THE NECESSITIES OF CONTEXTUALIZING ISLAMIC TEACHINGS: EXAMINING *ISLAM NUSANTARA*, REVITALIZING *IJTIHAD*[1]

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The Quran sets up a basic principle that Islam, as transmitted by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), serves as a mercy to the whole universe. The presence of Islam is completely intended for the benefit of Mankind and creature's life. A prosperous life, peace, justice, and the life that is based on noble values represent the vision and goals of Islam. In the core teachings of Islam, ethics-cum-morality is a great start and end. Islam is basically a religion of morality, as the Prophet declared that he was sent down by God simply to lead moral greatness into complete forms.

Islam necessitates Muslims to apply those values in their practical life. In this regard, Muslims have to serve as Gods' representative (*khalifah Allah)* on earth in preserving and developing good conduct in life. By implementing the noble teachings of Islam, Muslims who now number around 1.6 billion, or 23 percent of total world population of about 6.9 billion, could actually play a central role and significant contribution in building and developing a better life. Countries with Muslims as the majority of population, from Africa, the Middle East to Southeast Asia, should be a reference not only in promoting ethical-moral high standards, but also in developing civilization that is more humane and promising for the betterment of Mankind's future.

But the reality shows the other way around. In some countries with Muslims as the majority of population, such as Sudan, Syria, and Iraq, conflict and violence in its various forms become the phenomenon of their daily lives. Moreover, some Muslim groups in those countries have put forward some indulgence in violence and hatred in their interaction with other groups that are different from them. Ironically, religious symbols and attributes have been often affixed to the conflict and violence. The perpetrators did not hesitate to carry out acts of violence as such on behalf of religion.

Interestingly, however, Indonesia with the world's largest Muslim population, to a certain degree, do not show a similar, ugly face as some Muslim countries mentioned above. In the long history of its development, Indonesia can be said as being relatively safe and peaceful. This does not mean, however, that there is no problem. Lately, conflict and violence have arisen here and there. Although this incident occurred in a small scale, but if ill-treated, it is not impossible that the scale would be escalated and expanded. Moreover, in some cases, religion has been often dragged down into it. This is because the use of religion in conflict is particularly vulnerable to become an epidemic (and even endemic) virus which lead it to easily escalate.

Such a reality seems to be urgent to discuss. The reason is that irrespective of religion, nation, professional position, and any other attributes we bear, we have the same task on the ground: to develop a better life, and we must also be accountable for, either today or later.

Tracking Root Problems

The gap between the normative teachings of Islam and the religious practices of people needs to be studied and analyzed in depth. We should not get stuck to simplify the problem, however. As far as my research is concerned, the gap comes out of very complex issues involving diverse aspects, from religious understanding, education, political power, to economy. The interrelation between these aspects results in an action that is not only detrimental to society at large, but also Muslims.

One aspect that needs to be scrutinized is an incomprehensive religious understanding, leading people to the inability to capture the substantive vision and holistic mission of Islam. A fragmented understanding can give rise to views that are not only incompatible, but also contrary to religious purposes. Along with that, it will also bring about a rigid and exclusive religious thinking and practices.

Such a narrow religious outlook can develop when supported by an inadequate pattern of education. This way of having religion results from non-transformative, mature, integrative and enlightening education.

Admitted or not, education plays a pivotal role in determining the pattern of religiousness. Nevertheless, the collaboration between education and pattern of religiousness will not give birth to a brutal, radical movement insofar as no political power intervention enters into it. Violence and the like will grow if religion is co-opted by political power. Until now, Tibi's view of religious radicalism, to some degree, still reveals its relevance. He claims that radicalism (Tibi: fundamentalism) does not represent a spiritual tenet, but rather a political ideology resulting from the politicization of religion for socio-political and economic purposes in order to establish the so-called "divine order".[2] Similarly, Khaled Abou elFadl also insists that a movement he called "puritanism-supremacy" arises from the feeling of defeat among the apologists towards the West as well as Muslims outside their group.[3] Intellectuals of the Islamic world, such as al-Jabiri, support the opinion of these two Muslim intellectuals living in the West. His research finds that religious extremism (another expression of radicalism) is nothing more than a political-ideological camouflage.[4] Many other studies have also led to such a conclusion, suggesting that the brutal radicalism is rooted in political contestation for economy purposes.

Currently, politics has not been fully in favor of the sense of justice, has not been able to fully develop the economic equality, and has not sincerely provided a sense of security and prosperity for all people, especially in the third world. The economic gap is so

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[2] Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and The New World Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 20.

[3] See Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Islam and The Theology of Power," in *Middle East Report*, No. 221 (Winter, 2001), 33.

[4] See Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri, *Qadlaya al-Fikr al-'Arabi: al-Mas'alah al-Tsaqafiyah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahdah al-'Arabiyyah, 1994), 111-117.

large. For example, eight world's millionaires control over half the world's wealth.[5] While in other parts of the world, many children are starving, and malnourished, in some other countries there are people who are in abundance of wealth.

Inequality would just make certain people and groups finally marginalized. Along with other aspects, this condition leads them to escape from worldly life to religion. They make religion as a medium of protection and at the same time of resistance. That is because through religion they can easily touch the emotions for practical reasons. In these circumstances, religion is (often if not always) simply justified to protect their narrow interests and justify their actions despite the contradiction of substantive values of religious teachings. As a result, moral and ethical values of religion increasingly decrease having no influence in attitude, behavior, and action of the people except violence and radical acts.

Such religious reduction occurs when religion is perceived --borrowing the Geertz's concept[6] which Tibi later develops-- as a model of reality. The understanding of this model makes the teachings of religion, especially the sacred text understood as a representation of reality, which is concrete, which displays conformity with the object described. Strictly speaking, fundamentalist groups see text and reality as one and the same. Reality is measured according to the form as documented in the sacred text.[7] The reality of life must be exactly the same as what is written in the sacred text.

In that position, Jamal al-Banna calls the fact that the main messages of the Qur'an have been neglected *ta'thil al-Quran* which becomes an eye-catching phenomena. This can be seen from the manipulations of some commentators (of course along with radical groups) against the Qur'an. They only put forward the so-called "verses of the sword", and left about more than one hundred and twenty verses of wisdom, *maw'idzah hasanah*, suggestions for tolerance, patience, and tolerance.[8] In this regard, religion is nothing more than being used as a justification for indulgence of hatred, violence, defamation, and other radical acts against groups that develop different religious understanding.

Contextualizing the Teachings of Religion and Experience of *Islam Nusantara*

Normatively, Islam is only one, namely the revelation and the do-called "Word of God" (*kalam Allah)* which at the same time is described and communicated by the Prophet Muhammad. The "Word of God" has an absolute truth, and contains universal principles. To implement this sacred text, Muslims need to develop a certain understanding as an effort to actualize and contextualize the teachings into concrete realities.

At the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims practiced Islamic teachings by following the direct instructions of the Prophet. In addition, especially when they were not with (or away from) the Messenger of Allah, they performed an *ijtihad*. The event of the Prophet's dialogue with Mu'adz about the way of settling down religious issues before

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[5] See Liputan6, 16 January 2017: http://bisnis.liputan6.com/read/2828366/8-miliarder-ini-kuasai-lebih-dari-setengah-kekayaan-dunia/
[6] Clifford Geertz, "Religion As a Cultural System," in *TheInterpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Fontana Press, 1993), 93.
[7] See Bassam Tibi, *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change* (Boulder- Sa Francisco – Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), 8 and 11.
[8] Jamal al-Banna, *al-'Awdah ila al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2008), 16.

leaving for Yemen[9] in order to carry out the Prophet's commandment explains completely about it. Unlike *kalam Allah*, *ijtihad* has a relative truth and is very contextual. In the hands of these Muslims, Islam then developed into diverse expressions. The core vision of Islam that emphasizes the absolute noble moral value becomes the common ground for all the diversity.

Ijtihad as a means of contextualizing religious teachings into life emerged almost simultaneously with the presence of Islam itself. From time to time, the contextualization continues to develop. In the hands of al-Shafi'i, the contextualization of religion finds its strong point of interest through the proposed methodology of systematic interpretation of Islamic teachings. History goes on, so does the effort of contextualization of Islam continues to develop from time to time, and from one place to another.

All of it shows that Islam - or any religion - cannot be perceived as a model of reality. Islam as a religion which is transmitted solely for the creation of good life is necessarily understood as a model for reality, a teaching that is abstract and general to be contextualized and developed in the reality of life, where between doctrine and reality are not always in structural conformity or similarity.[10] The doctrine as the source and foundation of life needs to be interpreted based on space and time by maintaining its principles and values. The contextualization that needs to be developed has to be a responsible one based on the benefit of life and the human interest as a whole. *Maqashid as-syari'ah* and *al-mashlahah* are benchmarks that cannot be bargained for any personal interest.

Clerics of classical periods have classified *maqashid* into three kinds: *dlaruriyat*, *hajiyat*, and *tahsiniyat*. In al-Juwaini's view, the teacher of al-Ghazali, *dharuriyat* encompasses trust, soul, thought, personal property, and money. He insisted Islam must protect all these five. Almost the same as his teacher, al-Ghazali argues that the basic human needs to be protected are trust, soul, thought, descent, and wealth. Ibn Abd al-Salam, al-Qarafi, and al-Syathibi also develop a similar kind of identification.[11]

When Islam came to the Nusantara archipelago through the services of Walisongo (nine saints; clerics), such things of *maqasid* became their basis in contextualizing Islam. In doing *da'wah*, they were not just guarding the basic human rights, but also highly appreciated the culture, arts and local wisdom. They made use of local art performances, such as wayang which is very popular among communities, tembang and mask dance, as a medium to introduce Islam into local communities. Sunan Giri, in particular, presents Islam through children's games.[12] Thus, the presence of Islam in the Nusantara communities has gained relatively no resistance, and has been far from the use of violence. Even the people, to some degree, did not regard Islam as something foreign, coming from outside.

Islam with such identification has been one of the characteristics of Islam that has been flourished in the Nusantara archipelago. It has become an intrinsic part of the

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[9] See Abu Dawud Sulaiman al-Asy'ats, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Vol. 5, (Damascus: Syirkah al-Risalah al-'Aalamiyah, 2009), 444.

[10] Bassam Tibi, *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of*, 11.

[11] See also Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Shariah As Philoshophy if Islamic Law: A Systems Approach*, (London – Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008), 16 *ff.*

[12] See Agus Sunyoto, *Atlas Wali Songo* (Depok: Pustaka IIMaN, 2016), 179 *ff.*

country. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to call that this kind of practical expression of Islamic teachings *Islam Nusantara* model.

The so-called *Islam Nusantara* has been increasingly much more popular when the founders of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the successor generation attempted to disseminate it further. The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) with Pancasila as its philosophical basis finds firm legitimacy through NU. This can be traced from KH Hasyim Asy'ari's Resolution of Jihad which put forward the ideological basis for the struggle to defend the homeland of Indonesia as *jihad*. Similarly, it can be traced from the results of NU national deliberation (*musyawarah nasional*) in Situbondo in 1984 which confirmed the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia as a final form that should not be questioned and disputed from the theological and religious side in general. Islam Nusantara deserves to be a reference for the global Muslim community, since the existence of Indonesia as a country with the world's largest Muslims population throughout the history is relatively reflective of peace and prosperity in comparison to other Muslim countries.

But the rise of small-scale Muslim groups with views, attitudes and actions that sometimes have recently harmed other groups requires supporters of *Islam Nusantara* to re-examine the patterns and strategies of action that have been conducted. In other words, they need a re-contextualization which is more responsive of recent developments. Moreover, this re-contextualization is also badly needed for guaranteeing the sustainability of NKRI. In addition, through re-contextualization, *Islam Nusantara* is expected to become one of the references for the development of Islam in various parts of the world.

Developing *Ijtihad* and Its Strategies

One aspect that needs to be the subject of re-contextualization is the strengthening and expansion of the meaning and method of *ijtihad*. So far, the so-called *madhhab manhaji* (a school of Islamic legal thinking based on the methodological framework) of NU's *ijtihad* is still limited to the framework of the Shafi'i sect. It is the right time for NU leaders to develop the so-called *madhhab manhaji* and expand it further, encompassing the four sects that theoretically became the legal and ideological reference of organization since its inception.

Correspondingly, the approach used in the *giyas* (drawing an analogue), *ijma'* (consensus), or other *ijtihad* instruments should be enriched in systematic dialogue with other so-called auxiliary (or supporting) sciences, from social anthropology, technology and so on according to some particular need and subject. So far, the use of the so-called auxiliary sciences still seems to have been merely *ad hoc*, and has not been developed as part of a systematically integrated mechanism of *ijtihad*.

The effort that needs to be undertaken is not only at the level of academic discourse, but also at the level of transformative movement. People need to be made sure that contextualization of Islam in the form of *Islam Nusantara* and the like is one of the best efforts in actualizing and bringing the values of Islam down to the concrete life in Indonesia. Obviously, this transformative movement cannot just go and be formulated in the forms of discussion and lecturing and the like, but need to be conducted through concrete actions, from the strengthening of the economy of the people and the nation to the affirmation of solidarity, is based on the principle of *ukhuwwah Islamiyah* (Islamic

solidarity), *ukhuwwah wathaniyah* (nationalism-based solidarity), and *ukhuwwah basyariyah* (Humankind-based solidarity) simultaneously.

Along with that, NU cooperation with other organizations and institutions, including universities, is so urgent to be reinforced. Indonesian Mosque Council (Dewan Masjid Indonesia) deserves to become a strategic partner to save the mosques from any Muslim groups which misuse mosques as a seedbed movement laden with hatred and violence.

In a nutshell, the so-called re-contextualization movement should start today, systematically carried out with far-reaching strategic orientation. So, both concept of movement of re-contextualization need to be fostered and sustained, from time to time.