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Javanese-Christian Church Belief and Inter-religious Dialogue

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Abstract

This study attempts to elucidate both of Muslim and Christian understandings toward the idea of religious pluralism, with the case study of Javanese-Christian Church of Pogung and its relation to the surrounding community. It provides the discussion with some theological analyses on how people conceive the meaning of truth and, how this has led to the possibility and necessity of a dialogue; more specifically how their religious doctrines maintain their communities in dealing with other communities. Based on the qualitative approach, wherein the data gathered through in-depth interview and observation, the result of this study revealed that dialogue must be based on personal religious experiences and firm truth claims. Without personal religious experience, there is no way of grasping what the dialogue is all about. Dialogue must be based on the recognition of the possible truth in all religions; the ability to recognize this truth must be grounded in the hypothesis of common ground and goal for all religions. Dialogue must be based on openness to the possibility of genuine change or conversion.

Keywords:

Religious doctrine, Religious pluralism, Dialogue

Introduction

Living in a multi-cultural and particularly a religious pluralistic society, is a new and challenging experience for most of the Christians and Muslims in Pogung. GKJ (*Gereja Kristen Jawa*, Javanese-Christian Church) of Pogung, a densely populated district in Yogyakarta near to

the campus of the Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), was established in 1983. Beside inhabited by Javanese Christians, the district is also inhabited by particularly, Muslims having deep root of the Javanese tradition. The life of the people has been familiar with religious tolerance since the early nineties. Along with the development of Islamic empowerment and a large-scale migration of students having more fundamental outlook of Islam as well as strong commitment to the development of Islam, the feature of the society in Pogung has changed, and the already established lifestyle in the area has shifted into a condition in which the Islamic feature is very dominant. The dominance of the Islamic features, particularly those having more fundamental view of Islam, is deemed to bring disharmony and sometimes friction with the GKJ as an institution and personally with Christians.

This paper depicts theological pressure experienced by the Pogung Christians and examines the Pogung Javanese Christian concept of inter-religious relation. It will not drive the topic into an exhausting discussion, but highlight experiences and traditions beneficial to the future of religious tolerance. Moreover, as an attempt to elucidate both of Muslim and Christian understandings toward the idea of religious pluralism, its also provide the discussion with some theological analyses on how they conceive the meaning of truth and, how this has led to the possibility and necessity of a dialogue; more specifically how their religious doctrines maintain their communities in dealing with other communities.

Method

Qualitative approach was chosen by the researcher to gather the data. In which technically, pre-observation was conducted before further discussed the topic pertinent to the GKJ's adherents of different backgrounds. Nine persons were involved in the forum: Pak Agus (the food court owner), Pak Bagyo (the village's administrator), Pak Slamet, Pak

Tukirin (church's worker), Pak Arif, Pak Gunawan, Mas Ito, Pak Purnomo, and Mbak Yuni (Pak Bagyo's wife). All of them joined the discussion by their own intention, while the church facilitated it. This forum was deliberately held to create a good atmosphere where everybody is able to experience the religious or ideological dialogue "from within", from which we attempt to seek understanding and "truth". An in-depth interview and observation was also conducted not only involving the church community, but the Muslim community as well. However, this could not be completely conducted because it found out some obstacles to do the interview with some of the native residents.

Engaging Differences

As mentioned before, the emergence of a number of Muslim 'fundamentalists' surrounding the Pogung district, leads us to think critically about the significant changes taking place among the GKJ and its adherents, and the Muslim residents. The use of 'fundamentalists' here basically does not refer to a particular religious movement, but rather referred to some Muslims having a similar way of life as those 'fundamentalists'. Diana L. Eck (2006) states that the term 'fundamentalist' is sometimes used as a shorthand for the energies of the many radical religious and political religious movement. However, the typology of using some specific terms does not always seem appropriate, and of course this term seems inadequate to the analytic task though this is probably the first thing scholars who study these movement will say (Eck, 2006).

Perhaps, it will surely be the question why we choose the GKJ mainly located in Pogung to be our subject of research. To answer this question, first, we see that the GKJ is the most possible object to observe further with regard to the time planning. It sounds trivial, but actually it is true. This kind of compromise is reasonable in doing this research. And furthermore, it is expected that we are able to analyze the object in depth.

Second, in recent years we see the growth of the fundamentalist Islam in Pogung is significantly increasing, and as a consequence, changes related to the community relation and communication gradually begin to appear. The very explicit phenomenon is the emergence of tensions which are supposedly potential to create disharmony between both of the GKJ adherents and the Muslims surrounding the Pogung district.

Within the period of almost ten years, the church has faced many discriminating treatments from the residents, especially in the last three years. Usually, as the church tradition, they announce some of the church notices, such as when a Christian pass away or other memorial agendas, or the announcement of the weekly congregation. Recently, they find resistance from their Muslim neighbors when they deliver the church's notices or announce congregations, especially when those are done approaching the Muslim prayer times.

This is the most frequent case underlying the friction. According to the Muslims, the church congregation sometimes involves the rumble of the *gamelan* (Javanese traditional music instruments) which may bother the Muslim prayer calls. A member of the GKJ church has told us that they sincerely bewared of that. The church has instructed its members not to loudly express their religious activities during the Muslim prayer times. They actually realize and know the root of the problem which often harasses the harmony. However, they also realize it is not easy to reconcile. The tensions still remain in their hearts.

For instance, Pak Tukirin, a church worker, told us about the situation a few years ago after the establishment of the church. He admitted that the relation between the church and the society around the Pogung district was harmonious. They lived in peace and tolerance toward each other. However, the situations fast change especially when a number of Muslim migrants, most of whom are students with their new 'style' of Islam, began dominating at almost every corner of Pogung.

To make the context more obvious, I need to demonstrate some accounts of recrimination by Christians. One day when Mas Ito, one of the GKJ members, returned from a Biblical teaching and passed the Pogung area while bringing the Bible in front of his chest, he was shocked by someone who called him '*kafir*'. The term '*kafir*', infidel, in Islamic understanding is simply referred to that person who does not believe in Allah. He is familiar enough with that word, even though he is not a Muslim. Interestingly to note, this experience precisely proposes the way Mas Ito to understand those types of Muslims, especially those who are considered as fundamentalists. He started to understand their ideological teachings, which are profoundly different from those of his Muslim neighbors. To some extent, Mas Ito began to realize that Muslims as well as Christians have distinct variants of ideology. In this way, I assume that the process of understanding toward inter-religious relations which began from his daily life experience which led to some possible disputes shapes what kind of attitudes that Mas Ito should take to address this particular Muslim community.

Another case happened to Pak Tukirin, a church servant. He has a family whose members believe in different religions. The communication within the family runs well even after he converted to Christianity. Nevertheless, in recent years, he has been threatened by some horrible experiences, especially when his parents passed away. He was not allowed by his Muslim relatives to touch and wash his parents' bodies just because he is a Christian. The treatment he found seems unfair. According to the Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*, the dead affairs are a kind of sufficiency duty or *fard kifaya*, a duty imposed on the whole community of Muslims. The duty will be abolished if at least a Muslim or a number of Muslims fulfill it. It has been mentioned that it is not obligatory for a Muslim to wash, to shroud and to bury his disbeliever relatives except if he is afraid of losing their bodies, hence he should bury them (Sabiq, 1983). Concerning the

case of Pak Tukirin, I would say that it is too excessive of the family if they forbade him to take part in preparing his parents' bodies. It is true, according to *fiqh*, that his participation in the preparation does not abolish the ritual's predicate of *fard kifaya* since it goes back to the participation of Muslims as a community; but it does not mean that he cannot participate in it as a member of the family.

For the question is, how serious and how radical can this possibility of change be in the Christian part? To refrain from clear-cut and absolute claims, it could be harder for a tradition than the others. Yet, I believe that when they have intention to accept the fact of religious pluralism, they have to learn how to refrain from such absolute claims, and to start respecting others of different ideologies.

The Way into the Future

The traditional Christian attitude to other faiths was formed in a period of substantial ignorance of the wider religious life of mankind, and it has recently been thrown into a ferment of rethinking by greater and more widespread knowledge. John Hick (1982) distinguishes three phases in the development of the Christian attitude to other world religions. Firstly, the phase of total rejection is expressed in the dogma that non-Christians, as such, are consigned to hell. Secondly, the phase of the early epicycles is indicated by the growing awareness among the Catholic thinkers of the reality of religious faith, the dogma thus stands that only Catholics can be saved, and the last, the phase which may be called as the "later" epicycles. Here the theological ingenuity goes to its limits to hold together the two propositions that there is *no* salvation outside Christianity, and that outside Christianity there *is* salvation (Hick, n.d.)

Judith A. Berling (2004) in her book *Understanding Other Religious World* also states that the one reason Christians have difficulties with the presence of other religious is due to the long history of Christian

exclusivism. The insistence that Jesus Christ is the only gateway to salvation: (“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” [John 14:6]) (Berling, 2004). Christian exclusivism is also related to the fact that allegiance to Christianity presents itself as a choice that entails renouncing all other religious options. Christians who hold strongly to this view are concerned that engaging with other religions might be disloyal or might even lead to conversion to other faiths (Anton, 2017; Freeman, 2017).

In another corner of the theological world, from the end of the nineteenth century, Christianity has begun to be engaged in dialogues with representatives of other religions. In 1893, the World’s Parliament of Religion was convened in Chicago in conjunction with the World’s Fair. The Parliament brought religious leaders from around the world to discuss their traditions and to enter into dialogue about the unity of the world’s religion (Berling, 2004). The challenges of developing understanding across the lines of different religions are perhaps best addressed in bilateral inter-religious dialogues, and many theologians and educated Christians have participated in such dialogues (Baatsen, 2017; Baptista, 2017; Clooney, 2017).

Here I am concerned primarily with discursive forum discussion, though with the understanding that this may pass naturally into a deeper interior dialogue, and also that a common concern about the world community is a very proper part of the agenda of inter-religious dialogue today (Gabriel, 2017; Grung, 2017; Körs, 2017). Discursive or theological dialogue, then, takes place sometimes within our discussion. We have some topic discussion on how they (Christians) see other faiths, particularly for the question of, “Are all religions equally ordained by God?”

Since its emergence as a Christian affiliation in 1983, the GKJ has promoted the church’s teachings and perspectives toward other religious adherents, especially toward the Muslim community. The GKJ’s

adherents, in parishes learning other religions and re-appropriating GKJ tradition in light of that learning will, very slowly and gradually, pave the way for Christian theological understandings of religious diversity. This learning seemingly is important for the church communities as well as for the individual who is engaged in it. As an attempt to understand other religious faiths, what is the GKJ's attitude toward other religions?

The GKJ has been respectfully aware of the fact of religious diversity. Its adherents sufficiently realize that learning other religions, being engaged in conversations with their texts and adherents, can rise mutual understanding with other religions believers. One cannot really be involved in a genuine conversation without opening himself to the views of the others; a conversation which entails both mutual influence and mutual criticism. Moreover, in the contemporary world, many people have complex identities because of movements across cultural borders, cultural choices, racial heritages or inter-marriages. One may come from multi-religious household, as what Pak Tukirin experienced in his family. Whatsoever, it seeks to honor two or more religious tradition.

A member of GKJ argues that learning about other religions is a requirement for living as a Christian in a religiously diverse world. This learning can create a foundation for informed and ongoing theological reflection. In doing so, the GKJ has proclaimed their theological understanding about the others. It has been recorded (the GKJ's Basic Teaching, 2005: 63), that "Christianity is essentially the same as other religions; Christianity has its privileges in essential which make it different from other religions. The privileges of Christianity lie in the order of doctrine, worship, law and congregations which are made in order to respond to God's salvation upon men through Jesus Christ."

The GKJ offers this decision for the necessity of Christian learning and embracing religious pluralism. First of all, they recognize other religions as simply there; they are a fact of their existence. Each person

has their own right to convert to a particular religion. “The attitude of believers towards other religions is to **recognize and respect the rights of other religious life**, including the right to be adopted, applied and proselytized, without falling into a mistake to equate all religions”. (GKJ Basic Teaching 2005:62). Such engagement enables them to appreciate more profoundly and to vivify their own form of religion. In this way, the GKJ intensely, if necessary, defends the rights of other religions which are treated unfairly. The engagement with other religions helps them to correct and transform their religion, so that it can move into the future, becoming what is meant to be (Kit, 2017; Nordin, 2017).

Here, I try to analyze the GKJ’s process of learning about other religions, particularly toward their Muslim neighbors. The articulation of these various threads is a device to bring the light to several facets of what is admittedly a complex process. Its purpose is to develop a particular form of awareness to each other. In this process, the GKJ tries to enter other worlds through engaging and crossing boundaries of significant differences. It could be seen when the church accepts the idea of openness to the Muslim community especially when the friction arouses. Furthermore, they become engaged into a series of conversations and dialogues both with the voices of the other tradition as well as begin the task of interpretation and understanding by responding from their distinctive religious locations. And in order to maintain new relations, practiced Christian faith is then based on this new understanding.

Another dimension of my attention to the GKJ’s basic teaching toward other religions is the freedom to choose and practice the religion based on human freedom to plan his own life, as given by God to humans. Therefore, the attitudes the church as well as those of the believers are: first, recognize and respect one’s right to decide, select and follow religion for themselves, second, respect freedom of every person to

leave the religion s/he followed and to convert to another religion.¹ This church's principle is rooted from the notion that humans' nature as social beings makes them always live together, and gives the freedom for every person to determine and follow every religion s/he intends. Within these circumstances, the Christian believers are eager to open themselves to dialogues and are willing to cooperate with other faiths, without reducing the slightest respect for other religions and the rights of their adherents. The believers are still preaching to the salvation of God to human beings and try to make others hear and answer to God's salvation. This notion is taken from the biblical teaching: "Preaching God's salvation is for the sake of human safety and walks on the principles of freedom, not to exclude other religions, nor coercion [Rm.10: 14-15]".

Conclusion

Both in inter-religious as well as in inter-Christian and inter-Muslim relations, dialogue and theology, will form a life-giving, constantly rotating circle. Both theology (the effort to understand our own selves) and dialogue (the effort to act with and understand others) will call unto each other, enliven each other, challenge each other, and transform each other. The GKJ as well as the Muslim community in Pogung need to talk to each other in order to create a mutual understanding among them.

I expect that the culture of nurturing and clarifying theology can also take place within dialogues between Christians and Muslim. For me, this is what I have stated before that to create inter-Christian or inter-Muslim dialogues needs the help of inter-religious dialogues. Paul F. Knitter (1984) has added such theological premises to each of the basic presuppositions for dialogues: firstly, the dialogue must be based on personal religious experiences and firm truth claims. Without personal religious experience, there is no way of grasping what the dialogue is all

1 GKJ Basic Teaching 2005:63

about. Secondly, dialogue must be based on the recognition of the possible truth in all religions; the ability to recognize this truth must be grounded in the hypothesis of a common ground and goal for all religions. Thirdly, dialogue must be based on openness to the possibility of genuine change or conversion (Knitter, 1985).

This might be consistent with what Jesus has said, “Seek first the Reign of God and its justice and everything else will take care of itself” (Matt. 6:33). Commit yourself first of all to acting together with your fellow Christians and your brothers and sisters in other religions in promoting the love, justice, and peace of God’s Reign and your theologies will take care of themselves (Knitter, 2002).

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