

# ABDURRAHMAN WAHID'S CONTRIBUTION FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN INDONESIA

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**Abstract:** By understanding the historical development of inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia and its global setting since 1970s from rhetoric strategy to meaningful encounter, this paper seeks to situate important contribution of Abdurrahman Wahid's legacy besides those of other key figures in the field. The paper will critically analyze how and why Abdurrahman's ideas and works in inter-religious dialogue are intertwined with his family and personal biography, socio-political context of the New Order and after and his traditionalist Muslim background. In particular, Abdurrahman's reinterpretation of Islamic texts, doctrine and tradition will be discussed in the light of his vision for Indonesian democracy. His notion of religious pluralism, tolerance, peaceful co-existence, mutual understanding, and indigenization of Islam will be explained as intellectual and political enterprises by which he navigates and challenges all forms of injustices especially created by the New Order's politics of fear, exploitation of anti-Communist sentiment, ethnicity, religion, race and inter-social groups (SARA) and developmentalist ideology under Suharto's presidency. His engagement in inter-religious dialogue will be read against the developing context of the New Order's post-1965 politics of religion to the 1990s re-Islamization, the persistent growth of Islamic sectarianism, exclusivism, and identity politics that eventually results in interreligious tension and mutual suspicion, especially between Muslims and Christians. The paper seeks to understand how and why Abdurrahman Wahid as a prominent leader of Muslims as majority group explores inter-religious dialogue as a means by which religious communities are supposed to contribute and work together in overcoming common problems faced by the society. His commitment for and advocacy of the local culture, tradition, minority rights, and Islamic inclusivism will be understood as his struggle as statesman, religious leader, public intellectual and social activist for the creation of equality and justice for all citizens and human dignity in accordance with Islamic teaching and principles of democracy.

**Keywords:** *Inter-religious Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Indigenization of Islam, Islamic Sectarianism, Identity Politics, Democracy.*

**Abstrak:** Dengan memahami perkembangan historis dialog antar-agama di Indonesia serta latar globalnya sejak 1970-an dari strategi retorik menjadi perjumpaan yang bermakna, paper ini akan menempatkan sumbangan warisan Abdurrahman Wahid bersama para tokoh kunci lainnya dalam bidang ini. Secara kritis paper ini akan menganalisis bagaimana dan kenapa gagasan serta karya Abdurrahman Wahid dalam dialog agama terjalin erat dengan biografi pribadi dan keluarganya, konteks sosial-politik Orde Baru dan sesudahnya serta latar belakang Islam tradisional yang menjadi basisnya. Secara khusus, penafsiran ulang Abdurrahman Wahid terhadap teks, doktrin,

dan tradisi akan didiskusikan dalam kaitannya dengan visinya tentang demokrasi Indonesia. Pengertiannya tentang pluralism agama, toleransi, hidup berdampingan secara damai, saling memahami, dan pribumisasi Islam akan dijelaskan sebagai ihtiar intelektual dan politisnya yang dengan itu ia melakukan navigasi dan menggugat segala macam bentuk ketidakadilan khususnya yang muncul sebagai akibat dari politik ketakutan Orde Baru, eksploitas terhadap sentiment anti-Komunis, SARA dan ideologi pembangunan selama masa Suharto. Keterlibatannya dalam dialog antar-agama akan dibaca dalam kaitannya dengan perkembangan konteks politik agama pasca-1965 yang dilakukan Orde Baru hingga re-Islamisasi 1990an dan kian mengerasnya Islamisme, eksklusivisme serta politik identitas yang akhirnya mengakibatkan ketegangan hubungan antar-agama dan saling curiga, khususnya antara Muslim dan Kristen. Paper ini berusaha untuk memahami bagaimana dan mengapa Abdurrahman Wahid sebagai pemimpin terkemuka Islam sebagai kelompok mayoritas mengeksplorasi dialog antar-agama sebagai sarana bagi komunitas agama untuk berkontribusi dan bekerjasama satu sama lain dalam mengatasi problem bersama yang dihadapi masyarakat. Komitmen serta pembelaannya terhadap budaya lokal, tradisi, hak-hak minoritas dan inklusivisme Islam akan dipahami sebagai bagian dari perjuangannya sebagai seorang negarawan, pemimpin agama dan intelektual publik serta aktivis sosial dalam upaya untuk mewujudkan kesetaraan dan keadilan bagi setiap warga negara serta martabat bagi semua manusia sesuai dengan ajaran Islam dan prinsip-prinsip demokrasi.

*Kata kunci: Dialog Antar-agama, Pluralism Agama, Pribumisasi Islam, Sektarianisme Islam, Politik Identitas, Demokrasi.*

## Introduction

Despite the fact that religious diversity has been part of Indonesian life from the very beginning, the idea of inter-religious dialogue emerge gradually as public discourse only in the 1970s. Particularly, the introduction of “comparative religion” by Mukti Ali at IAIN (State Islamic Institute) in Yogyakarta was a groundbreaking step<sup>1</sup>. However, even until the 1980s, inter-religious dialogue was understood and practiced mostly as a “rhetoric strategy” to prevent conflict among the existing religious groups. More specifically, it was primarily used to set up the ‘rule of the game’ for proselytization projects, especially among Muslims and Christians as the two largest religious groups<sup>2</sup>. Only since the 1990s, inter-religious dialogue has become more meaningful encounter for members of different religious communities both as instrument for overcoming real problems between them as well as a bridge for working together as equal citizens.

Obviously, this remarkable progress of inter-religious dialogue in the country was achieved through long winding road and hard works of so many actors and countless historical events. Abdul Mukti Ali, Nurcholish

Madjid, Th. Sumartana, YB Mangunwijaya, Djohan Effendi, Abdurrahman Wahid, Bikkhu Sri Panyavaro Mahathera, Franz-Magnis Suseno, Mother Gedong Bagus Oka<sup>3</sup> are among important figures who have laid foundation for that. Together with many others, they are the founding parents of inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia. This paper will focus on Abdurrahman Wahid’s ideas and his contribution to the development of inter-religious dialogue in the country. In fact, this paper is a part of my larger effort to map out the intellectual legacy of key thinkers of inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia<sup>4</sup>. I hope that my account will shed some lights on important issues, ideas, perspectives and analysis on the topic that might push both academic discussion and the practice of inter-religious dialogue in the country moving forward.

## A Biographical Sketch

Abdurrahman Wahid, the forth Indonesian President, was born in Denanyar, Jombang, East Java, on September 7, 1940, among the elite family of traditionalist Muslim environment. His father, Wahid Hasyim

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<sup>1</sup> Read A. Mukti Ali, *Dialog Antar Agama* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Nida, 1971)

<sup>2</sup> At the global context, the history of inter-religious dialogue in the Christian world also began only in the 1970s. The Second Vatican Council of 1965 in fact still assumes the superiority of Christianity (Catholicism) over other religions, while only until 1990 WCC laid more coherent theological groundwork for dialogue with other religions. Read Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 44-77.

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<sup>3</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid is well-known for his idea of the promotion of ‘culture of dialogue’, like Nurcholish Madjid is for his ‘inclusive theology’, Th. Sumartana for his ‘theologia religionum’, YB Mangunwijaya as ‘the father of the poor’, Bikkhu Panyavaro Thera is for his ‘sincerer heart, better world’, and Mother Gedong Bagus Oka is for her Ashram Gandhi and ‘spiritual journey through prayer’. For further discussion, please read Achmad Munjid, *Building a Shared Home Investigating the Intellectual Legacy of the Key Thinkers of Inter-Religious in Indonesia*, a PhD dissertation at Religion Department, Temple University, 2014

<sup>4</sup> Achmad Munjid, *Building a Shared Home...*

(1914-1953) was a five times reelected Minister of Religious Affairs during the period of Soekarno, the first Indonesian president. While his grand father, Hasyim Asy'ari (1871-1947), is the founder of *Nahdatul Ulama* (NU), the largest mass-based traditionalist Muslim organization in Indonesia. Thank to his family's position, since his childhood, Abdurrahman Wahid, or affectionately known as Gus Dur, has encountered so many diverse people, ideas, and worldviews. As a simple illustration, books and magazines of various languages, as well as newspapers published by Catholic-owned and other non-Muslim publications were abundant in his house in Jakarta<sup>5</sup>. Many guests of various strata and backgrounds constantly visit Abdurrahman's house. In addition to national leaders, many student leaders and young people also came regularly there. It was this kind of environment that surrounded Abdurrahman since his early life.

Being the oldest son, Abdurrahman was also frequently taken by his father to various forums and meetings. It was also while Abdurrahman was accompanying his father to a NU meeting in West Java that a tragic car accident happened causing the death of his father in a slippery rainy night in 1953<sup>6</sup>. A bitter-sweet memory that never leaves Abdurrahman resulting from his father's death is the fact that there was always a large crowd of people lining on the streets to pay tribute while Wahid Hasyim's dead body was transported by car the next

day from Bandung to Jakarta and from airport in Surabaya to Jombang. "What could one man do that the people would love him so much? Was there any finer achievement in life than this?" are among his questions that motivate Abdurrahman later in his human relations.

In 1954, now being an orphan and poorly doing in school, Abdurrahman then was sent by his mother to Yogyakarta, the center of education in Indonesia, to continue his study at junior high school. There he stayed in the house of his father's friend, Haji Junaidi, who was a member of Religious Advisory Board of Muhammadiyah<sup>7</sup>. During these years, three times a week he would also go to the *Pesantren*, i.e. traditional Islamic boarding school, of Ali Ma'shum of Krapyak, just outside the city. In 1957, after finishing his Junior Economic High School (SMEP) in Yogyakarta he commenced formal full-time *pesantren* studies at Pesantren Tegalrejo in Magelang, in addition to his part-time studies at his maternal grandfather's *pesantren* in Denanyar, Jombang.

He, then, moved to Jombang in 1959 to become a full-time student at Pesantren Tambakberas under Kiai

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<sup>5</sup> Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid, Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President* (Sydney, University of New South Wales Press Ltd., 2002), p. 49. For further discussion, most of my data on Abdurrahman's biography is taken from this book.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid...*, p. 50.

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<sup>7</sup> Muhammadiyah, the second largest mass-based Muslim organization, is a modernist movement organization founded in 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan, a schoolmate of Hasyim Asy'ari while they were in Mecca. However, since the main goal of the inception of Muhammadiyah is to carry out religious purification among the Indonesian Muslims, while NU, overwhelmed by Sufi tradition, is well known for its generous accommodation for the local culture—or even syncretic, according to certain perspective—the relation between Muhammadiyah and NU is frequently in tension from time to time. To some extent, it is analogous to the relation between Protestantism and Catholicism among the Christians.

Wahab Chasbullah<sup>8</sup>, one of his close relatives and another founder of NU, until 1963. To follow Barton, it is during these years that Abdurrahman's formal studies in Islam and classical Arabic literature were consolidated. Moreover, it was also during the years that his reading of Western ideas, especially in European social thought and the great English, French and Russian novels really took off. During the earlier years of his teenager, for instance, Abdurrahman has begun to self-educate himself with Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and Lenin's *Infantile Communism* thanked to the encouragement of one of his teachers whose political affiliation was PKI (Indonesian Communist Party).

His ideas on liberal Islam, including those concerning religious pluralism and inter-religious relation, in fact, have taken their shape since the very beginning of his life. In this case, in addition to the influence of his open-minded family and the cultural orientation of the modern Indonesian society towards pluralism and egalitarianism, according to Esposito, Abdurrahman's ideas is also deeply influenced by his tolerant Sufistic world of Indonesia's traditional Islam<sup>9</sup>. In short, Abdurrahman's intellectual development was shaped both by classical Islamic scholarship and modern Western learning that highly praises the idea of pluralism and tolerance. His close friendship with Ramin, an Iraqi Jew, while Abdurrahman spent his years as a

student in Baghdad (1966-1970), i.e. after his unhappy studentship at Al Azhar University, Cairo (1964-1966), illustrates this pluralistic view. Meanwhile, his social roles later in his career, such as being the Chairman of Jakarta Art Council (1982-1985) and of Forum Democracy, in addition to his three times re-elected presidency of NU (1984-1999), demonstrate how serious he has made any effort in achieving his dream concerning the pluralistic and democratic society of Indonesia. After his short-term presidency, Abdurrahman was back to his lifetime dedication as religious leader, public intellectual and social activist<sup>10</sup>. He spent the rest of his life by engaging and standing at the frontline on issues of inter-religious dialogue, including intra-religious dialogue among Muslims. His unconditional advocacy for the minority groups, the persecuted and victims of injustice remained unwavering. He passed away in December 30, 2009 due to several health problems but his legacy lives on<sup>11</sup>. Millions of people gather in many cities across the country every December to commemorate him, to take inspiration and learn important lessons from his life<sup>12</sup>. Several

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<sup>10</sup> His removal from power has been subject of controversy even until today. For an insider perspective on the last day of Abdurrahman's presidency, read Bondan Gunawan et.al. *Hari-Hari Terakhir Bersama Gus Dur* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2018) and for a recent book debating his removal from power, please read Virdika Rizky Utama, *Menjerat Gus Dur* (Jakarta: NUmedia Digital Indonesia, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Read my obituary for him, Achmad Munjid "Gus Dur's The Immortal Legacy" in *The Jakarta Post*, 8 January 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Besides annual commemoration events, some of his followers also published books as tribute to him. Read for instance, Husein Muhammad, *Samudra Kezuhudan Gus Dur, Sang Guru Bangsa, Sang Sufi dalam Kesehariannya* (Yogyakarta: Diva Press, 2019), Nur Kholik Ridwan, *Ajaran-Ajaran Gus Dur, Syarah 9 Nilai Utama Gus Dur* (Yogyakarta:

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<sup>8</sup> About Wahab Chasbullah read Greg Fealy 'Wahab Chasbullah, Traditionalism and the Political Development of NU' in Greg Fealy and Greg Barton (ed.s), *Tradisionalisme Radikal, Persinggungan Nahdlatul Ulama-Negara* (Yogyakarta, LKiS, 1996), pp. 1-34.

<sup>9</sup> Read 'Indonesia: Islam and Cultural Pluralism', in John L. Esposito (ed.). *Islam in Asia: Religion, Politics and Society* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1987).

organizations, like Wahid Foundation<sup>13</sup>, and social movement among young people of different religious backgrounds, especially Gusdurian Network<sup>14</sup>, were established and have been very active since to further develop Abdurrahman Wahid's legacy.

### **Inter-Religious Dialogue and Democracy**

Role played by Abdurrahman Wahid in the field of inter-religious dialogue is very prominent especially in the last two decades of his life. Since November 10, 1994 he has served as a member of the Presidential Board of World Council on Religion and Peace (WCRP)<sup>15</sup>. Previously, in August 1993, he was invited to Manila, Philippines, to be honored with Asia's equivalent of a Nobel Prize, Ramon Magsaysay Award. This is recognition for his contribution to inter-faith understanding. In fact, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Barton<sup>16</sup> records, he has actively sought out opportunities for exchange and dialogue between Indonesia's faith communities and leaders of religious

communities around the world. However, in my opinion, the roots of his ideas in this subject of inter-religious dialogue in fact can be traced even back to the earlier years. This is reasonable with regard that, for him, the exchanges and dialogues are part of the educational process needed by the Indonesian society about modernity and democracy, as well as part of his mission as leader of NU to set an example of how Muslim society should develop<sup>17</sup>. What I am going to do in the following pages is to reconstruct his main ideas on inter-religious dialogue based on some key points from his spread articles, interviews and speeches, as well as his own engagement in many inter-religious dialogue works.

As a caveat, with regard to Abdurrahman's position as organic thinker and social activist who is always engaged in empirical problems of his people, his thoughts on inter-religious dialogue should be understood within a particular framework: the establishment of Indonesian democracy and its challenges. Abdurrahman's thoughts are part of his efforts in navigating the complicated challenges to establish a true democracy based on the reality of local culture, religious diversity, and the common ideal set up by Indonesian founding fathers. For him, inter-religious dialogue is never for itself, but a means to achieve the embodiment of a democratic modern Indonesia. Inter-religious dialogue should not only be a project of building superficial peaceful coexistence among religious communities, like the one

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Noktah, 2019), Fathur Rohman and Ahmad Saefudin (eds.), *Merindu Gus Dur, Antologi Esai Pemikiran Sang Guru Bangsa* (Yogyakarta: Komoyo Press, 2018), and Nur Kholik Ridwan, *Suluk Gus Dur, Bilik-Bilik Spiritual Sang Guru Bangsa* (Yogyakarta: Ar-Ruzz Media, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Wahid Foundation was established in 7 September 2004 and has been very active in Indonesia and across the globe in promoting tolerant and peaceful Islam. For more information about this organization, please visit their website here: <https://www.wahidfoundation.org>

<sup>14</sup> For more information about Gusdurian Network and its activities across Indonesia, please visit <https://www.gusdurian.net/id/>

<sup>15</sup> Douglas E. Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia: Democracy, Islam and the Ideology of Tolerance* (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), p. 45. See also Abdurrahman's interview with *Kompas Daily*, November 27, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> See Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid*, p. 197.

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<sup>17</sup> Douglas E. Ramage, "Demokrasi, Toleransi Agama dan Pancasila: Pemikiran Politik Abdurrahman Wahid" [Democracy, Religious Tolerance and *Pancasila*: Political Thoughts of Abdurrahman Wahid] in Greg Fealy and Greg Barton (eds.), *Tradisionalisme Radikal...*, p. 219.

carried out by Suharto's New Order government. Instead, it should be oriented to develop a real sense of solidarity and mutual understanding among faith communities.

This is the most crucial thing; so far we did not have any program—at the national level—to develop mutual understanding and solidarity among religious communities. What we have is only a program of [pseudo] tolerance, to show respectful restraint from each other. The term created by the government perfectly reflects the reality: The Harmony of Religious Communities. Which means nothing but harmony. Harmony means peaceful coexistence—without necessarily mutually understanding each other. Whereas in fact, what we should develop is a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding<sup>18</sup>.

This has been his position from the very beginning. That is why Abdurrahman rejected when, being a member of the Executive Board of government-sponsored Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI)<sup>19</sup>, he was designated to represent the Council in the Forum for Religious Harmony. It is exactly because, for him, there is no dialogue in such a forum. What happened there, instead, is a series of monologue where each party talks only

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<sup>18</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Dialog Agama dan Masalah Pendangkalan Agama" [(Inter-)Religious Dialogue and the Problems of Religious narrow-mindedness Process] in Komaruddin Hidayat and Ahmad Gaus AF (eds.), *Passing Over, Melintasi Batas Agama* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama and Paramadina Foundation, 1998), p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> He was appointed as a MUI Board member (1985-1990) and was never re-appointed since then. MUI itself was established by the New Order regime in 1975 as a stamping body from the Muslim communities for the government's programs. Read also Greg Fealy (eds.), *Tradisionalisme Radikal...*, p. 166, and also Darul Aqsha (eds.), *Islam in Indonesia: A Survey of Events and Developments from 1988 to March 1993*, (Jakarta: INIS, 1995, p. 200).

for itself without listening to others. "We do not need that type of dialogue," he once insisted<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, he argues that tolerance among the existing religious communities is only a lip service. "Our tolerance and solidarity are not sincere," he argues<sup>21</sup>. In Paul Knitter's words what Abdurrahman means must be the "lazy tolerance"<sup>22</sup>.

As already have been much discussed by many scholars, by exploiting anti-communist spirit, the New Order military regime was established in the wake of 1965 bloody communist massacre based on the politics of fear called SARA (*suku, agama, ras dan antar golongan*; ethnicity, religion, race and social group)<sup>23</sup>. Religion, ethnicity, race and social groups are treated as extra sensitive issues that should be banned from public discourse. People are not allowed to have sensitive conversation

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<sup>20</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid "Dialog Agama....", p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Menetapkan Pangkalan-Pangkalan Pendaratan Menuju Indonesia Yang Kita Cita-Citakan" [Setting Up Terminals Towards the Envisioned Indonesia] in Imam Walujo and Kons Kleden (interviewers and editors), *Dialog: Indonesia Kini dan Esok* [Dialogue: Indonesia the Present and the Future] (Jakarta, Leppenas, 1980), p. 108.

<sup>22</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?, A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (New York, Orbis Books, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> The word SARA was allegedly introduced in 1978 by Sudomo, a Soeharto's man in charge of public security and order. Initially this was a reference to prohibition on provoking social unrest based on ethnicity, religion, race and between classes or groups. In the later development, however, the assumption turns the other way around: ethnicity, religion, race and class are accused as the causes of instability and thus are prevented in public discussion. See Th. Sumartana (eds.), *Pluralisme, Konflik dan Pendidikan Agama di Indonesia* [Pluralism, Conflict and Religious Education in Indonesia], (Yogyakarta, Dian/Interfidei, 2001), pp. 91-92.

on the issues that will easily trigger inter-religious, racial and other conflicts and eventually open the door for the communist to return<sup>24</sup>. In fact, during the New Order, as noted by Th. Sumartana, instead of being positively perceived as fact of diversity, ethnicity, religion, race and different groups or classes are kept away from public discourse. SARA is suspected as a threat, political subversive force and frequently a scapegoat for the survival of Indonesia. Inter-religious issues are treated in such a way as being super sensitive. An example is when MUI in March 1981 issued a *fatwa* (statement of opinion on legal issues) that prohibits Muslims participation in Christmas celebration<sup>25</sup>. SARA is positioned as the enemy of the New Order's developmentalist ideology emphasizing on stability, security, order and unity<sup>26</sup>. Since inter-religious and racial problems were never properly addressed under the New Order and when they come to surface in most cases were solved immediately by military force, the so-called harmonious and peaceful coexistence among different religious, ethnic and racial communities were very superficial<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> For instance read Michael R. J. Vatikiotis, *Indonesian Politics under Suharto: Order, Development and Pressure for Change* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> See Darul Aqsha (eds.), p. 199. Over time the fatwa has even been misunderstood as MUI prohibition for Muslims to say "Merry Christmas" to their Christian friends, neighbor and colleagues. Read my article, Achmad Munjid, "The Controversy over Merry Christmas: Where is the Fatwa" in *The Jakarta Post*, 23 December 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Th. Sumartana, *Pluralisme, Konflik dan Pendidikan Agama ....*, p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> For a brief discussion on this topic and its long-term impact on inter-religious relations in Indonesia, read my article "Between fake tolerance and pseudo freedom of religion" in *The Jakarta Post*, 22 Agustus 2013. Accessible here: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/08/22/between-fake-tolerance-and-pseudo-freedom-religion.html>

From time to time inter-religious relations grow from bad to worse, from mutual suspicion to increasing tension. Suharto and his New Order benefited from the fragility of inter-religious relations to keep them in power that lasted for over three decades. Abdurrahman Wahid wanted to make the superficial peaceful coexistence real by creating mutual understanding and promoting inter-religious dialogue as an effective tool for democracy<sup>28</sup>.

Mutual understanding in inter-religious dialogue, for Abdurrahman, has three interrelated aspects. The first is critical attitude towards one's own religion so to avoid any possible narrow-mindedness and religious politicization<sup>29</sup>. The second is proper understanding on the main principles and historical developments belong to other religious communities so to avoid any possible misunderstanding resulting from one-sided perception. The third is sufficient understanding of both sides on the context where their social interaction takes place. Ill conversation about other religion should be avoided. Instead, within the spirit of being religious, such as the concepts of humanity and the role of religion in social life could be studied, to

[8/22/between-fake-tolerance-and-pseudo-freedom-religion.html](https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/08/22/between-fake-tolerance-and-pseudo-freedom-religion.html)

<sup>28</sup> Even when he became President, Abdurrahman Wahid consistently used non-violent and non-military approach in solving conflict problems in the country, including that of Aceh and Papua. For a comprehensive discussion on this issue, read Ahmad Suaedy, *Visi Kewarganegaraan Kultural Abdurrahman Wahid dalam Penyelesaian Konflik Aceh dan Papua, 1999-2001*, a PhD dissertation at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> The ninth commandment of Swidler's "Dialogue Decalogue" in Swidler, Leonard. *After the Absolute, the Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 45.



be further developed and even to be debated among them<sup>30</sup>.

### Three Aspects of Mutual Understanding

Let us examine more carefully the three aspects of mutual understanding through inter-religious dialogue as proposed by Abdurrahman Wahid. The first is critical attitude towards one's own religion, especially in public life. Historically, this first aspect is important with regard that power relation between religion and state has demonstrated a kind of symbiotic relation in providing mutual legitimacy<sup>31</sup>. In such a pluralistic society as Indonesia, relation between religion and state should be carefully maintained so to prevent it from resulting in mutual suspicion among the existing communities on the one hand and to achieve mutual symbiosis for the sake of common good on the other hand<sup>32</sup>. One example, according to Abdurrahman, is the acceptance of *Pancasila* as the sole foundation by NU in 1984<sup>33</sup>. Before NU's acceptance of

*Pancasila* as the sole foundation of the organization, from time to time the relationship between NU and the New Order government was characterized by mutual suspicion. The situation became much more positive after that. Here, through NU, Islam gives acceptable legitimacy to the State, and thus vice versa. The point is how each part does not intervene in other's business with regard that both religion and state has each own separate domain<sup>34</sup>. Meanwhile, any alliance between the two where one or both sides make use of the other at the cost of equal rights of certain (religious, political or other) group, like favoritism of the majority Muslim by the New Order since the end of 1980s, should be denied. In particular, therefore, he denounced ICMI as a sectarian organization<sup>35</sup>. For Abdurrahman Wahid, the establishment of ICMI in the 1990 that marked the rising tide of Islamic formalism is an evident of hardening of Islamic exclusivism that seriously endangered

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<sup>30</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Dialog Agama..." pp. 57-59.

<sup>31</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Kebebasan Agama dan Hegemoni Negara" [Religious Freedom and the State's Hegemony] in Komaruddin Hidayat (eds.), *Passing Over...*, p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> See also Franz Magnis-Suseno, "Pluralisme Agama, Dialog dan Konflik di Indonesia" [Religious Pluralism, Dialogue and Conflict in Indonesia] in Th. Sumartana, *Pluralisme, Konflik...*, p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> *Pancasila* is the five principles declared in 1945 as the national foundation of Indonesia. During his presidential term, Soeharto implicitly forced any political and social organization to adopt it as the 'sole foundation'. Under his dictatorship, the acceptance of this is affirmation and the rejection of it is subversion to his power. Many Islamic organizations chosen to dissolve themselves instead of accepting *Pancasila*, which is considered to be un-Islamic, as their sole foundation.

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<sup>34</sup> Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid...*, p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> ICMI (*Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Se-Indonesia*, Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) was founded by the end of 1990 by a number of leading Muslim intellectuals under the full sponsor of Soeharto while his supporters among the military kept on decreasing. Many books have discussed about the consistent criticism of Abdurrahman about this organization. According to Abdurrahman, relation between ICMI and Soeharto's regime is only a short-term marriage of convenience. ICMI is primarily established as 'political vehicle' by using Islam as the commodity. This organization represents manipulation of Islam to support the government. It also shows that Islamic activists are allowing themselves to be used by Soeharto in order to advance their own goal of Islamizing the government and society. In the long run this obviously endangers the multi-religious and multi-cultural society of Indonesia as a democratic nation. See, for example, Douglas E. Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia*, pp. 62-74 and Adam Schwarz, *A Nation in Waiting, Indonesia in the 1990s* (St. Leonards, NSW, Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd., 1994), pp. 185-188.

Indonesian democracy<sup>36</sup>. The establishment of MUI by the New Order government is another example on how religion is co-opted by the state to justify a political regime, as mentioned earlier.

In relation to the previous reason, theologically, critical attitude is also needed to eliminate exclusive tendency belong to each religion, especially in term of truth claim. In Abdurrahman's opinion, Islam does not have absoluteness to judge others whosoever<sup>37</sup>.

In the Islamic faith, God frequently insists that we are (only) the last part of a long journey. That these human beings have passed through various experiences in searching for the One God. Qur'an itself recognizes that. It is true that Qur'an and Hadith say that Islam is revelation of the truth. However, we should not forget that while saying so, there is *no negation to the right of those with different belief*<sup>38</sup>.

As Barton records, Abdurrahman's Islam, by definition, is fundamentally tolerant, egalitarian, dynamic and cosmopolite. It recognizes diversity and thus is a religion that rejects any unjust treatment based on class, ethnicity, race, gender and other forms of grouping in the society. He even further argues that Islam is a faith that recognizes the equality of human being before God, regardless of being Muslim or non-Muslim<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Read Achmad Munjid, "Thick Islam and Deep Islam" in *The Jakarta Post*, 16 August 20019.

<sup>37</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Menetapkan Pangkalan...", p. 111.

<sup>38</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Menetapkan Pangkalan..." p. 109 (emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> Greg Barton, "Pengantar" [Introduction] in Abdurrahman Wahid, *Prisma Pemikiran Gus Dur*, (Yogyakarta, LKiS, 2000), p.

In that connection, to interpret such "exclusivist" texts as Qur'an 2:120<sup>40</sup> and 48:9<sup>41</sup> should be carried out by doing a careful examination on their contexts rather than merely reading them literally. On the first verse, that Christian "never will be satisfied with thee", there are two interpretations. First, this means that each side cannot accept the basic concepts of the other, which is definitely reasonable. That is exactly also the same attitude of Islam to Christianity. If both are satisfied with or accept the basic concept of the other then what does it mean to be Christian or Islam?<sup>42</sup> Both in fact are different and that is the *raison d'être* of each. However, it does not necessarily mean opposition. Second, the addressee here is "thee", Muhammad, and not "all human being" or "all believers" in general, for example. At that time, the powerful Christians were politically challenged by Muhammad. It does make sense therefore that they were not satisfied with him unless he followed them. So, it will be mistaken to generalize the "thee", Muhammad, to the Islam and thus meaning that the Christians will never be satisfied with Islam simply because their faith avoid

xxx. On Abdurrahman Wahid's idea of humanism, read for instance, Syaiful Arif, *Humanisme Gus Dur, Pergumulan Islam dan Kemanusiaan* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Ar-Ruzz Media, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> "Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with thee unless thou follow their form of Religion."

<sup>41</sup> "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; and those who are with him are strong against unbelievers, (but) compassionate amongst each other."

<sup>42</sup> Paul Knitter, however, describes that to accept other religion as it is, including its basic concepts, is just fine for those who take the position of "the acceptance model". See Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 173-190.

Islam as a religion<sup>43</sup>. There the point is not religious issue per se, but more about power contestation<sup>44</sup>.

As with the second verse, here “unbelievers”, according to Abdurrahman, does not refer to non-Muslim in general, an anonymous subject, but rather “the Meccan unbelievers” who fought against Islam as a religion. There is a clear-cut difference between non-Muslim and the “categorical” unbelievers of Mecca. Generalization as frequently made by many Indonesian Muslims to assume that both of them are identical is misleading. In addition, “compassionate amongst each other” does not necessarily mean uncritical. If the above verse will be taken literally, ask Abdurrahman rhetorically, why did Muhammad once say “(Even) If Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, steals, I will chop off her hands”?<sup>45</sup>

Abdurrahman needs to reiterate this interpretation in many occasions because he himself is frequently accused of by certain Indonesian Muslim groups, including within NU, as being care more about his inter-faith dialogue initiatives

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<sup>43</sup> Abdurrahman argues that some Muslim has made mistake by generalizing the “thee”, Muhammad, as the addressee, to be the whole Muslims. In my opinion, however, here Abdurrahman has also made other ‘generalization’ by assuming that theologically as if Christianity has never rejected Islam as a religion. Through a careful historical examination on Muslim-Christian encounter, in fact, there were/are Christian theologies that deny Islam as a religion. The development of inclusive and pluralist theologies in the later period does not erase that dark side of the history of Muslim-Christian relation. On this issue, see, for example, Huge Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd: 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, “Menetapkan Pangkalan....” p. 109.

<sup>45</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, “Dialog Agama...” p. 53.

and his friendships with Christians than he did about supporting Islam. Some, including those within ICMI, even speak of him as “collaborator” of the Christians and non-Muslim groups and mockingly ask “How to Islamize Abdurrahman?”<sup>46</sup> So serious the accusation was that its controversy almost prevented him from being re-elected in his second term of NU presidency in the 1989 *muktamar* (five-yearly congress)<sup>47</sup>. In short, in Abdurrahman’s opinion, without a critical reading on each own religion, religious people will be prone to narrow-mindedness and thus also politicization of religion for the sake of short term gains or self-interest.

The second aspect, each side also needs to properly understand the main principles and historical development belong to the other(s). For instance, most of Indonesian Muslims, do not know about the main principles of Christian theology that enable them to appreciate their fellow Christian’s faith. The same is the case with the Christian. As found in most of the Muslim world,

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<sup>46</sup> Douglas E. Ramage, *Ibid.*, p. 50. In later year, he was also accused to be the Zionist Agent and supported Benny Moerdani, a leading Christian Army General at that time, to be the next Indonesian President. Abdurrahman is also widely criticized to defend the Christian group-owned *Monitor* Tabloid when it was banned by the government due to a controversial polling publication in 1990 considered by Indonesian Muslim as a serious humiliation to the Prophet Muhammad. In 1990 the *Monitor* tabloid in fact made a poll on the most popular figure among its readers. Surprisingly, Prophet Muhammad was only number tenth in the list, under President Soeharto and other Indonesian figures. Abdurrahman’s clarification on these issues see his interviews with various mass media in M. Saleh Isre, *Tabayun Gus Dur, Pribumisasi Islam, Hak Minoritas, Reformasi Kultural* [Gus Dur’s Clarification, Indigenization of Islam, Minority Right and Cultural Reform] (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1998).

<sup>47</sup> See Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid....* p. 170.

Bible is frequently compared with the Qur'an as if both of the sacred texts are equal. Similarly, Jesus is also compared to Muhammad without trying to understand the real significance in the respective tradition. In addition, many Muslims in Indonesia also do not know about such historical development of the Christianity as Vatican Council II or Ecumenical Movements and their consequences that may decrease their suspicion to the Christians. Inter-religious dialogue, according to him, should assume a serious effort made by each side to comprehensively understand the dialogue partner. If not, than it is just a monologue<sup>48</sup>.

Another simple example due the lack of understanding, according to Abdurrahman, is the frequent controversy commonly found around the erection of a church among majority Muslim neighborhood. Until recently, many Muslims do not know that, in term of congregation, Christians are organized based not on territory, but on denomination. Therefore, the erection of a new church in a certain place where only a small number of Christians exists would be interpreted as a program of Christianization<sup>49</sup>. Furthermore, due to the long history of competition for more followers between the two groups since the colonial time, Muslim-Christian mutual suspicion in the wake of 1965 communist massacre, as well as the use of military style by the New Order in its early years when inter-religious problems emerged, there has been unresolved growing misunderstanding between the two religious communities especially on issues related to proselytization and the establishment of

house of worship<sup>50</sup>. Again, here, the policy of SARA, plays a significant role in discouraging religious people from knowing each other<sup>51</sup>. Whereas in fact, in Hugh Goddard's words, this second aspect, along with the first one, are needed to avoid the application of "double standards", namely comparing only the ideal principle of "our" religion with the empirical, let alone the negative historical, reality of other religion, that has frequently resulted in mutual misunderstanding<sup>52</sup>.

The third aspect—and presumably the most significant contribution of Abdurrahman Wahid in inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia—is the proper understanding on the context where social interaction between different religious communities takes place. With regard to the defined scope of this research, by context here means real problems encountered by the pluralistic Indonesia in establishing its democracy in relation to the implementation of national modernization project of development by the New Order.

As a person who was born in, grew up and then become a prominent leader of the Byzantine world of Indonesian traditionalist Muslim, he finds that his beloved world is being shaken from every direction<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Read Achmad Munjid, "Between fake tolerance..."

<sup>51</sup> Th. Sumartana, *Ibid.*, p. 99-105.

<sup>52</sup> Read Hugh Goddard, *Christians and Muslims: From Double Standards to Mutual Understanding*, translated into Indonesia by Ali Noer Zaman (Yogyakarta, Qalam, 2000). In Swidler's Decalogue this must be the fourth rule, namely, not to compare our ideals with our partner's practice and vice versa; read Swidler, *Ibid*, p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> Particularly, Abdurrahman's works in the early 1970s as compiled in *Bunga Rampai Pesantren* [An Anthology on *Pesantren*] (Jakarta, Dharma Bhakti, 1979) demonstrate how much

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<sup>48</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Prisma Pemikiran....*, p. 202.

<sup>49</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Dialog Agama...", p. 56.

Vertically, from the state's direction, being faithfully attached to tradition and local culture, traditionalist Muslims was considered as the hard target of the development project. They are accused of being backward and suffered from ignorance, static-minded, parochialism, as well as fostering established understanding both on Islamic thought and society<sup>54</sup>. The traditionalist Muslims are also perceived as administratively poor, lack of effective management and politically opportunistic<sup>55</sup> so that they are judged as being incapable of bearing the tasks for modernizing Indonesia. Horizontally, their Islam is also accused as being syncretic that cost vitality of the religion as an alternative "total system of life" before the secularizing world.

According to Abdurrahman, on the contrary, here is exactly the core of the problem: the right approach to the tradition and culture. In that connection, misunderstanding between Muslim and Christian in Indonesia, according to Abdurrahman, results from two factors. First, Indonesian society is undergoing a difficult transitional era, i.e. from traditional agrarian to modern industrial era, that has created psychological and cultural deprivation<sup>56</sup>. In fact, modernization, as implemented through national development project in Indonesia, has resulted in various traumatic situation

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he loves his traditional Islamic World without losing his critical attitude. On this topic see Greg Barton, "Liberalisme: Dasar-Dasar Progresivitas Pemikiran Abdurrahman Wahid" [Liberalism: Foundations of Abdurrahman Wahid's Thought Progressiveness] in *Traditionalisme Radikal...*, pp. 162-193 and also the introduction by Greg Fealy and Greg Barton in *Ibid.*, pp. xxv-xxviii.

<sup>54</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Pengantar" [Introduction] in *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>55</sup> Greg Fealy and Greg Barton (eds.), *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>56</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Dialog Agama...", p. 52

among the people such as alienation of individual from other members of the society due to the mobile and compartmentalized life, anxiety resulting from the high competition, difficulty in fostering intimate life even with the close relatives due to the penetration of the new cultural pattern, unprepared condition before the rapid changes of values, and so on<sup>57</sup>.

In that regard, instead of being pushed aside, tradition and local culture should be reshaped wisely. In fact, this is a typical view of his background, i.e. Sunni Traditionalist in general and NU in particular<sup>58</sup>. One of the principles characterizing NU as traditionalist is its well-known proverb "to maintain good traditions, to adopt better inventions". Henceforth, tradition, for Abdurrahman, is continuation that cannot be eliminated as such without causing huge impacts on the life of both individual and society. Therefore being proud of the self-tradition accompanied by a mature attitude without over-idealizing the existing norms is needed in front of the modernization process<sup>59</sup>. Meanwhile, culture is the art of living that organizes the survival of the society and creates the pillars needed to maintain social order<sup>60</sup>. In his view, the New Order has made serious mistakes. It underestimates tradition and local culture as obstacle for modernization,

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<sup>57</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Muslim di Tengah Pergumulan, Berbagai Pandangan Abdurrahman Wahid* [Muslim in Wrester, Various Abdurrahman Wahid's Views] (Jakarta: Leppenas, 1981), p. 47.

<sup>58</sup> Mitsuo Nakamura, "Tradisionalisme Radikal, Catatan Muktamar Semarang 1979" [Radical Traditionalism, A Note on 1979 Semarang Congress] in Greg Fealy (eds.), *Ibid.*, pp. 58-75.

<sup>59</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Ibid.*, p. 44

<sup>60</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Negara dan Kebudayaan* [State and Culture], paper presented at National Congress on Culture, Jakarta, November 3, 1991, p. 1.

while at the same time centralizes and uniforms the culture by subduing it under the tight control of the state. In fact, the technocratic motif and pragmatic orientation of the New Order's developmentalism in treating people primarily as numeric facts rather than as living person attached to certain tradition and culture have seriously deteriorated the psychological and cultural deprivation. This, as was getting evident since the late 1970s, in turn, has enhanced conflict potentials, including matters connected to Muslim-Christian relation<sup>61</sup>.

Worse than that, due to the distortion of concepts used to social life through the national modernization project of "developmentalism" (*pembangunan*), mutual alienation among elements of the society occurred inevitably. From Muslim perspective, Abdurrahman recognizes, indeed since the last several decades, Islam found that the so-called "developmentalism" has been very difficult<sup>62</sup>. In this situation, not surprisingly, any 'alternative' social system to overcome the existing crisis has fascinated some disoriented Muslims<sup>63</sup>.

The second factor causing protracted misunderstanding and mutual suspicion between Muslims and Christians is the fact that, being the majority, Muslims have has been frequently mobilized for political purposes and Islam is abused as political banner against other groups<sup>64</sup>. By rising Islamic banner people tend to assume that non-Muslim also means

anti-Islam. To Abdurrahman, this is exactly because Islam, supposed to be the universal religion for human being, has been treated as an *alternative* system. There has been a strong tendency to demonstrate that Islam is an "alternative culture" for any forms of the existing culture in Indonesia<sup>65</sup>. That is supposed to be the true Islam, which 'unfortunately' means the Arab Islam. Consequently, many aspects of life should be Islamicized, which means to be Arabicized. Islam as "the ideal culture" means Islam that is sterile from local cultures. If mismanagement of culture and tradition by the New Order regime has caused psychological and cultural deprivation, this misjudgment of culture and tradition by certain Muslim group(s) has resulted in cultural alienation. Therefore, the need for demonstrating a strong self-identity of Islam as an exclusive group seems inevitable for some Indonesian Muslims. Obviously this very political articulation of Islam finally lead only to misunderstanding, or even worse mutual suspicion, between Muslims and Christians. Over the years, many Muslims are so preoccupied with debate around the danger of Christianization<sup>66</sup>, while the threat of Islamic State keeps haunting many Christians<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Dialog Agama..." p. 52

<sup>62</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Muslim di Tengah Pergumulan*, p. 89.

<sup>63</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Massa Islam..." p.8.

<sup>64</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Dialog Agama..." p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Pergulatan Negara, Agama dan Kebudayaan*, [The Struggle of State, Religion and Culture] (Jakarta: Desantara, 2001), pp. 203-207.

<sup>66</sup> About the issue of Christianization the following joke might illustrate something. One day a Muslim father feels so sorry that one of his five children has converted to Christianity. While he was praying, God amuses him, "Do not worry, you still have four left. I only have one son, and he has converted to Christianity. Your situation is much better than me."

<sup>67</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Menetapkan Pangkalan..." pp. 106-107. Read also Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened, Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order*

## Cultural Approach

Abdurrahman Wahid strongly believes that a (socio-) cultural approach in practicing religion, including in inter-religious relation, is extremely vital. What does he mean? Religion cannot be separated from culture. Religion, including Islam, is relevant and meaningful only when it has become part of the existing culture. Since cultures are different and changing over time, despite the fact that religious teaching remains the same, its application can be different depending on the cultural context. Therefore, within the context of Indonesia, “we bring back religion [Islam] to foster the pluralistic cultures, the culture that refers to the plurality of the nation. In other words, the approach is a cultural one”, Abdurrahman says<sup>68</sup>.

Religion, he argues further, basically cannot regulate the worldly life comprehensively. It provides foundations to live righteous life. As the foundation therefore religion cannot be demanded too much so to avoid its over-claim. Religion only has legitimate claim on the fundamentals of life. When over-claim takes place, when religion is dragged to go beyond its territory, it will become a contending factor for other sectors of life, whereas in fact, religion is the foundation of all and thus does not compete against anything (that is not contradict its principles)<sup>69</sup>. Instead of being an alternative, religion should become the inspiring power, a moral force of the society. Its role is to create social ethic<sup>70</sup>. With regard to the

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(Leiden and Amsterdam: ISIM/Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

<sup>68</sup> See M. Saleh Isre, *Tabayun Gus Dur...*, p. 111.

<sup>69</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, “Menetapkan Pangkalan...”, pp. 117-121.

<sup>70</sup> Saleh Isre, *Tabayun Gus Dur...*, p. 153.

principles of jurisprudence (*usul fiqh*) and legal maxim (*qawa'idul fiqh*) inherited by NU from the long Sunni tradition, especially in relation the issue of nation-state this idea is ‘genuinely’ NU<sup>71</sup>.

In this relation, Abdurrahman Wahid is also well-known for introducing the idea of “indigenization of Islam”. Basically it means contextualization of Islam or practicing Islam in accordance with the cultural context of the people. Islam should be practiced in fruitful dialogue with the local culture where both Islam and culture are mutually enriched. The universality of Islamic values transform the local culture, but at the same time local culture also shape the manifestation of Islam as practiced by the people. Only when Islam is indigenized, contextualized, Indonesian Muslims will not be uprooted from their culture, which is also their important identity. As much as Islam and Arab are not identical, being Muslim doesn't have to lose Indonesian or other culture. When Islam is practiced against local culture, in many cases it means Arabicization that eventually results in alienation due to the separation of the Muslims from their tradition<sup>72</sup>.

For Abdurrahman Wahid, this so-called socio-cultural approach of practicing Islam includes the capability of the Muslims to appropriately understand the fundamental problems encountered by the society as a whole,

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<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Abdurrahman Wahid, *Prisma Pemikiran...*, pp. 155-162.

<sup>72</sup> He was then much criticized for this. One of the most controversial is his misunderstood idea to replace “*assalamu alaykum*” (peace be upon you; a greeting expression assumed to be Islamic) with “*selamat pagi*” (good morning). See M. Saleh Isre, *Tabayun Gus Dur*, *Ibid.*, p. 148.

instead of imposing their own agenda<sup>73</sup>. Within the context of social life in a pluralistic society like Indonesia, Islamic teaching should be treated as complementary factor, instead of being a contending factor that will disintegrate the entire nation<sup>74</sup>. Universality of Islam should be found in the eternity of Islamic messages rather than in physical manifestation of the cultures. For him, it is more important to change the people's behavior without necessarily mean the change of the formal or physical aspect of their culture.

If Muslims are preoccupied with physical or symbolic manifestations of the culture and, in turn, also the formal aspects of religion<sup>75</sup>, it may only lead to two consequences. First, "regimentation of Islam"<sup>76</sup>, which means that Islam becomes a regime repressing anything considered as un-Islamic through the

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<sup>73</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Pribumisasi Islam....", *Ibid*, p. 91.

<sup>74</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Massa Islam....", p. 8

<sup>75</sup> In fact, the Snockian policy of the New Order in handling Islam by promoting ritual Islam on the one hand and suppressing political Islam on the other hand has resulted in two consequences: (1) deconfessionalization of politics, which is good in Abdurrahman's opinion, and (2) Muslims' preoccupation of formal aspect of their religion, which is bad. YAMP, a Soeharto's foundation, for instance is well known for its contribution in building some 700 mosques spreading all over the country, while his Dharmais Foundation is claimed to have sent hundreds of *dai* (Islamic preachers) to the trans-migrant areas outside the Java Island. Cf. Adian Husaini, *Soeharto 1998* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 1996), p. 37 and Munawir Sjadzali, *Islam, Realitas Baru dan Orientasi Masa Depan Bangsa* [Islam, New Reality and the Future Orientation of the Nation] (Jakarta: UI Press, 1993), p. 30.

<sup>76</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Pengembangan Kebudayaan Islam di Indonesia" [The Development of Islamic Culture in Indonesia] in *Pikiran Rakyat Daily*, Bandung, February 5, 1985.

exercise of power. Second, Muslims will keep on arguing about peripheral issues instead of addressing fundamental problems encountered by the society, namely backwardness, ignorance, poverty, injustice, poor law enforcement, tremendous social and economic gaps resulted from transnational economic enterprises and the like. Therefore, Indonesian Muslims should know the right priority in addressing the real problem and consciously integrate their "Islamic struggle" into the "national struggle" by placing it within the long-term context of democratization<sup>77</sup>. Not only that Islamic struggle should be in line with Indonesian national struggle, it also should be part of the struggle for humanity<sup>78</sup>. Muslims should be ready to live peacefully together with people from different religions, political ideologies, cultural views and others. A new universalism in Islamic teaching and new cosmopolitanism in the worldview of the Muslims are sine qua non for Islam to play its role as liberating force in the more pluralistic society of the future<sup>79</sup>.

According to Abdurrahman, there is exactly the place and the significance of inter-religious dialogue.

## Conclusion

Many of what have been achieved in the field of inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia today is possible thank to the foundation laid by key figures in the past. Among Indonesian most important figures of inter-religious dialogue is Abdurrahman Wahid. His ideas and practice in the field represent

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<sup>77</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "Menetapkan Pangkalan....", p. 118.

<sup>78</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Prisma Pemikiran....*, p. 67.

<sup>79</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, *Pergulatan Negara....*, p. 188.



not only his broad knowledge of what it means to be a modern Muslim, but also his strong commitment to his country and to humanity. Through inter-religious dialogue, he promotes democracy, setting an exemplary model for the Muslims as majority group, defending the rights of the minorities, seeking justice against dictatorship of Suharto and the New Order in creating a better and world for all through recognition of religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence. His ideas and practice of inter-religious dialogue represent his vision as organic intellectual, social activist, committed religious leader and visionary statesman who wholeheartedly engages with the most fundamental problems of his people. His legacy of inter-religious dialogue in the forms of theological re-interpretation, social movement, theoretical concepts and organizations are manifestation of his long life struggle against all injustices for the true dignity of human being.

For him, accepting religious pluralism should go beyond recognizing religious diversity, but more importantly how to learn from each other and from the differences for the betterment of all. During his lifetime, Abdurrahman Wahid dedicated his works in solving real problems of the people across different religious backgrounds. Within the context of the New Order when religion, race, ethnicity and social class are frequently manipulated for political interest, together with leaders and community members of other faith, Abdurrahman Wahid can effectively point out that political authoritarianism, economic disparity, ethno-religious sectarianism, all manifestations of discrimination, intellectual and theological manipulation to serve the ruling elite are common enemy for all religions. Religious people should promote

meaningful dialogue and collaborative work in solving common problem by taking side for the weak, marginalized. To promote inter-religious dialogue, for him, means to accomplish three aspects of mutual understanding among the existing religious communities, i.e. self-critical attitude, sufficient mutual understanding on the main theological concept and historical development of the other's and the proper understanding on the context of inter-religious relation. In that regard, inter-religious dialogue in Indonesia should be put within the context of democratization and the establishment of the Indonesian nationhood. Instead of being put against culture, religion should be practiced in fruitful dialogue with the local culture. Islam should be indigenized, being immersed into the local culture. Instead of competing with other religions to get more followers, Muslim should be engaged in real dialogue with people of other faiths in overcoming the common problem of the society.

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