# SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

*Conceptual Paper*

# Islam-Christian Relations in Indonesia

## M. Zainuddin

*Department of Social Science, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training,*
*Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, East Java 65144, Indonesia.*

## ABSTRACT

Relations among believers of different religions are often characterized by conflict and disharmony. The interreligious conflict and disharmony are not in line with the doctrine and religious mission itself, which on the contrary promote peace and harmony. If the undesirable opposite happens, it means there is a gap between the normative teachings with the empirical reality. Why does that happen? This article reveals the issues related to the Christian-Muslim relations in Indonesia over a period of time along with the factors underlying the disharmony of Christian-Muslim relations in Indonesia. The method used to analyze this problem was the historical-sociological approach. This study concludes that the Christian-Muslim conflict in Indonesia is triggered by external rather than (internal) problems such as political and economic issues as well as the shalow understanding of the believers themselves.

*Keywords:* Christian, interreligious conflict, Islam, relations

## INTRODUCTION

The relations among believers of differing religions were in existence since the Prophet Muhammad's era where he served as the leader of the people and concurrently of the country. The Prophet laid the foundations of government and enacted regulations on interfaith relations known as "The Medina" (*Mithaq Medina*) agreement. The contents of the Charter of Medina, among others,

concern cooperation and mutual help between Muslims and Jews to confront those who attack against the holder of the agreement. The agreement in the Medina Charter was shared between Muslims and Jews in the city to maintain Yasrib (Medina).

The Medina Charter, also commonly called the Constitution of Medina, designed by the Prophet was a very brilliant idea , which was to give recognition to the principles of universal humanity in a plural society. That was recognized by many historians as a serious effort by the Prophet to build a civil society which inspires today's modern political order such as religious freedom, human rights and guaranteed security.

Pulungan (1994) illustrated the Charter of Medina in 14 principles, namely: 1) the principle of *keumatan* (civil society); 2) the principle of brotherhood; 3) the principle of equality; 4) the principle of freedom; 5) the principle of inter-religious relations; 6) the principle for the protection of the oppressed; 7) the principle of coexistence; 8) the principle of peace; 9) the principle of defense; 10) the principle of consultation; 11) the principle of fairness; 12) the principle of law enforcement; 13) the principle of leadership; and 14) *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* principle (those upholding the good and avoiding the bad).

## THE EXAMPLE OF TOLERANT ATTITUDE IN THE PROPHET'S ERA

Siradj (2006), for example, pointed out that there was a Christian named Bahira who realized danger to the prophethood of Muhammad, as the last prophet. Bahira realized that the safety of the Prophet was threatened. Then he reminded Abu Talib, the uncle of the Prophet to protect the Prophet from his enemies. Similarly, when the Prophet suffered psychological shock after receiving the first revelation, Khadijah, his beloved wife took the Prophet to Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a famous Christian monk. Waraqa calmed down the Prophet and assured Khadija that it was a sign of his prophethood. This was the example of the sincerity of the Christians (represented by Waraqa) in the history; they protected the Prophet from potential harm.

Similarly, the Qur'an also has noted the Islamic-Christian relations as stated in the following verses:

*In ar-Rum verse 2-4, Allah stated "Destroyed [i.e. cursed] were the companions of the trench [containing] the fire full of fuel, when they were sitting near it and they to what they were doing against the believers".*

*In al-Buruj verse 4-8, Allah stated "The Byzantines have been defeated. In the nearest land. But they after their defeat will overcome. Within three to nine years. To Allah belongs the command [i.e. decree] before and after. And that day the believers will rejoice".*

*In al-Maidah verse 82, Allah stated "You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers to be the Jews and those who associate others with Allah; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say "We are Christians". That's because*

*among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant".*

Qur'an puts sympathy over the "tragedy of Najran", the tragedy that befell the Christians in Najran (now a city located in the south of Saudi Arabia). They were tortured and burned in fiery trenches.

According to Siradj (2006) among the Arab tribes who sent a delegation to the Prophet Muhammad was the tribe of Najran. They were quite a large delegation, 60 people led by three recognized leaders: `Abd al-Masih, the so-called` Aqib; Abd al-Harith ibn Alqamah, a Nestorian bishop, and Ibn al-Harith, a leading figure of Bani Harith. They were welcome in the Mosque by the Prophet in Medina. They stayed at the Prophet's Mosque and partly in the houses of the Prophet's companions. They stayed a few days, even had time to do the church service in the Prophet's Mosque. Initially they asked for permission to perform church services outside the mosque, but the Prophet just let them do it in the mosque. While in Medina, the Prophet held dialogue with the leaders of the delegation. Before they returned, there was agreement between both parties which stated that the soul, religion and their properties were fully protected by the Prophet.

The same tolerance was accorded to by the Majusi to Muslims. History told us that the Zoroastrian community in Abyssinia received Muslim refugees led by Ja`far Ibn Abi Talib, which reached 100 people, 18 of whom were women.

Genealogically, the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions have the same lineage, namely through Abraham. Christianity was born as a divine religion through the Prophet Isa, while Islam through Prophet Muhammad. Jesus is a descendant of the Prophet Ishaq, one of the sons of Abraham. which then descended to the Israelites (Jews, sons of Jacob). While the Prophet Muhammad is a descendant of Ishmael, half-brother to Isaac, which then descended to the Arabs. Meanwhile on the teaching aspect, there is also a closeness and a meeting point between Islam and Christianity. Therefore, Allah encouraged humans to head to *kalimah sawa* ', to the belief in Allah, the angels, the Apostles, scripture and the final day. Driven by the spirit of *Kalima Sawa,* the Prophet built a community of Medina known as the "Constitution of Medina" (Siradj, 2006).

The harmonious relations among religious followers continued during the al-khulafa al-Rashidun, Umayyad period and Abbasids era. But the harmonious relationship from time to time was also marred by stains of crusade in the 10-11 century AD, mainly due to political and economic interests. This is according to Siradj (2006) triggered by the ambition of the kings in Europe and the Middle East to fight for the Jerusalem area.

Coward (1995) listed the encounter of Islam with other religions in six stages: beginning from the time of the Prophet in Makkah until the modern age today, where Muslims met with people of various religions in different parts of the world such as the Nestorian Christians and Monophysites, Mazdean, Sabian,

Melkite Orthodox, Jews, the Samaritans, the Haranian, the Manikhean, Buddhist and Hindu. Coward contended that historically during the Middle Ages, Muslims had more knowledge about other religions compared to non-Muslims, and had a more objective attitude towards people of other faiths than Christians. In the context of the current pluralistic world, Coward believed Muslims had the opportunity to formulate ideas on interfaith relations as they were pioneers in this.

## CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN INDONESIA DURING THE OLD ORDER PERIOD (1945-1965)

In the Indonesian context, since centuries ago, there have been many different religions: Hinduism, Buddhism and various beliefs, which include both both animism and dynamism. There was a tendency to mix the various religious aspects (syncretisms) especially in Java. Academic discussions on religious issues in the palaces in Java by the religious elite was also a common tradition. According to Ongkokham (1993), they were mutually tolerant. But it should be admitted, however, that religious differences or differences in opinion on theology also often led to bloody conflict.

The pattern of interfaith relations in the past was strongly influenced by the politics of religion as well as the stelsel politics of the colonial government. Each was left in an antithetical relationship, which involved competition. The colonial government practiced religious politics which emphasized dogma (teaching) not ethics (behavior). As a result, religious life lost its inspiration among the people. Also, the colonial ruling elite controlled interfaith dialogue in such a way that it was constrained to a large extent (Sumartana, 2005).

According to Sumartana (2005), since the 19th century AD, religions appeared in a formative phase characterized by an attempt to formulate teaching and education befitting the challenges that arise today. Contact relations with religious centers abroad led to the emergence of religious purification. Religious orthodoxy became prominent with new developments such as Christianity becoming Western-centric, Islam becoming Arab-centric, Hinduism becoming India-centric, and Buddhism becoming Srilangka-centric and Thai-centric. Such tendencies have had effects on current interfaith relations, e.g., the stigma of the Crusades and the wars between Protestants and Catholics in the history of Europe also influenced the sentiments of the Indonesian people. The long list of "religious wars" impacted religious harmony and contributed to conflicts in modern times, like that in Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Israel, Bosnia and in other places.

By the time Christianity came to Indonesia, most of the population had converted to Islam. Both religions were equally newcomer religions for Indonesia. Christianity came to Indonesia in conjunction with the arrival of the West (colonial rule) in the 16-17 century AD, while Islam arrived earlier (9-10 century AD) through Muslim traders from Arabia, Persia (Iran), or India (Gujarat) (Sudarto, 1999).

The roots of Muslim-Christian conflict had been in place long before their encounters in Indonesia. According to Cooley, as quated in Sudarto (1999), since the beginning the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia have shown tension. This is because, prior to entering Indonesia, these religions had competed and been in conflict with each other in West Asia, North Africa and Western Europe. The conflicts were then brought by these two religions into Indonesia. One of the reasons for conflict according to Madjid, as quated in Sudarto, was due to economic factors. The arrival of Western people, the Portuguese, English and Dutch to East Asia, including Indonesia, was to liberate their economic dependence on the Muslim world, which at that time dominated the world economy. However, Cooley concluded that the political aspect was the dominant factor affecting the relationship between Islam and Christianity in Indonesia.

Siradj (2006) asserted that the tension of Christian-Muslim relations was not motivated by factors such as creed or belief. As in the time of the Crusades, political and economic factors contributed more to the tensions. Politically, the position of Christianity as the religion brought by Dutch colonialism was less favorable than Islam. Christians were associated to the invaders. This tension was coupled with the political situation in Indonesia since the early 1970s. To address status quo, the New Order regime included the non-Muslim minority in bureaucratic circles and in organizations overseeing the management of economic resources. And at the same time, the New Order government also marginalized Muslims in those domains. Thus the issue of religion was considered normal in that imbalanced situation. Muslims politically opposed the policy of the state, and sometimes they turned to radical Islamic movements for support. Suspicion was escalating between Muslims and Christians. A number of groups had the privilege from the state from which their conglomerates emerged. This new rich group enjoyed the ruler status. On the other hand, the majority of Muslims were displaced and marginalized. This imbalance created economic disparities that lead to a prolonged crisis, which could explode at any time in the form of religious conflicts. The problems got more complicated as Indonesian politics was still far from being the true democracy that it aspired to be. Thus, the disharmonies among Muslim-Christian relations were not uncommon as it was motivated by political overtones than religious ones.

Another factor that triggers the disharmonious relationship between Muslims and Christians according to Siradj (2006) is due to the superficial understanding of religion among some Muslims. With a very superficial knowledge of religion, they often claim to be leaders representing the majority of the Indonesian nation. One example of superficiality is evident from the efforts of some people who claim to be religious scholars. They aim to replace Pancasila with Islamic principles by establishing Islamic state, a thought

that leads to the formation of a theocratic country. This of course is questionable: Would the Prophet Muhammad have approved such a doctrine (Siradj, 2006)?

Here, the two religions instill mutual hatred. The West, as a Christian representation expanded their economy to Indonesia with missions on Christianity propagating the religion. Islam, on the other hand see the West as the imperial power feeding the Christian missions. Both have interest and bring potential conflicts, during the colonial period, the Old Order and New Order eras.

Thus, if viewed from the historical perspective, in the colonial period, the tense relations between Muslims and Christians was triggered by evangelism (missionaries) who received big support from the Dutch colonial government, both in terms of political and financial assistance. During the Old Order, the tension between the two religious communities was aggravated while the discussion of the 1945 Constitution was going on, and during the period when the Constituent Assembly election as well as the 1955 general elections were held. In the preamble of the 1945 Constitution, "seven words"[1] associated to Islamic nuances were defined. The Christians regarded the seven words as efforts to establish an Islamic state. The words were then finally removed (Sudarto, 1999). According to Rabi' (1998),

the founders of the Republic of Indonesia, who also represented the majority of the people who are Muslims, aspired to establish Pancasila as the state ideology in an earnest effort to find a state system that ensures harmony and religious pluralism.

Motivated by the disharmonious relationship between religions, the New Order government through the Minister of Religion, KH. Muhammad Dahlan, held the "Top-Down dialogue " on 30 November 1967. But the dialogue which gave birth to the "Interfaith Council" was not considered successful due to the occurrence of interreligious conflict. Mukti Ali, the next Minister of Religion tried to formulate a dialogue which was grounded in good faith and which would foster mutual trust of each religious community. Finally Mukti Ali reformulated the "Interreligious Council" involving more religious leaders.

## HARMONY, TOLERANCE AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE OF THE NEW ORDER ERA (1966 – 1998)

Thus Sumartana (1993), further claimed it was evident that since the beginning of the New Order until now –both on the initiative of the government and the religious communities itself-- interfaith dialogue had been built, and even had become a national agenda for the sake of stability and successful development – though there were some people who claim that it was not successful due to the lack of mutual agreement between followers of the two religions, especially with regard to the principles of propagation. During the period

---

[1] The seven words are: "the obligation to enforce Sharia Law for adherents", of a series of words in the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution, namely: "The state is based on the Deity with the obligation to enforce Sharia Law for adherents".

between the years 1972-1977, it was noted that the government had organized dialogues which took place in 21 cities (Syadali, 1997).

In the decade of the 1980s to the present, dialogue initiatives in creating inter-religious harmony and understanding continue to be carried out, either by the religious elite, young intellectuals and the government itself, e.g. a dialogue organized by the International Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP) initiated by Djohan Effendi and his colleagues, institutional dialogue (institutional dialogue), the dialogue among the delegates from various religious organizations involving legitimate religious councils, such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Association of Indonesian Churches (PGI), the Conference of Catholic Bishops Indonesia (KWI), Parisada Hindu Darma, The Representative of Indonesian Buddhists (WALUBI) and so on. The transformative discourse of dialogue was often done by intellectuals or NGOs such as the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia or the Inter-Faith Dialogue (Interfidei / DIAN), Paramadina, Institute of Islamic and Social Studies (LKiS) in Yogyakarta, Institute for Pesantren and Community Development Association (LP3M) in Jakarta, Community Interfaith Dialogue (MADIA), and others. But the fact was, the tension and turmoil triggered by religious sentiment (Muslim-Christian) in some areas, such as in Situbondo, Tasikmalaya, Ketapang, Kupang, Ambon, Poso, Maluku resulted in the destruction of places of worship such as mosques, prayer rooms, and churches. This hampered the

Government's efforts to solve the problems of conflict. The conflict in Poso led to *Perundingan* (Negotiation) *Malino I* and *Malino II*. This was followed by other negotiations such as in the Maluku conflict resolution. Malino II negotiation was expected to generate a significant benefit in the creation of peace and harmony among religious believers in Indonesia. But even this effort, was unable to overcome and prevent the resurgence of conflict among religious believers. This phenomenon shows the gap (gap) between the ideals of religion (das sollen) as teachings and messages of the Lord with the empirical reality that occurs in society (das Sein).

Reese (1996) stated that imposing a particular religion on the people would endanger political stability. This was also explained by Spinoza, that the imposition of beliefs/religions on the people would lead to civil disobedience, and chaos in politics and religion. Therefore, according to him, the state should support tolerance to ensure the security of citizens. Oppression in the name of religion was opposed by Locke (1999), who added that religious tolerance should be extended to people of all variants of religious beliefs and rituals. But, Locke eliminated atheism in the expansion of the tolerance. *Second*, at the latitudinarianism stage, the country or region establishes a particular religion as the official religion. In this case, people do not have an obligation to embrace the official religion. Furthermore, it must be stated clearly that those who embrace non-official religions are not expelled from the country. The third stage is

pax dissidentium, and at this stage religious freedom has been completely owned by the people and endorsed by the state.

In this context, Indonesia as the country has come to the dissidentium pax stage, giving freedom to its people to embrace the six official religions endorsed by the state. At the institutional level and theoretically, religious tolerance policy has been formulated in the legislation, but at a practical level, such a great formula often cannot be implemented perfectly into everyday life as there are still social and religious issues which have not been solved. Therefore we need the synergy between the government as policy maker and the public as the doers. In making policy, the government should pay attention to the growing aspirations of the people, so that policies can be made applicable. The government also should proactively promote the establishment of religious tolerance and facilitate the public's willingness to juxtapose one religion with other religions or one school and other schools.

To arbitrate religious conflicts is not easy. The preventive required measure is to provide an integrated understanding of religion. Understanding of religion cannot be done partially as it may lead to misunderstanding of other religions. In this case Ali (1998) said that to understand religion integrally, several prerequisites were required. First, the intellectual needs to be able to understand the religion or the religious phenomenon as a whole and ready to comprehend all the information about other religions. Secondly, it needs

a considerable emotional state, not to be indifferent, as was done by the positivists. This does not mean that we agree with the notion that religion is only an emotional issue, because religion includes intellectual, emotional and volition. In understanding other people's religion there should be feeling, attention and matexis (participation). Participation is best learned through the constant interaction with people of other religions. This experience helps us to understand more about their religion, because their daily practice is sometimes different from the teachings that we learn from the book. Third, there is a will. This willingness should be oriented towards constructive purposes. The excessive love on one religion may eliminate appreciation of the differences among the religions (which should be avoided). Mukti Ali added that in addition to the three prerequisites above, humans needed to be equipped with first hand experiences. This is because the vast experiences will provide additional qualifications to understand other religions. Through experiences, one can absorb the thoughts of others, a wide variety of other's actions, feelings and ways of thinking.

## CONCLUSION

From the discussions, it can be concluded that there are three factors that lead to conflict in religious life: political, economic, and shallow religious understanding. To achieve the necessary religious harmony, the integrated understanding of religion including empathy, sympathy and habits for interfaith dialogue are important.

In general, religious life in Indonesia is harmonious, with some problems sometimes triggered by political and economic interests. Religion should be kept out of political and economic interests, and should play a role in the control of deviations. This can come about through interfaith dialogue.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

## REFERENCES

Abu Rabi', I. (1998). Christian-Muslim relations in Indonesia: The challenges of the twenty-first century. *Journal of Studia Islamika, 2,* 215-492. doi: 10.15408/sdi.v5i1.758

Ali, A. M. (1998). *The science of comparative religion in Indonesia.* Yogyakarta, Indonesia: IAIN Sunan Ampel

Coward, H. G. (1995). Religious pluralism and the future of religion. In D. Thomas (Ed.), *Religious pluralism and truth essay on cross cultural philosophy of religion* (pp. 89-90). New York, USA: State University of New York Press.

Locke, E. A. (1999). *The essence of leadership: The four keys to leading successfully.* London, England: Lexington Books.

Ongkokham. (1993). Religious pluralism in historical perspective. In *Introduction to the dialogue: Criticism and religious identity* (pp. 22-46). Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Institue DIAN/ Interfedei.

Pulungan, J. S. (1994). *Prinsip-prinsip pemerintahan dalam piagam Madinah ditinjau dari pandangan al-Quran* [The principles of government in the Medina charter are reviewed from the view of the Quran]. Jakarta, Indonesia: Rajawali Press.

Reese, W. L. (1996). *Dictionary of philosophy and religion: Eastern and Western thought.* Amherst, USA: Humanity Books.

Siradj, S. A. (2006). *Tasawuf sebagai kritik sosial* [Sufism as social criticism]. Bandung, Indonesia: Mizan.

Sudarto, H. (1999). *Islamic-Christian Conflict: Reveals the roots of the problem of relations between religious communities in Indonesia.* Semarang, Indonesia: Pustaka Rizki Putra.

Sumartana, T. (1993). *Dialog: Kritik dan identitas agama* [Dialogue: Criticism and religious identity]. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Institut DIAN/ Interfidei.

Sumartana, T. (1993). Towards interfaith dialogue. In T. Sumartana (Ed.), *Introduction to the dialogue: Criticsm and religious identity* (pp. 1-22). Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Institut DIAN/Interfidei.

Sumartana, T. (2005). *Pluralisme, konflik dan pendidikan agama di Indonesia* [Pluralism, conflict and religious education in Indonesia]. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Institut DIAN/Interfidei.

Syadali, A. (1997). *Ulumul Qur'an* [Quranic science]. Bandung, Indonesia: Pustaka Setia.