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Indonesia's Islamic studies revisited

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Religious studies have become the subject of heated debate among Indonesian scholars regarding whether or not they represent a particular and distinct discipline of knowledge. Some acknowledge them, but some others don't. But, following the enactment of Law No. 12/2012 on higher education, controversy has shifted from the academic position of religious studies to the development of their body of knowledge.

Religious studies with special reference to Islamic studies are now increasingly being reviewed. The reason for this is because the law, specifically in paragraph 10 of Article 1-3, delivers two important mandates. First, the science of religion has been affirmed as a particular science, which is different from other sciences, including social and humanities. Second, as a consequence, efforts to develop the science of religion are not negotiable in the frame of strengthening religion in modern times and the development of science itself.

The experience of world-class universities around the world shows that the science of religion has long been established through a particular department called religious studies. The problem of whether or not religious studies are a separate scientific discipline is no longer an issue, particularly in Western universities. Therefore, though Indonesia is arguably late to follow scientific developments in the academic world. The Higher Education Law is an important step in advancing the science of religion as a specific science itself.

On that basis, the 12th annual international conference on Islamic studies (AICIS) in Surabaya organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and hosted by the State Institute of Islamic Studies (IAIN) Sunan Ampel earlier this month, played an important role in reviewing and enhancing Islamic studies as a particular reference of growing religious studies in Indonesia.

The conference was related to the mandate and spirit developed by the Higher Education Law. The conference can be used to develop a scientific design of Islamic studies in the fields of technical sciences, education, economics and social politics.

Islamic studies in Indonesia has to do an "academic marriage" between the scientific treasures of various regions. Every region has made its own contribution to the advancement of Islamic studies. Methodological strength of the study of Islam in the West, for example, should be taken as one of advantages, and may be used as a subject of interest to study the development of Islam in Indonesia. With the strength of the material owned, Islamic studies in the Middle East



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provides a model of Islamic higher education that is rich in mastery of the material.

Islamic studies in Indonesia is worth espousing while negotiating the results with scientific and cultural treasures of Islam in Indonesia. Why is this important? Because, Islam in Indonesia, in fact, hold its own uniqueness when compared to the existing and growing expresses of Islam in other regions, including the Middle East.

The specificity of each region requires an adequate scientific explanation. This is where the study of Islam finds its significance. Once religion is out of its place of origin, it, borrowing the perspective of John R. Bowen (2005), will experience tension centered on the relationship between religion and cultural diversity leading to conversion processes.

Through his theory of "Crossing Cultural Boundaries", John R. Bowen (2005:164) asserts that the conversion process demands two important aspects. First is translating the original language and religious culture into a new language and religious culture, and second is adapting religion to a new environment.

Thus, when successfully attracting as many adherents as possible, religion will undergo a process of crossing cultural boundaries to include the above three important elements: conversion, translation and adaptation.

The three processes above raises strong tension in the theological context. Tension occurs in capturing and maintaining the core message of religion, including religious practices. Thus, ideas such as orthodoxy and orthopraxy grow out of popular response to the convergence between religion and local traditions. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2002:84-5), the idea of orthodoxy is meant possession of the religious truth, while orthopraxy refers to a correct way of practice and attainment of truth.

In the context of the totality of the tradition and spectrum of Islam, the idea of orthodoxy and orthopraxy can be understood as a condition of being on the right path. Failure to capture and protect the core message of religion and religious practices that are considered "true" can receive judgment that a religious practice is invalid.

Therefore, adequate scientific explanation on the peculiarities of Islam in developing its assessment of each of the above areas cannot be delayed anymore. It will provide an important contribution to the strengthening of Islamic studies in the country.

In this regard, the affirmation by the newly enacted Higher Education Law to clump religious or Islamic studies should provide new high awareness that Islam is not merely a religion. But, it is also part of a separate, particular and distinct science.

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