

ISLAMIC PLURALISM IN INDONESIA: COMPARING FUNDAMENTALIST AND LIBERALIST VIEW

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Abstrak: Pluralisme dianggap sebagai basis ketiga dalam menafsir keberagaman beragama, setelah eksklusivisme dan inklusivisme. Sejalan dengan sejarah pluralisme di Barat, pluralisme Islam di Indonesia juga bisa dikatakan sebagai kontinuitas dari dua paradigma keberagaman sebelumnya, yakni eksklusivisme dan inklusivisme. Meski demikian, aksi maupun reaksi yang dilakukan para pemikir fundametalis Muslim di Indonesia tidak bisa begitu saja dinafikan. Menurut kelompok terakhir ini, pluralisme adalah jalan berpikir yang “terlarang”.

Keywords: Pluralisme, fundamentalisme, eksklusivisme.

Introduction

We may define pluralism as “aboard term, applicable to any doctrine which maintains that there are ultimately many things or many kinds of things; in both this sense it is opposed to ‘monism’. Its commonest use in late twentieth-century philosophy is to describe views which recognize many set of equally correct beliefs or evaluative standard; and in this sense it is akin to ‘relativism’.”¹

Actually, pluralism—as the same as plurality—is a fact, although in the field of religious studies it is still debatable. We may see how the three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have lived in mutual respect and tolerant relationship for almost fifteen centuries ago. Religious pluralism is a phenomenon which has always been with us. So, like John Bowden clearly stated, “there is also religious pluralism within each of the monotheistic faiths.”²

Pluralism is the third basic ways to interpret diversity of religions: after exclusivism and inclusivism. According to Arvind Sharma, it is easy to summarize these three ways of religious diversity. She said: “If one religion thinks that it alone constitutes the road to salvation and the other religion simply does not, the position is described as exclusivist. If one religion continues to think that it alone continues the path to salvation but admit that other religion also go part of the way but not the whole way, which it alone does, then the position is described as inclusivist. If, however, one tradition thinks that all other tradition also continue valid paths to salvation, along with it self, then the position is described as pluralist.”³ In the line with Sharma, Rita Gross explained these ways in her article, *Excuse Me, but What’s the Question?*, and she added the recent model suggested by Paul Knitter in his book, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Orbis Books, 2003). According to this theology of religions, value judgment about the validity of various religions should be suspended in favor of learning more deeply what each religion is actually aiming.⁴

¹ See *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Routledge, London, 2000).

² Bowden, John, *Religious Pluralism and the Heritage of the Enlightenment*, in Boase, Roger, *Islam and Global Dialogue* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 13.

³ Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (New York: Orbis Book, 2005), 56.

⁴ Knitter, *The Myth*, 76.

Like the history of pluralism in the West, we can say that Islamic pluralism in Indonesia is a continuity from exclusivism and inclusivism. Some “liberalist Moslem” scholars, e.g. Nurcholish Madjid, Johan Effendy, and Gus Dur, struggled to reach it. Today, Sukidi said, it is not enough to talk only about inclusivism. We need pluralism to make deeper dialogue with other religions, not only in discourse but also in “practice”.

There are still many “fundamentalist Moslem” scholars that strictly reject and avoid this philosophical way of thinking. According to them, pluralism is the forbidden way of thinking. Islam previously stated that monotheism is the best way to understand religion. Monotheism is the only religious thinking of God, and pluralism—which tries to “converge” the truths—is truly opposed with monotheism.⁵ Accordingly, this group got the support from MUI (Indonesian Moslem Leader Committee), who announced the “prohibited” guidance of pluralism, liberalism and secularism.⁶

It is interesting to know that both “liberalist” and “fundamentalist” Moslem use Qur’anic verses in arguing their ideas. Both refer to the Qur’an, an Islamic holy book, to strengthen their argument.

This paper is going to explain about the argument of two groups, trying to find the “reason” behind their ideas. It will describe more specifically about Islamic pluralism, asserting that the differential paradigm between two groups of Moslem scholars is only a problem of interpretation of the Qur’anic text. In this context, we can refer to Khaled Abou el Fadl, the leading Moslem thinker, who say: “Ultimately, the Qur’an or any text, speaks through its reader”⁷

⁵ It is different with John Bowden’s thesis. According to him, “there is also religious pluralism within each of the monotheistic faiths.” (See: John Bowden, *Religious Pluralism and the Heritage of the Enlightenment*, in Boase, Roger, *Islam and Global Dialogue*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 13.

⁶ The guidance based on National Conference MUI VII, 26-29th July 2005. The number of this guidance is 07/MUNAS MUI/II/2005. The head of the conference is KH. Ma’ruf Amin.

⁷ Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 22.

Islamic Pluralism in Indonesia

Referring to Sayyed Hossein Nasr, a pluralistic Moslem philosopher, Islamic pluralism is a divine revelation. The differences among religion are explained in terms of the different manifestations through which the Real presents itself. Here, he is in the opposite view from John Hick who asserted that pluralism is a human phenomenon.⁸

In Indonesia, discourses about Islamic pluralism were becoming lustrous after the launching of the “guidance” of MUI which prohibited pluralism, liberalism, and secularism. There were two Moslem groups responding to this guidance: the “pro” and the “con” for Islamic pluralism.

A. Pro-Islamic Pluralism

To talk about the argument of pro-Islamic pluralism, I want to approach this issue from two points of view: historical and normative perspectives, emphasizing the second.

By the first perspective, we may find the teaching of Islamic pluralism from the history of the Prophet Mohammad in Medina, where people—Moslems, Jewish, and the small Christian community of Najran—had been living in multiculturalism and pluralism. Prophet Mohammad gathered people to the “Constitution of Medina” (*al-Mithâq al-Madînah*) and invited them to the agreement: protecting together Medina from enemies. They have the same rights and tasks. Moslems and Jews had lived peacefully there for a long time. What happened later when the Moslems chased the Jews out was a political issue. That happened because some Jews did not keep their promise to protect Medina from outsiders, and precisely they tried to cooperate with the enemy to attack the Moslems from behind: a conspiracy.

Nurcholish Madjid was sure that everyone who would try to read the essence of the “Constitution of Medina”⁹ would be presently

⁸ Muhammad Legenhausen wrote the article comparing the way of thinking between both of Sayyed Hossein Nasr and John Hick, *Misgivings about Religious Pluralism of Sayyed Hossein Nasr and John Hick*, al Tawhid, vol. 14, no. 04.

⁹ Some of the articles of Constitutions of Medina are bellowing:

Article 16: whoever of the Jews follow us has the (same) help and support (*nasr, ismah*) (as the believers), so long as they are not wronged (by him) and he does not help (others) against them.

surprised, because the concepts within the Constitution were too progressive involving religious pluralism.¹⁰ As Robert N. Bellah said, the system of Civil Society in Medina Era was too modern.

The social interaction between Moslems and Jews in Medina is the real fact of Islamic pluralism. Islam did not compel people to profess Islam and be Moslem. Prophet Mohammad did not force Jews to convert. He allowed people to believe their faith and worship God based on their conviction. This fact denies the claim assuming that Islamic teaching was spread by the sword: violence and war.

So, it was historically shown that Islam is full of pluralistic teachings. Prophet Mohammad taught his companions to be Moslem pluralists. A story of *hadith* said, one day while Prophet Mohammad is sitting with his companions, a Jewish corpse came. The Prophet directly stood up to honor that corpse. His companions asked him: “He is only a Jewish corpse, isn’t he!” But Prophet Mohammad said: “He is a human being, isn’t he?” In this story, he wanted to teach his companion to honor others: to make a harmony with others. And we know that harmony is one of values of pluralism.

In the second perspective, there are a lot of verses in the Qur’an describing plurality. Ali Asghar said “Islam not only accepts the legitimacy of religious pluralism but considers it central to its system of beliefs.”¹¹ Here are some of verses which Liberalist Moslems use to argue their philosophical idea of pluralism:

1. “Unto every one of you We have appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if Allah has so willed, He could surely have made

Article 25: The Jews of Banu ‘Auf are a community (*ummah*) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion, and to the Moslem their religion. (This applies) both to their clients and to themselves, with the exception of anyone who has done wrong or acted treacherously; he brings evil on himself and on his household.

Article 37: It is for the Jews to bear their expenses and for the Moslem to bear their expenses. Between them (that is to one another) there is help (*nasr*) against the people of this document. Between them is sincere friendship and honourable dealing not treachery. A man is not guilty of treachery through (the act of) his confederate. There is help for the person wronged.

¹⁰ Fridolin Ukur and Retnowinarti, *Pluralisme dan Demokrasi* (Jakarta: Badan Penelitian dan Pengembangan Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia, 1995), 60.

¹¹ Asghar Ali Engineer, “Islam and Pluralism” in Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (New York: Orbis Book, 2005), 212.

you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by meant of what He has given you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto Allah you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.” (5:48)

2. “There is no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error.” (2:256)
3. “Say: O ye that reject faith, I worship not that ye worship, nor will ye worship that which I worship, and I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship, nor will ye worship that which I worship, To you be your way (religion), and to me mine.” (109:1-6)

Liberalist Moslem argues by these verses that pluralism is a fact that we cannot reject, and is a phenomenon which God wanted to.

As it is mentioned in the *first verse*, if God really wants to make one single community in the world, He can do this, but in the fact He does not. This verse asserts that pluralism, including religious pluralism, is “supported” by God. In this context, the word “Unto every one of you We have appointed a (different) law and way of life” is very important and significant. The phrase “every one of you” obviously denote different communities.¹² Based on this verse, every community has its own way and law, as it is a fact that God sent a prophet to every community.¹³ As Qur’an said, “To every people (was sent) an apostle: when their apostle (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged.” (10:47)

There is another verse related with the spirit of pluralism that strengthens the freedom of belief and conscience. Allah said: “Mankind is a single nation. So Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He revealed with them the book with truth, that it might judge between people concerning that in which they differed. And none but the very people who were given it differed

¹² Engineer, “Islam”, 212.

¹³ In Islamic tradition, there are a lot of prophets from Adam to Mohammad. It is all about 124.000, include 313 *rasul* (messenger) and 25 prophets that are mentioned in the Qur’an. It is also convinced, based on the *hadith*, that in every 100 years there will be one reformer (*mujtabid*) among the Moslem, who will purify the teaching of Islam.

about it after clear arguments had come to them, envying one another. So Allah has guided by His will those who believe to the truth about which they differed.” (2:213)

The *second verse* asserted to us that religiosity is a free-choice of human beings. There is no coercion in “having” religion. Allah clearly stated that human beings can choose what religion they want to believe, because the essence of religion is “faith” which someone cannot get in a forced situation: he will only reach it philosophically, freely, and fairly by thinking. According to this verse, human beings should “activate” their mind to reach the “truth”, or say, to have a religion. It is forbidden to force another person to believe a certain religion. On the other hand, this verse teaches us not to claim the truth and salvation, because it will sociologically cause socio-political conflict to emerge, and then cause what we call “holly war” among religions. Perhaps, it is important here to look at Paul Knitter’s statement that each religion—as a way to viewing all things—is relative, limited, partial, and incomplete.¹⁴

The *third verse* makes the portrait of pluralism sharper. It allows everyone to profess his/her faith. To summarize this surah, Abdullah Yusuf Ali said, “This is another early Meccan Surah. It defines the right attitude to those who reject faith: in matters of truth we can make no compromise, but there is no need to persecute or abuse anyone for his faith or belief.”¹⁵

To encounter the views of Liberalist Moslem, Anis Malik Toha writes a book titled *Tren Pluralisme Agama, Tinjauan Kritis* (Trend of Religious Pluralism: A Critical View). In this book Toha tries to generally describe a history, basic principles, and the impacts of pluralism, to finally talk more specifically about Islamic views. According to him, there are two kinds of will of God: ontological will (*irâdab kawñîyah*) and legislative will (*irâdab shar’îyah*). Sometimes God created things based on His ontological and legislative will, e.g. goodness, truth, conviction, angels, and everything He wants and likes, and sometimes He created things only on ontological will, e.g. evil, wrongness, and everything He dislikes and hates. According to Toha,

¹⁴ See: Sukidi, *Teologi Inklusif Cak Nur* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2001), 4-5.

¹⁵ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur’an, Text, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an Inc. 2001), 1799.

Islamic pluralism has a unique character: (1) appreciating the basic differences among religions with its own characteristics, (2) identifying factors and mediums which push human beings to reach their perfection, and (3) naming everything by its name, without reduction and simplification by another definition.¹⁶

At last, Toha tends to reduce the meaning of Islamic pluralism, and tries to interpret it by his own “subjectivity”. Here, he often refers to an article written by Muhammad Legenhausen, *Misgivings about Religious Pluralism of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and John Hick*. He rejects the western scholars’ interpretation of pluralism. In his view, Islam has its own characteristic. Based on the Qur’an (2:256) he argues that we must strictly differentiate between goodness and evil, and between Islam and *kufur* (infidel). I think the conclusion of all things he argues goes back to Islamic monotheism: he believes that Islam is the only one religion which God wants it ontologically and legislatively.

B. Con-Islamic Pluralism

Fundamentalist Moslems argue their conviction minimally with three verses in the Qur’an. They are the following:

1. “The religion before God is Islam (submission to His will)...” (3:19)
2. “If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to God), never will it be accepted of Him; and in the hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who has lost (all spiritual good).” (3:85)
3. This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.” (5:3)

In the *first verse*, Allah has clearly asserted that the true religion before Him is Islam. According to Fundamentalist Moslems, here, Islam means the teaching which Prophet Mohammad taught and practiced it. Islam is absolutely the five pillars that Moslems must conceive, beginning with *syahadat* (the confession that Allah is only the true God and Mohammad is the prophet of Him). Other religions outside Islam are wrong and unacceptable. They tend to be exclusivist. This kind of conviction is strongly strengthened by the *second verse*

¹⁶ See: Anis Malik Toha, *Tren Pluralisme Agama: Tinjauan Kritis* (Jakarta: Perspektif GIP, 2005), 210.

which states that everyone trying to look for the truth outside Islam will not be accepted by God.

As Mustafa Ruzgar believes, the main point emphasized by these verses is that Islam is the final religion and is self sufficient.¹⁷ But, he also reminds us to critically look at the ambiguity inside these verses. The majority of Moslems have understood that “Islam” means a specific religion, has a specific meaning, and is the final religion. There will no more revelation after Islam.

So, the claimed self-sufficiency of Islam is closely related to the idea that Islam is the final religion. Since the previous age, Moslems believed that Islam does not need to learn from the other religions. It is opposite with *hadith* which order us to learn from anyone, anything, anyhow, even from a “pig” (to express something we hate). Here, Moslems seem to be rejecting dialogue with other religions.

On the other hand, Liberalist Moslems interpreted “Islam” in this verse as “a total submission of the will of the creature to the will of the creator”¹⁸. Interpreting this verse, Muhammad Asad wrote: “Behold, the only (true) religion, in the sight of God is (man’s) self-surrender into Him”. They conceived that Islam does not mean certain institutionalized religious law. Mahmoud Ayyoub has explained that term “Islam”, at the time of Prophet Mohammad and according to the Qur’an, is not the name of religion. He said:

“Islam is not, according to the Qur’an and early prophetic tradition, the name of a religion. Rather, it signifies the attitude of the entire creation before God. The term Islam, in this sense, applies to the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, to humankind and to everything that God created. This is the first and the universal plane of the meaning of the term “Islam”.¹⁹

I think it is important here to mention two others verses of Qur’an to show that Qur’anic text encourages a pluralist to approach toward other religions. This emphasis will be seen very sharply in these two verses:

¹⁷ Ruzgar, *Islam*, 163.

¹⁸ Mahmoud M. Ayyoub, *The Qur’an and Religious Pluralism*, in Roger Boase, *Islam and Global Dialogue* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 278.

¹⁹ Ayyoub, *The Qur’an*, 278.

1. “Those who believe (in the Qur’an), and those who follow the Jewish (scripture), and the Christians, and the Sabians—who believe in Allah and the last day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” (2:26)
2. “Whoever work righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily, to him will We give a new life, and life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.” (16:97)

Anyway, I believe that these two verses are more “relevant” to the essence of Islamic teaching of pluralism than exclusivism.

Conclusion

Based on previous descriptions we may conclude that the different ways to look at pluralism between Liberalist Moslems and Fundamentalist Moslems is an interpretational problem of the Qur’an. Both of them use the Qur’anic verses to argue their conviction and conceive them as a truth. Sometimes they use the same verse with a different interpretation, and they often use different verses to deepen their argumentation.

Imam Ali said that the content of the Qur’an is *ḥammâl al-wujûb* (multi-interpretable). Everyone may interpret a verse of Qur’an based on his “background” and socio-cultural setting. It is in line with what Khaled Abou el Fadl wrote:

“Any text, including those are Islamic, provides possibilities for meaning, not inevitabilities. And those possibilities are exploited, developed, and ultimately determined by the reader’s efforts—good faith efforts, we hope—at making sense of the text’s complexities. Consequently, the meaning of the text is often only as a moral as its reader. If the reader is tolerant, hateful, or oppressive, so will be the interpretation of the text.”²⁰

Pluralism is a fact. However, the difference between the pros and the cons of Islamic pluralism is a kind of plurality. We should not “problematize” religious diversity, because it is not a mistake. “The lamps are different, but the light is the same”, Jalaluddin Rûmi Said. Referring to Rita M. Gross, the essential question here is—instead of

²⁰ el-Fadl, *The Place*, 22-23.

debating pluralism; where it came from, why it persists, whether or not it should exist—how best to live with religious diversity.²¹

*Do you know what did Rûmi say farther?
Everything and everyone glorifies You in different ways.
Yet none of them is aware of the others.
Man disbelieves in the glorification uttered by inanimate things
But those inanimate things are masters in performing worship.
Nay, the two-and-seventy sects/nations, every one,
are unaware of the real state of each other and in a great doubt.*²²

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²¹ Knitter, *The Myth*, 80.

²² Jalaluddin Rûmi, in Paul Knitter, Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (New York: Orbis Book, 2005), 229-230.