make sense of what is happening today within Indonesian politics and cultures, it is necessary to depict comprehensively issues of religious “radicalism” and “pluralism.”

The word “religion” used in this piece refers to both “doctrines” and “social capital” (e.g. religious teachings, texts, symbols, networks, institutions, organizations, and societies, among others) that can be used as a source of radicalism, fighting, violence, hatred, and hostility, and at the same time a resource for peace, dialogue, love, and reconciliation. Indeed, religion resembles “double-edged sword” potential for violence and peace, hate and love, conflict and harmony, division and union, and so forth. On one hand, religion can be waged as a “divide factor” to legitimize discrimination, injustice, and violence, and at the same time a “unite element” to boost a process of democratization, conciliation, and pluralism. Richard Solomon, President of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) correctly states, “While religion can and does contribute to violent conflict and extremism, it also can be a powerful factor in the struggle for peace, pluralism, and reconciliation.” Catholic historian Scott Appleby has captured well the problems of this religious ambiguity in his *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. I do believe this issue—the rivalry between radicalism and pluralism—is being faced today in all societies and cultures, not “unique” Indonesia.

I will assess Indonesia’s religious radicalism and violence and then followed by explanation of favorable factors for interreligious cooperation and inter- and intra-faith dialogue.

II. RELIGIOUS RADICALISM

There is a great deal of evidence of ethno-religious radicalism and inter-group riots, anti-pluralist movements, and other human rights violations committed by the militant groups in the post-Suharto Indonesia scattering from Aceh in the western part to Papua in the eastern one. Violent conflicts between Christian and Muslim militants in Ambon and Maluku, for instance, took some eight thousand lives. The mayhem began in January 1999 and escalated during the following three or four years (van Klinken 2007). In addition, located in the central part of Indonesia, Poso, the city in the Central Sulawesi province has been wracked by lengthy religious conflicts and *jihadi* attacks, causing a thousand deaths (HRW 2002, ICG 2007). Still, in the months following Suharto’s fall in May 1998, radical Islamist paramilitaries sprang up in major cities across Indonesia to destroy bars, discotheques, and

stores that sell alcohol, to close (some) churches, and other alleged centers, as well as to sweep western people.

On other occasions, these radical Islamist paramilitaries raided bookstores for left-wing and liberal literature, intimidated unveiled women, arrested an unmarried couple found sleeping in a hotel, and used machetes and cudgels to break up pro-democracy meetings and gatherings. Their violent and vandalizing acts continue. On October 12th 2002, a bomb exploded in the popular tourist resort of Kuta, Bali, in which almost two hundred people died, mostly foreigners and Australians. This terrorist attack was the largest in scale after those in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001. Investigations blamed the Jamaah Islamiyah, an obscure radical Islamic group that was unknown only a few months before the attacks. This group was suspected of having links to the al-Qa’ida terrorist network (Bertrand 2004, Abuza 2002). Less than one year after the tragedy, a bomb re-exploded at the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in August 2005, in which thirteen more were killed.

Besides blasting hotels and committing other deadly attacks, the radical Muslim groups had destroyed churches and closed others in West Java (the churches belonged to *Gereja Kristen Pasundan*—the Pasundan Christian Churches). Likewise those radical Muslim groups devastated Ahmadiyah² sect properties, such as Mosques, schools, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and offices in Parung-Bogor and Kuningan (West Java), Jakarta, NTB and other places. Moreover, they attacked and prohibited the *pesantren* (residential boarding school) of *I’tikaf Ngaji Lelaku* led by Yusman Roy³, the Cancer and Drug Rehabilitation Center under leadership Ardy Hussein⁴, *Salamullah* sect led by Lia Aminuddin⁵, and *al-*

² Ahmadiyah was founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1839-1908), who was born in the small village of Qadian in Punjab, India. In 1889, he declared that he had received divine revelation authorizing him to accept allegiance of the faithful (called “*bay’ah*”). There are two streams of Ahmadiyah, namely, Qadiyan and Lahore. The persecution of Ahmadiyah is not only in Indonesia but also in worldwide of Islamic regions, for example in Bangladesh. See Ali Dayan Hasan, “Breach of Faith: Prosecution of the Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh”, Human Rights Watch, June 2005 Vol. 17, No. 6 (C). Actually, in Indonesia, both Ahmadiyah sects (Qadiyan and Lahore), called Jamaah Ahmadiyah Indonesia (JAI), are the “legal Islamic sects” protected by the law since “colonial era”. By Indonesian government, Ahmadiyah had received “legal status” based on decree of the Ministry of Justice No. JA 5/23/13 on March 13 1953. Thus, the existence of Ahmadiyah in Indonesia is “legal”, not an “unlawful organization” (Rahardjo 2005). To know more about this Ahmadiyah in Indonesia case see The Wahid Institute reports at <http://www.gatra.com>

³ Yusman Roy, the leader of the *pesantren* of *I’tikaf Ngaji Lelaku*, an Islamic boarding school based in Malang, East Java, has taught using two languages (Arabic and Indonesian) in the shalat prayer. Roy, who was only trying to teach his followers a good way of praying was arrested and was charged with committing blasphemy. His use of the languages in the salat was considered a criminal act, and brought him to the jail.

⁴ Another case involving blasphemy accusations occurred in Probolinggo, East Java This time it was the ideas coming from a drug counselor at the Cancer and Drugs Rehabilitation Center (YNKCA) led by Ardy Hussein. Thousands of people ransacked the complex because of what had been written in the book aiming to help addicts, *From Darkness toward Brightness* (the title derived from the Qur’an *Min al-Dlulumat ila al-Nuur*). The foundation was closed and he and his assistants were arrested. Ironically, his

Qiyadah al-Islamiyah led by Ahmad Mushaddeq. Not only that, they provoked, intimidated, and attacked Liberal Islam Network⁶ activists, and the Institute People Children for Education and Advocacy office—an Islam-based NGO that counters the ideas of Syari'ah law application in Bulukumba, South Sulawesi.

Likewise, hard-line Muslim groups always seed terror, hatred, and fear to ones outside their groups, and commit violence and restriction by bombing and sweeping Western people. The most recent data shows that these hard-line Muslims took over local mosques, mostly in the cities of northern Java. After taking over mosques, they built new *madrasah* and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) to provoke hatred and enmity against non-Muslims, especially Christians and Jews, as well as local Muslims who are considered to be “less-Islamic.”

The depiction sketched above suggests that inter- and intra-religious relations, religious freedom, democracy, peacebuilding, and civic pluralism are under critical threat in today's Indonesia. The hazard basically comes from two main flows: (1) a strong wave of islamization as manifested by the formalization (and imposition) of Islamic law in several regions of the country⁷, and (2) a widespread of anti-pluralist movements and vandalistic, violent, and discriminatory acts against groups that implement religious forms different from the mainstream Islam. The latter cases are serious violations of human rights and threaten the very foundation of the nation and the pivotal strength of the country. Moreover, the outbursts of ethno-religious violence, some of which showed the telltale signs of old regime provocation (Hefner 2000, 2005) and other violent acts were linked to independent extremists, including one group with ties to al-Qa'ida (Abuza 2002, ICG 2005), have slowed the reform movement mentored by Muslim intellectuals and activists and put the Muslim community's pluralist experiment and democratic Muslim politics in question.

The problem becomes more complicated, since the Indonesian government did not show a firm attitude and resolute steps against the violators. The government

seems hesitant to protect religious freedom and pluralism. This can be seen from the hands-off way the state has dealt with those cases. Indeed, they have arrested “terrorist syndicates” who exploded the Bali hotels, the Marriot hotel, and the Australian embassy. Additionally, the government has captured those who are suspected by CIA as “al-Qa'ida linkage.” However, the government and the security forces did not prevent attacks committed by radical Muslims on certain targeted groups (e.g. Ahmadiyah, Shiites, and other local religious sects). They seem to be reluctant to perform effective measures to prevent terrorist actions since (some) security personnel, particularly the police, have so often been part of the law violators and the human rights transgressors. Politicians and government officials cannot fix this mess in national security because many of them have committed political violation of human rights (Wahid 2005, Barton 2004).

In brief, these human rights violation cases were supported and backed up by some (“anti-pluralist”) factions in the national and local governments (both province and district levels) and the security personnel.⁸ The government issued decrees prohibiting such organizations and religious sects or cults. Such decrees had been used by some security apparatus and Islamist groups to legalize their destructive and vandalistic actions. Some police members, security personnel and the government officials close their eyes (apathy) before law violations occur in the daily life of the country. These facts have made them reluctant to take punishment against hard-line Muslim groups. The Minister of Religious Affairs even regarded Ahmadiyah and other religious sects as deviated and deviating religious groups. Ironically, the minister condemned them based on the *fatwa* (Islamic edict) of *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (the Indonesian Ulema Council), not based on the laws and the Indonesian constitution. Since Indonesian government did nothing against radical Muslims gangsters and did not punish them, violence and human rights violation escalate elsewhere throughout Indonesia as noticed by Zumrotin K. Soesilo, a human rights activist (*Gatra*, 3/21/2006).

Socio-political analysts and religious scholars argue that the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) had participated in creating incitement, hatred, conflicts and violence (Rahardjo 2005, Assyaukanie 2007). Through *fatwa* (Islamic edict), they have condemned Ahmadiyah as a deviated sect, and pluralism, secularism and liberalism as deviated and deviating schools of thought. Such *fatwa* used by radical Muslims as a religious justification for their violence against ones/groups outside their mainstream. This is the *fatwa* of incitement of religious

followers, including small children, were evicted from their premises and are now virtual refugees. The children were also accused of blasphemy and shunned!

⁵ Lia Aminuddin or Lia Eden is a woman leader of the West Java-based Salamullah cult. She has admitted to receiving “enlightenment” and a “mandate” from an angel and God through a dream as *mahdi* (messiah) to teach/guide people to the right path.

⁶ Liberal Islam Network is the Jakarta based NGO that focuses on and promotes the ideas of Islamic liberalism, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, feminism and other universal values / principles, as well as counters Islamic fundamentalist movements. Founded by young intellectuals and activists, this NGO has become one of Islamic militant groups' target particularly in Indonesia.

⁷ With regional autonomy, some provinces such as Aceh have begun to implement Syari'ah law. Others, such as South Sulawesi and Banten have attempted to follow suit. Some regencies, including Bulukumba in South Sulawesi, launched in 2003 a bylaw implementing civil Islamic law there for all Muslims. The regent of Cianjur (West Java) required all government workers to wear Islamic clothing every day, and some men and women were afraid not to comply. Muhammad Ali, “Muslims, Minorities and the State in Indonesia”, *The Jakarta Post*, February 15, 2006. In Padang (West Sumatra), the regent has obligated the citizens to wear *jilbab* (women's headscarves) and suggested to non Muslims to wear it.

⁸ Collaboration between security apparatus and Islamic terrorists and gangsters is not the exception of the rule in the history of Indonesia. Australian professor Greg Barton in his *Indonesia's Struggle: Jamaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam* (2004) acknowledges the links between terrorism and the Indonesian armed forces that most experts sweep under the rug. The military also supported and fully backed up Muslim militant groups within anti-Christian jihad in the Maluku and Central Sulawesi in which thousands more were killed during communal conflicts from 1999 to 2002. Basically, Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), an organization that has a link to Al-Qaida led by Osama Ben Laden, was born as an unintended consequence of Indonesian military plots against Muslim radicals in the 1970s.

hatred. Unfortunately, some elite members of the nation's Muslim organizations (such as NU and Muhammadiyah) took silence toward the *fatwa*. It is thus a sort of a "vicious cycle of religious violence," namely, violence that involves both political power ("state-sponsored crimes") and religious authority ("religious-supported radicalism"). History has noted that the impact of violence and extremism involving both religion and politics was horrifying for humanity.

What has happened in today's Indonesia since the reformation in 1998 is a clear example of what peace activist Johan Galtung calls direct, cultural, and structural violence⁹. Structural violence is built based on the assumption that some groups, classes, sexes/genders, and nationalities should have more access to goods, resources (economical, cultural, and socio-political), and opportunities than other groups; then this assumption is brought to social, political, and economic systems that govern societies, states, and the world (Slattery, et. al. 2005). The term structural violence, Johan Galtung has said, refers to any form of injustice and inequality which is "internalized" by dictatorial regimes into socio-economic-political systems. Galtung uses the term "structural violence" because these structures of injustice and inequality can create direct or physical violence. Galtung (1996, 2005) argues that "direct violence," that is, physical/verbal violence against body, mind, and spirit of human beings, is mainly rooted in "structural violence" (sometimes called oppression) and "cultural violence," which is violence rooted in language, religion, art, and other primordial identities.¹⁰ Although direct violence, which involves physical, verbal, and psychological violence, is the most evident, it is only the tip of iceberg; the main roots of "direct violence" are systems, structures, and cultures (religious included) which maintain discrimination, inequality, and injustice.

⁹ Violence can be defined as "any physical, emotional, verbal, institutional, structural, or spiritual behavior, attitude, policy, or condition that diminishes, dominates, or destroys ourselves or the others" (Slattery, et. al. 2005, 33). It is important to know that violence is conceptually different from conflict. Conflict is normal, natural, ubiquitous, and forever while violence is not. Violence, unlike conflict, is related to behavior, and can be easily observed whereas conflict is more abstract so that it is difficult to detect. Violence is caused by unresolved conflict and polarization. Galtung defines polarization as "dehumanization of human being and social relations" (2005: 4). In addition, he says that conflict is "evident" in society, but this is not the case with violence. Hence, a conflict does not necessarily end in violence. What leads to violence is the failure to transform the conflict. The types of violent conflict can be varied. Riots are one of the most common forms, in which groups react and respond to an event that provokes violence when tensions are running high. Some scholars argue that cases of ethnic violence worldwide can be both defensive or offensive responses to changing opportunity structures, while others places more emphasis on the psychological responses that modify groups' perceptions of events and cast them as threatening, insulting, degrading, or inhuman (Bertrand 2004: 13)

¹⁰ For further explanation about the terms of direct, structural, and cultural violence, see the works of Johan Galtung, among others, *Essays in Peace Research* (Copenhagen, 1975); *Peace by Peaceful Means* (International Peace Research Organization: Sage Publications, 1996); "Peace Studies: A Ten Points Primer," paper presented at Nanjing University, China, 4-6 March 2005. Also visit Galtung's website at <http://www.transcend.org/>

Furthermore, the description sketched in the previous paragraphs suggests that what happens in post-Suharto Indonesia is not just inter-religious conflict but also intra-religious violence. Intra-religious tension is as powerful as inter-religious clash. Very often the religious conflicts that flare up have less to do with *what* one believes than with *how* one believes what one believes.

III. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: A NEW HOPE

In addition to those "scary events," there are a number of promising hopes for religious peace-building, pluralism, and interfaith dialogue in modern Indonesia. One of the most promising hopes lies on the facts that the country's Muslim majority remains pluralist, tolerant, and anti-violent movements. A recent survey of Indo Barometer, a Jakarta-based leading research center, shows that 88.88% of respondents of the survey disagree with the use of violence to battle "immoral behavior," and only 7.4% support it. The results also indicate that 96.2% of the respondents reject the use of violence to other religious followers (non-Muslims) and only 1.3% agree with it. Another significant finding of the survey was 95.4% of respondents agree that tolerance between all religions is vital, with only 3.5% considering it unimportant. In addition, most respondents reject the imposition of religious bylaws (63.3%), while 27.9% agree.¹¹

The critical question is: why do the majority of the Muslims remain silent? This is because they are afraid of militant Muslim movements, wait and see the right momentum, or have a lack of awareness of the threat and danger of violence? As a majority, they are also not solid, different from hard-line Muslim groups ("liquid majority" *vis a vis* "solid minority"). Hence those who are concerned with peace-building and pluralism need endeavors, actions, and movements to convince and awake "the silent majority" in order to oppose radicalism, certainly peacefully and nonviolently.

Equally important is the emergence of the application of cross-cultural/religious programs developed by education institutions, especially higher level education, to share a common commitment to interfaith dialogue and the promotion of peace. Education is central ingredient in supporting and promoting inter- and intra-religious relations since it has become the most paradigmatic of modern cultural institutions, and the great majority of modern Muslims desire for (UNDP 2003). As the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia has about 10,000 Islamic boarding schools (known *pesantren*) and 37,000 Islamic schools (*madrasah*) (Hefner & Zaman, eds. 2007: 173). If designed properly, these Islamic

¹¹ The survey was distributed in 33 provinces using multi-stage random sampling and face-to-face interviews with 1,200 respondents of all religions. Respondents were selected to reflect as closely as possible Central Statistics Agency demographic data. Pollster Indo Barometer conducted the survey in May 2007, to determine Indonesian Muslims opinions on terrorism and religious tolerance in their own country ("RI Muslims Remain Tolerant: Poll," *The Jakarta Post*, June 22, 2007).

academic institutions can be used as a potential resource for seeding Islamic teachings and cultures of tolerance, pluralism, democracy, feminism, and other Islamic universal values (Abu-Nimer 2003; Sachedina 2001). In the future, such institutions will be able to create cadres of pluralist and moderate Muslims to block radical-fundamentalist Muslim movements in the country.

Another promising hope, in addition to the facts of “tolerant grassroots” and “peaceful education,” is the mushroom of civic organizations, moderate Muslim groups, feminist communities, pluralist institutions, intercultural and religious associations, “liberal” NGOs, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Unfortunately these potential powers are lack of dialogue and engagement. They walk on their own paths and groups (read, “in groups”) and not try to reach other communities (“out groups”). Dialogue, particularly religious-based dialogue, is another significant “cultural approach” for building inter- and intra-religious harmony.¹² Dialogue in this context does not mean “face-to-face conversations” in seminars, discussions, workshops, or other public debates and formal forums; instead it is an ongoing communication process to understand thoughts, minds, worldviews, teachings, systems of belief, and philosophies of life of other communities.

As its most basic, interfaith dialogue is a simple concept: persons of different faiths (or even the same faith but different schools of thoughts—*mazhab*) meeting to have a conversation. But the character of the conversation and the purpose of having the talk are not simple to describe or categorize since they cover a variety of types. Leonard Swidler describes interfaith dialogue as “a conversation among people of different faiths on a common subject, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow” (Smock, ed., 2002: 6). Furthermore, Professor Swidler affirms that interreligious dialogue operates in three areas: the “practical” (collaboration to help humanity), the “spiritual” (experiencing “from within” by participating in the religious practices of other groups), and the “cognitive” (seeking knowledge and understanding of the others). My former professor, Mohamed Abu-Nimer classifies interfaith dialogue in three models: humanity models (working on humanitarian issues), harmony model (seeking the similarities within distinct religions as a bonding factor of tolerant-in-pluralism and peacebuilding),

and liberal model (dealing with, not only the similarities but also the differences among religions in order to comprehend their meanings).

Dialogue can be reached through negotiation, mediation, facilitation and so on by involving go-betweens and persons/groups from heterogeneous backgrounds as networks. These people should have similar concerns and objectives, including building peace and resolving the conflicts. They can be human rights’ activists, NGOs, interfaith communities, experts, Muslim militants groups, governments, stakeholders, educators, among others. Coordination among networks can strengthen and sharpen dialogue processes to seek common grounds and to get maximum outcomes such as what has been done by the West African Networks of Peacebuilding (WANEP) by involving a wide variety of actors who are concerned about inter-religious violent issues (Schirch 2006: 68).

Likewise dialogue can be achieved through informal ways. Dialogue is the cultural bridge to air deadlock, to enhance mutual awareness, to foster joint activities, and even to transform relationships between members of conflicting groups. Dialogue is an effective communication tool to create mutual understanding and mutual trust among warring parties. Many times tensions, disturbances, and conflicts often happened because of lack of communication. Human rights’ violations occur because of lack of dialogue. The Indonesian Ulama Council had issued *fatwa* as deviated and unlawful toward Ahmadiyah, Yusman Roy’s Islamic Boarding Schools, Ardhi Hussain’s Cancer and Drug Rehabilitation Center, Lia Eden of Salamullah, and condemned pluralism, secularism and liberalism as deviated and deviating schools of thought, from their own perspectives. They had no willingness to communicate with the targets (the subjects of *fatwa*). Therefore, dialogue requires commitment and willingness to seek “other truths”.

In short, such religious-based dialogue, both inter and intra-faith, can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from joint appeals by high-level religious leaders for an end to fighting, to attempts to develop mutual understanding and the recognition of shared values and interests, to grassroots efforts to encourage repentance and promote reconciliation. These types of ongoing, healthy and constructive dialogue can function as a way to move from the perspective of ethnocentrism (“inward-looking”?) to ethno-relativism (“outward-looking”?), to borrow the terms of Milton Bennett. Bennett defines the term “ethnocentric” as “assuming that the worldview of one’s own culture is central to all reality,” while fundamental to ethno-relativism is “the assumption that cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context” (Bennett 1993, 1-51). Those who actively engage in interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural encounters realize that moving from an ethnocentric perspective to an ethno-relative one is a lengthy, tiring journey. Here, those who are involved in the dialogue process need a strong commitment, significant motivation, and sincere intention to fully and totally engage with “outsiders” for the sake of inter-group peace and the creation of global justice.

¹² Examples of countries that use dialogue instruments to resolve conflicts are: the (1) Southern India. *The Council of Grace* brings together Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Sikhs in an endeavor to resolve conflicts. (2) The Middle East. *Clergy for Peace* brings together rabbis, priests, pastors, and imams in Israel and in the West Bank for pursuing peace and justice in the region. (3) The Pacific. *Interfaith Search* brings together representatives of many religions in Fiji in order to handle prejudices and misunderstanding as well as to promote mutual understanding, respect and appreciation for one another; and (4) Europe, the “Project: Interfaith Europe” is the “first undertaking of its kind to invite urban politicians and representatives of different religions from all over Europe in the cities of Graz and Sarajevo” (Benedek and Nikolova, eds. 2003: 166).

The importance of interfaith dialogue has also been asserted by Hans Kung, president of the Foundation for a Global Ethic, one of international NGOs promoting religious dialogue and peace. He says, "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions" (Kung 1998).

What can be inferred from this statement? Undeniably the investigation of the foundation of religions by cross-cultural understanding, education, interfaith encounters, and inter-religious dialogue, is the basis of sustainable peace-building worldwide. In the words of prominent Muslim peace scholar Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2002), interfaith dialogue or interreligious encounters is the miraculous way of transforming conflict and building enduring peace.

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