

IN SEARCH FOR MUSLIM ETHICS OF CALVINISM: IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC LIFE THROUGH THE INCORPORATION OF RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES INTO THE STATE POLICIES IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: This article deals with an exploration of how Islam is translated into Calvinist ethics into the state policies in order to improve the quality of public life in Indonesia by revisiting the foundation of “mild secularism” adopted by the founding fathers of this country. Along with this argument, religious ethics can be utilized in improving the quality of public life by revitalizing religious doctrines to support the betterment of public life quality. In doing so, reactivating the mechanisms of inductive rational thinking such as *ijtihad* or *tajdid* is badly needed in order to deconstruct old-fashioned understanding of religious teachings prevalent in society regarding all issues contradictory to the betterment of public life quality such as Human Development Index (HDI), life expectancy index, health issues, and so forth. However, this huge undertaking is only possible by means of a concerted collaboration across institutions both within state structure and outside of it.

Keywords: Ethics of Calvinism; Public life quality; Religious doctrines.

Introduction

Religion always plays the role of a double-edged sword; on one side, it holds positive and productive potential for improving the

quality of life for its followers.¹ On the other side, religion has a negative-destructive aspect that can damage the lives of its adherents. On one hand, religion can unite its followers, but on the other hand, it is also the force that separates humanity. On one side, religion becomes a “sacred canopy” that shelters the souls and spirituality of its adherents; on the other side, religion can be a “destroyer” of social harmony in society due to differences in interpretations and perspectives of its followers in understanding religious doctrines.²

Conflicts between civilizations and followers of different religions throughout human history provide more than enough evidence to affirm the thesis that religion is a source of conflict.³ Conflicts between followers of different religions, such as the Crusades, as well as internal conflicts within the Muslim community, such as the Battle of Jamal, the Battle of Siffin, inter-dynasty wars, etc., demonstrate that religion has actually torn apart human values and sacrificed human lives.⁴ If not as a source of problems, at the very least, religion has not been able to contribute to improving the quality of human life (at least in Indonesia). Religion is still left idle, unused, in enhancing the quality of life for the human community.

If we refer to data released by the Pew Research Center on the Global Divide, the Indonesian nation can indeed be classified as one of the most religious nations in the world (96 percent of respondents stating the importance of God as a source of moral guidance in life). Nevertheless, when we look at indicators of the public quality of life that remain chaotic, there is found to be no correlation between the religion embraced by the community and

¹ Heather Dubois, “Religion and Peacebuilding: An Ambivalent yet Vital Relationship,” *Journal of Religion, Conflict and Peace*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring, 2008), 1-21. See, also, Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith (eds.), *Religion and Peacebuilding* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004). See, also, M. Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville, Fl.: University Press of Florida, 2003).

² Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004). See, also, Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York & London: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996).

⁴ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003).

the improvement of the public life quality.⁵ Religion is still entangled with various forms of social-political-legal decadence, manifested in low scores on various public life indexes such as the Human Development Index (HDI), poor environmental sanitation, disorder in public space planning, low Health Index, low life expectancy index, high maternal mortality rate, high stunting rate, high corruption index, high rate of early marriages, and various other forms of social pathology.

Islamic Ethics of Calvinism: Theoretical Gap

In so far as the academic quest is concerned, there have been no research results discussing the study of Islam and Calvinism. Nevertheless, there are some research findings indirectly related to the theme of Islam and Calvinism. The first scholarly work is an article written by Sukidi (2006) entitled “Max Weber’s Remarks on Islam: The Protestant Ethic among Muslim Puritans.”⁶ In this article, Sukidi refutes Max Weber’s entire thesis that Islam does not share a number of prerequisites with Protestantism, especially Calvinism, to become a religion with worldly advantages, such as capitalism.

As Weber has argued in his seminal work, *the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,⁷ Islam there are four prerequisites as indicators of Calvinism that are not possessed by Islam; (i) the doctrine of predestination (Islam relies on the doctrine of predetermination); (ii) doctrine of salvation. For the Calvinists, ascetic behavior and good works may be seen as signs of salvation in the world to come, which is alien to Islam; (iii) inner-worldly asceticism which is closely associated with Calvinists, while Islam adopts other-worldly asceticism. (iv) Rationalization as one of characteristics employed by Calvinists in understanding religious doctrines in relation to the conduct of life. On the contrary, Islam, in Weber’s argument, does not pose a strong tendency in using rationalization in understanding religious doctrines about life.

⁵ Masdar Hilmy, “Agama dalam Arsitektur Negara-Bangsa,” *Kompas*, 17 April 2023, 6.

⁶ Sukidi, “Max Weber’s Remarks on Islam: The Protestant Ethic among Muslim Puritans,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2006), 195-205.

⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).

Through this article, Sukidi refutes Max Weber's thesis that Muhammadiyah becomes a prototype of a religious movement that shares doctrinal similarities with Calvinism.⁸

The next research work that bears similarity to the theme of this article is a paper written by Sumanto Al Qurtuby. In his work, "Calling for 'Islamic Protestantism' in Indonesia and Beyond: Towards Democratic and Pluralistic Islam," Al Qurtuby attempts to reflect on the potential of Islam as a doctrinal force that can be expected to build a new geopolitical global order that is democratic, pluralistic, and peaceful.⁹ The emergence of ideologies and movements of radicalism and terrorism within Islam that have created a negative image of this religion is an undisputed sociological fact that there are a few fanatical followers of this religion who attempt to dominate religious interpretations toward a regressive direction. However, the Muslim community cannot allow the face of this religion to remain in the hands of these few individuals. They must reclaim it by constructing ideologies and religious understandings that align with the principles of modern civilization (democracy, pluralism, peace, and universal humanity).

Apart from the two articles mentioned above, there are several research findings that discuss the ethics of Calvinism and the work ethic of Protestant religion, but they do not specifically examine how Calvinistic ethics are derived from the Islamic tradition and/or other religions in Indonesia as a starting point for the integration process between the work ethic and religious spirit.¹⁰ There is also an article that discusses the impact of Calvinist teaching in Indonesia written by Agustinus M. L. Batlajery.¹¹ However, the latter article focuses more on the relationship between Calvinism and the Christian community and church congregations in Indonesia, which is clearly not the focus of this study.

⁸ Ibid., 200-205.

⁹ Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "Calling for 'Islamic Protestantism' in Indonesia and Beyond: Towards Democratic and Pluralistic Islam," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 2, No. 01 (June 2008), 151-177.

¹⁰ Husnul Khitam, "Islam and Capitalism: The Dynamics of Religion and Contemporary Indonesian Work Orientation," *Al-A'raf*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (June 2022), 45-63.

¹¹ Agustinus M. L. Batlajery, "The Impact of Calvinist Teaching in Indonesia," *Unio Cum Christo*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (October 2017), 203-2018.

On the basis of preliminary research findings and scholarly works above, a serious study on how the Islamic Calvinist ethics is possible for Indonesian Muslims becomes a necessity in the landscape of Indonesian Islam. This article argues that the absence of Calvinist ethics among Muslims in this country is a result of long story of dichotomous narratives adopted in this country. This religious dichotomy in turns results in the syndrome of decay in the worldly life of Muslim community in Indonesia.

Syndrome of Growth vs Syndrome of Decay

The above reality stands in stark contrast to secular countries. In those countries, life is actually much better. Human beings and human values are highly esteemed, as evidenced by the consistently higher life indexes compared to countries whose populations claim to be religious. Contrasting with countries whose populations claim religiosity, one would undoubtedly find conflicts and bloodshed there.¹² The two sides of their lives affirm the diametric dualism between religion and public indexes.

Borrowing from the theoretical framework of Erich Fromm in his book *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*, there exists a syndrome of decay among religious nations worldwide, where the existence of religion has not yet been able to place life and humanity, human beings and human values, in a high regard.¹³ Religiosity seems to only fuel human egoism in the pursuit of rewards and the quest for the keys to heaven, ironically neglecting life and humanity. Meanwhile, among secular nations, a syndrome of growth occurs, where the values of life and existence, human beings, and humanity become the primary compass in societal, national, and state life. According to Fromm, within human beings, there are two psychological tendencies: nonproductive orientation and productive orientation.¹⁴ He refers to the first tendency as necrophilia, which involves the presence of characteristics in humans that are characterized by a love for death, non-productivity, and decay (herewith referred to as “syndrome of

¹² Phil Karber, *Fear and Faith in Paradise: Exploring Conflict & Religion in the Middle East* (New York & Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

¹³ Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964).

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

decay”). On the other hand, the second tendency (referred to as “syndrome of growth”) operates in the opposite manner: the presence of characteristics involving a love for life, productivity, and growth towards everything that exists on earth.¹⁵

The two contrasting and contradictory images in appreciating humanity above should be taken as serious reflections to improve the condition of religious diversity and national life in any particular nation that refers to itself as “religious” such as Indonesia, unless the vitality of religion in public life will disappear. Indonesia has taken the path of “neither here nor there” (neither religion nor secular) in terms of the state policy towards religion. In this case, this paper argues that Indonesians do not need to revise this model, for example, by adopting to secular model where religion is treated as a private entity. What the Indonesians need to do is to draw upon the spirit of ethics of Calvinism from the traditions of religions (regardless of the religion) in order to improve the quality of their lives. This is intended so that religion can provide maximum and productive contributions to improving all productive national life indexes.

Dichotomic Religious Narratives

The division of the two entities mentioned above—the religious entity and the worldly entity—occurs because religious adherents treat them in a “secularistic” manner.¹⁶ The term “secularistic” here does not mean the same as the secularism doctrine applied in Europe or other advanced nations, where religion is not given a place in the public sphere to govern the affairs of the state and society. However, in reality, in a secular state, religion has ethical ties with all worldly affairs.¹⁷ The concept of secularism in the Indonesian context, on the contrary, refers to the separation of worldly life, state, and society that has no ethical relevance whatsoever to religious entities.¹⁸ Religion concerns an

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Separating the sacred from the profane. See, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Luthfi Assyaukanie, *Islam and the Secular State in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009).

individual's personal life related to spirituality and life after death, not related to the affairs of society, the state, and worldly life in general.

The division of these two entities has implications for the dualism in the state's policies regarding the religious domain.¹⁹ On one side, there is the Ministry of Religious Affairs tasked with handling various matters related to the religious life of its citizens, including Islamic education affairs. On the other side, other ministries have no relevance whatsoever to various religious issues. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology or the Ministry of Health, for instance, only deal with education-related matters or health issues under their respective jurisdiction.²⁰ As a result, many issues that inherently have a common thread between the two distinct institutions become difficult to coordinate because they fall under different domains. However, the infiltration of non-productive religious interpretations into fields like health, which are not in line with scientific narratives and productive work ethos in that field, requires collaboration and coordination between the two ministries to mutually support and dismantle counterproductive interpretations of health towards a more productive one.

Therefore, an effort is needed to bridge the two worlds that have long been considered divided by constructing an ethical religious narrative based on the values of religious teachings. In doing so, we are not attempting to religionize (Islamize) worldly or state affairs at all. We simply want to emphasize that religion does not contribute to the deterioration of their quality of life. This is important considering there are several social facts behind the deterioration of social-economic-political life indexes due to the excessive intervention of religion in worldly affairs through non-productive narratives or interpretations. For example, infant mortality is considered a blessing because the baby will lead its parents to paradise in the future.²¹ Or the dominance of a fatalistic

¹⁹ Muhammad Sirozi, "Secular-Religious Debates on the Indonesian National Education System: Colonial Legacy and a Search for National Identity in Education," *Intercultural Education*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2004), 123-137.

²⁰ Ibid., 124-125.

²¹ Kamyar Hedayat, "When the Spirit Leaves: Childhood Death, Grieving, and Bereavement in Islam," *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, Vol. 9, No. 6 (2006), 1282-1291.

fate-based theology behind the Muslim community's attitude towards the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from these examples, there are still many instances of counterproductive behavior in religious communities due to the lack of enlightened understanding of religion or due to the intervention of unproductive understanding among religious communities that leads to a condition of decay syndrome in their lives. This can be done by, among others, crafting the so-called "Muslim Calvinism ethics" among the Muslim community.

The first approach in crafting religious Calvinist ethics is to construct a non-dichotomous narrative between religion and public life. Why a non-dichotomous narrative? Because our religious narrative is still dichotomous as explained above—or, not to say, secular. That is, religion is not mandated to participate in worldly affairs. Religion is only allowed to concern itself with matters of life after death (the grave and the hereafter). Worldly matters that religion can handle are the cycle of the Muslim community: testimony as a Muslim (ID card), circumcision, marriage-divorce, and funeral rituals. Beyond that, religion is forced to "know its position" and not to intervene in worldly life. Firstly, religion is considered to lack sufficient competence to handle worldly affairs. Secondly, theologically speaking, worldly matters are considered outside the scope of religious narratives. As a result, religion seems to be left idle once again in various worldly affairs.

The entire dimension of religion, especially Islam, actually receives very extensive treatment in the construction of the "neither here nor there" state (neither secular nor religion-based).²² Especially for Muslims, all pillars of Islam are treated well by the state. Establishing places of worship is facilitated, the management of almsgiving (*zakāh*) is also regulated by the state (Law No. 23 of 2011),²³ as well as the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).²⁴ The Ministry of

²² Nadirsyah Hosen, "Religion and the Indonesian Constitution: A Recent Debate," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 03 (October 2005), 419-440.

²³ Alfitri, *Islamic Law and Society in Indonesia Corporate Zakat Norms and Practices in Islamic Banks* (London: Routledge, 2022), 93.

²⁴ Robert R. Bianchi, *Guests of God: Pilgrimage and Politics in the Islamic World* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 189.

Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, as the special ministry whose mandate is to handle religious affairs, is consistently allocated a very large budget each year (always ranking in the top seven ministries in terms of budget after the Ministry of Public Works and People's Housing (PUPR), the Ministry of Defense, The Indonesian National Police (Polri), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA).²⁵

Nevertheless, religious policy affirmations and accommodations have not shown significant contributions in the context of improving the national and state life. Corruption is still prevalent, the quality of healthcare is low, and the Human Development Index (HDI) and life expectancy index remain subpar. During the recent pandemic, the religious narrative also could not fully support the handling of Covid-19, both in terms of preventive and curative measures. Within the Muslim community, there is a division of opinions regarding the belief in the existence of Covid-19.²⁶ There is, in fact, a group of Muslim believers who resist health protocols by continuing to gather in crowds while religious rituals (which has been proven to be the fastest mode of transmission for the spread of Covid-19). They believe that health protocols do not apply during worship, as they are conceived that worship itself implants antibodies capable of warding off the entry of the Covid-19 virus. Such unscientific attitudes clearly contradict health reasoning and can pose a threat to human safety.

In the context of disasters, there is a dichotomy between religious and scientific narratives.²⁷ Whether acknowledged or not, religious narratives about disasters tend to be fatalistic and overlook disaster risk mitigation. Meanwhile, scientific narratives about disasters operate in the opposite manner: rational (based on

²⁵ Information downloaded from www.dataindonesia.id (accessed on 22 December 2023).

²⁶ Masdar Hilmy, "Winning the Battle of Authorities: the Muslim Disputes over the Covid-19 Pandemic Plague in Contemporary Indonesia," *Quodus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2020), 293-326; Masdar Hilmy, "Nalar Agama Melawan Pandemi," *Kompas*, 30 July 2021, 6.

²⁷ David K. Chester, "Theology and Disaster Studies: The Need for Dialogue," *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research*, Vol. 146, No. 4 (1 September 2005), 319-328.

cause-and-effect principles), mitigative, and precise.²⁸ Therefore, when facing disasters, the Muslim community tends to submit to fate. They argue that whatever befalls humanity must be accepted with submission. Humans do not have the power and authority to defy the will of God. It is God who controls and moves this natural world. If God wills it, then anything will certainly happen, including natural disasters. In short, the strong role of religion in society has not yet contributed to improving the quality of public life especially in terms of disaster mitigation.

Once again, the low quality of public life is caused by the neglect of religious narratives that have not been given a wide opportunity to contribute their energy to improving the quality of public life. Religious narratives remain counterproductive and separate from public well-being affairs. We may refer to such religious narratives as dichotomous or divided narratives. Sociologically, such narratives are not without precedent at all. In fact, dichotomous narratives that develop in society may well be the result of a social construction process that ultimately shapes a construct reality within the community itself.²⁹ Society feels “comfortable” with such construction, accepting it as part of the sublimation of the inability to manage quality public life.

Neglect of religious narratives comes from two directions: internal and external. Internally, religious circles tend to refrain from “intervening” in observing phenomena outside of religion. Religion is considered to lack authority to deal with public sectors; social sectors (conflict, social integration and harmony), health sectors (malnutrition, stunting, Covid-19 pandemic), natural disasters and accidents, to sports and the arts. Externally, external groups (non-religious scientists and the state) also tend to “underestimate” the ability and authority of religion to contribute to improving the quality of public life. However, if explored properly, the construction of a “unique” state like Indonesia actually provides very promising opportunities for the development of a more quality and productive national life.

²⁸ Armin Bunde, Jürgen Kropp and Hans Joachim Schellnhuber (eds.), *The Science of Disasters: Climate Disruption, Heart Attacks, and Market Crashes* (Giessen, Germany: Springer, 2002).

²⁹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1991).

The dichotomous narrative differs substantially from the secular narrative. However, the dichotomous narrative also has a significant historical intersection with the secular narrative. If the dichotomous narrative is built on the principle of “dual truth realms,” the secular narrative is built on the principle of “mutually antithetical” relationships between one and the other. Religious narratives are considered to have their own separate place, unconnected to the narrative of worldly life. Nevertheless, both are united by the same principle: the separation or division of two realities. Meanwhile, the principle of “mutually antithetical” implies a negation between one and the other. The reality of religion and religious narratives is considered not to be interconnected and connected, even mutually contradictory, because their substance is seen as being in opposition to each other.

Indonesia’s Mild Secularism Revisited

Even though they have different substance and definitions, it very possible that both are rooted in the same mentality: the separation between the sacred and the profane, between the material and immaterial, between the worldly and the hereafter. In other words, the secularism mentality becomes the source, seed, or origin of the dichotomous narrative also traces its roots to the same origin as the narrative of secularism. The genealogy of secularism in this country cannot be separated from the history of colonization that separated religious communities from the state community.

Some scholars classify the construction of the “neither-nor” state (*negara bukan-bukan*) as secularism.³⁰ Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) refers to the type of secularism adopted by this country as “mild secularism.”³¹ According to Gus Dur, even though the majority of the Indonesian population adheres to Islam, our founding fathers did not choose a theocratic system (a state based on a specific religion). Since its inception, Indonesia declared itself

³⁰ Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle, “Muslim Indonesia’s Secular Democracy,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (July/August 2009), 575-590; See also, Greg Barton, “Indonesia: Legitimacy, Secular Democracy, and Islam,” *Politics & Policy*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (June 2010), 471-496.

³¹ Abdurrahman Wahid, “Indonesia’s Mild Secularism,” *SAIS Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer-Fall 2001), 25-28.

based on Pancasila (lit. five pillars). In this country, Gus Dur goes on to argue, “religion serves more as moral support than as state ideology.”³²

Regardless of the debate about whether the “neither-nor” state construction falls into the category of secularism or not, it is advisable that we critically understand the theoretical nomenclature of secularism as an idea that emerged in the colonial and post-colonial era. The discourse of secularism that developed in Europe was a dialectical process that was indigenous, bottom-up, and originated from authentic historical roots. Meanwhile, the development of secularism in the Muslim world was more often top-down, a state-forced policy imposed on society in the name of modernity and democracy. As a result, secularism in the Muslim world did not find its authentic footing because it represents a history and philosophy that is distinctly European. This is why the secularism project in most Muslim countries ended in failure due to resistance from the grassroots.

Following Noah Feldman in his book *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, the pattern of state-religion relationship among Muslim nations were stable and friendly compared to the same pattern in the West prior to Colonization Era.³³ For more than a millennium, religion has played a crucial and constructive role as an agent of stability and predictability. In contrast to the Western world where, in the post-Reformation Era, religion became a source of deep conflicts, in the Muslim world, religion successfully compelled the imposition of strict limitations on the personal ambitions and desires of caliphs and sultans, preventing them from encroaching upon the religious realm that served as the authority of the scholars. To address various religious issues, rulers tended to consult with scholars to find solutions, and, in general, they each occupied distinct roles without interfering with or intervening in each other’s domains.

In line with Feldman, Vali Nasr asserts that it is impossible that secularism cannot free itself from the shackles of its colonial entanglements. It is a nomenclature that is distinctly Western and colonial. Furthermore, he emphasizes that:

³² Ibid., 27.

³³ Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Secularism in the Muslim world never overcame its colonial origins and never lost its association with the postcolonial state's continuous struggle to dominate society. Its fortunes became tied to those of the state: the more the state's ideology came into question, and the more its actions alienated social forces, the more secularism was rejected in favor of indigenous worldviews and secular institutions—which were for the most part tied to Islam. As such, the decline of secularism was a reflection of the decline of the postcolonial state in the Muslim world.³⁴

The affirmation of the origin of secularism, both in the sense of soft separation as in Anglo-America and hard separation as in Continental-France, becomes important because secularism has sociological, historical, and philosophical foundations deeply rooted in the European societal context.³⁵ When it is imported into the context of Muslim societies, it is evident that there is significant resistance and sociological upheaval that can disturb the stability of Muslim societies. Even among some majority-Muslim nations in the Middle East, secular state systems are apparently used as a façade to perpetuate despotism and authoritarianism by heads of state, as demonstrated by Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and others. Some Muslim activists experience oppression and persecution under secular governments in those countries. It is their experiences that cause some Muslims to associate secularism with the ideology of oppression. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, secularism carries a negative connotation because this term is often denounced by “Islamists” as one of the elements of “SEPILIS” (secularism, pluralism, and liberalism).³⁶ Additionally, the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) has issued a fatwa declaring secularism as forbidden (haram).³⁷ In short, secularism—whatever its form—has a less favorable history in this country.

³⁴ Vali Nasr, “Secularism: Lessons from the Muslim World,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 132, No. 3 (Summer 2003), 67-72 (69).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See, for instance, Adian Husaini, *Liberalisasi Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Dewan Da’wah Islamiyah Indonesia, 2006), 11.

³⁷ Mun’im Sirry, “Fatwas and their Controversy: The Case of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (February 2013), 100-117.

Instead of grappling with dichotomous religious narratives tinged with secularism, why don't we develop more authentic and productive religious narratives and discourses? Why don't we start from the diction and religious discourse inherited from our religious heritage? Such an approach is far more productive than getting entangled in religious narratives that exploit secularistic narratives while silencing religious narratives in private and solitary spaces that do not directly contribute to the improvement of the quality of national life.

Therefore, it is crucial to seize the religious discourse that has been dominated by the Salafi group. What they have been doing so far is excavating the normativity of religious teachings to justify the lives of Muslims in the world. The first step in this direction is to redefine and reconstruct various terms, nomenclatures, and religious discourses they have already developed, such as Sharia, fiqh, hijrah, and the like. It must be acknowledged that our attitude towards the religious discourse of the Salafi community has tended to be antipathetic and indifferent. They have inadvertently taken control of the public space and the digital world, developing a literalistic and regressive religious understanding. It must be acknowledged that most of them are new learners who are currently captivated by the enthusiasm and curiosity about the normativity of religious teachings. It can be said that they belong to a militant group actively studying religion. However, their militancy is not complemented by the wealth of comparative perspectives (*mugārahah*) in the rich discourse of classical religion. Therefore, their religious stance tends to be narrow-minded, closed, and limited. They do not open themselves to the rich religious heritage available to them.

As a counter-discourse to the religious beliefs of the Salafi community, it is essential to develop Muslim own discourse based on the most authentic religious sources (the Qur'ān and Hadīth) concerning themes of statehood and nationalism that directly contribute to improving the quality of people's lives. What NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) has done through the nomenclature of civilizational jurisprudence developed in 250 *pesantrens* (Islamic boarding schools), for instance, is a productive way to explore religious narratives towards the reconstruction of more productive

religious thinking.³⁸ The body of knowledge traditionally held by the *pesantren* leaders (*kiai*) is reexamined through religious studies aligned with the current religious discourse. It involves examining topics such as the nomenclature of *Dār al-Islām* vs *Dār al-Harb*, *Kāfir* vs Muslim, *jihād* vs *qital*, and so on. In this way, the religious discourse held by the *santri* (students of the *pesantrens*) can be reviewed and kept updated in line with the changing time. Alternatively, the progressive Islamic discourse of Muhammadiyah provides elegant ways to anchor arguments for improving the quality of life in more authoritative and authentic religious sources.³⁹

Deconstructing Dichotomous Narratives: Cross-Institution-Ministry Synergy

Since its entry into the Reformation Era (*Era Reformasi*), Indonesia has been facing various complex and multifaceted challenges that require the synergy of all elements of the nation to unravel. All these issues are interconnected, forming a cluster of endless labyrinthine problems. Institutionally, there are state institutions (the Trias Politica: legislative, executive, and judiciary) that have been mandated to address various issues. Within the executive branch itself, there ministerial institutions entrusted by the president to handle the nation's problems, including health, education, law, culture, population, labor, human development, technology, industry, poverty, social inequality, disasters, and sports as well as the arts. All sectors have been compartmentalized within the existing ministerial institutions.

Nevertheless, to address the various issues facing the nation, synergy among ministerial institutions is required, which is not an easy task. Sometimes there is sectoral ego within the ministerial institutions that hinders the resolution of a problem. One ministry and another may not necessarily converge on a common platform. An example is the issue of investment. Reportedly, it is not easy for investors, especially foreign investors, to invest in Indonesia.

³⁸ “PBNU Gelar Halaqah Fiqih Peradaban di 250 Titik,” NU *Online*, 21 June 2023.

³⁹ Abdul Mu’ti et al. (eds.), *Kosmopolitanisme Islam Berkemajuan: Catatan Kritis Mukhtamar ke-47 Muhammadiyah di Makasar 2015* (Surakarta: Muhammadiyah University Press, 2016).

Once again, this is due to cross-sectoral constraints that are not easy to navigate. Therefore, President Jokowi's idea to streamline various regulations related to many aspects into a comprehensive and cross-cutting regulatory framework—referring to as the Omnibus Law—as a smart breakthrough for solving various national issues. The challenge, however, lies in providing accurate and adequate understanding of these various matters to the public, which is not an easy task. Miscommunication and misunderstandings often occur among stakeholders regarding the issues included in the Omnibus Law. As a result, unnecessary resistance may arise in certain circles regarding the implementation of a regulation.⁴⁰

Another aspect that has not been maximally addressed is the synergy across related ministries concerning a development issue, such as infrastructure development, human resource development through improving the Human Resource Development Index (HDI), health sector development, poverty alleviation, building disaster-aware communities (as we live in a disaster-prone area), and so forth. In this context, the state tends to mandate a specific ministry and does not encourage synergy and communication among other ministries. As a result, the success or failure of a program is solely borne by the relevant ministry responsible for that specific program. Meanwhile, other ministries tend to be indifferent to the success or failure of programs executed by other ministries.

At a glance, delegating mandates to specific ministries may seem professional and targeted. The Ministry of Social Affairs, for example, exclusively deals with social issues faced by the community, such as social assistance for natural disasters, mapping social vulnerabilities and mitigating solutions, and so forth. Other ministries, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, do not have the authority to assist in resolving programs owned by the Ministry of Social Affairs. However, if we are honest, religion touches on various aspects of human life—from birth to death. In reality, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is not involved in programs owned by other ministries. One explanation for this is that each ministry has

⁴⁰ "9 Jam Demo di DPR, "Massa Aksi Tolak Omnibus Law Cipta Kerja Bubarkan Diri," *Kompas online*, 14/03/2023.

been assigned tasks and functions according to the budgetary capacity provided by the state.

Concerning disasters, for example, one should not assume that disaster issues have no connection with religion. So far, the Ministry of Social Affairs has not touched at all on the religious aspects of disasters, so culturally, our society cannot become a fully disaster-aware community. One of the contributing factors is the presence of traditional religious narratives that act as hindrances in efforts for swift and accurate disaster mitigation and management. As we all know, the theology of disasters in our society is till surrounded a fatalistic and irrational religious understanding. When a disaster strikes our society, religious narratives about disasters, produced by religious teachers, preachers, and Muslim scholars speaking from one stage to another, often spread. It is not uncommon for the disaster narratives produced by them to be counterproductive to the protocols of quick and precise natural disaster mitigation and handling (often resulting in the concept of “theodicy”).⁴¹

Another example is the issue of underage marriage or child marriage. On one side, there is a traditional religious narrative allowing the marriage of girls after reaching the age of menstruation (around 11-13 years old). However, the changes in time necessitate a reexamination of the minimum age for marriage for girls. In the present conditions, the age range of 11-13 years falls into the category of vulnerable children if they are married. This can be understood considering that changes in time imply changes in the classification of age limits for individuals. If in ancient times (7th century when Islam was revealed), the age of 11-13 years for girls allowed for marriage, in the present era, this age range still falls into the category of childhood. It is only at the age of 19 that a girl is allowed to marry someone of the opposite sex (in accordance with Law No. 16 of 2019, replacing Law No. 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage).

Challenging the traditional religious narrative about the age limit for marriage is clearly not easy. Even though there are laws in

⁴¹ In Christian tradition, associating disasters with God's punishment upon the victims or humanity is called “theodicy.” See, D. K. Chester, “Theodicy of Natural Disasters,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 51, No. 04 (November 1998), 485-506.

place, society might still use religious narratives as an exit strategy for early-age marriages, especially if the girl is already pregnant out of wedlock and/or due to other reasons.⁴² Yet, behind legal provisions, there is a religious legal argument based on the principle of *maslahah* (*al-maqāsid al-shari‘ah*). Because these two different narratives are not well orchestrated, both persist within society. As a result, the community still has the opportunity to marry off their daughters at an early age by relying on traditional religious narratives. The high rate of early marriages in several regions in Indonesia is due to the availability of such exit strategies. Meanwhile, the existence of Law No. 16 of 2019 concerning Marriage is easily overlooked by society, resembling a paper tiger. Such legal dualism should not occur if the nation desires a rule is adhered to by all citizens.

In the context of public health development, religion also has a strong intersection with efforts to maintain physical and spiritual health. A fatalistic approach to life can hinder the achievement of a long-life expectancy. According to World Bank data for the year 2020, the average life expectancy of the Indonesian population is 71 years.⁴³ Compare with other developed countries such as the United States (77 years), the United Kingdom (81 years), China and Japan (85 years), Singapore (84 years), South Korea along with several other countries like Norway, Australia, Iceland, Israel, and Malta having the same figure (83 years), Sweden along with Italy and Spain (82 years), Malaysia and Brunei (76 years), and so on. Unfortunately, among the top twenty countries with the highest rankings, none originate from predominantly Muslim-populated countries.

It has to be acknowledged that so far, the scientific narrative about age and health has not been well complemented by religious narrative. In fact, there tends to be a contradiction between the two; the religious narrative tends to be fatalistic and irrational, while scientific narrative tends to be secular and rational.⁴⁴ The

⁴² Masdar Hilmy, “Mengurai Sengkarut Dispensasi Nikah,” *Jawa Pos*, 31 January 2023, 4.

⁴³ World Bank data (www.data.worldbank.org).

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Harold G. Koenig and Saad Al Shohaib, *Health and Well-Being in Islamic Societies: Background, Research, and Applications* (New York & London: Springer, 2014).

religious narrative is deductive-normative in nature, whereas the scientific narrative tends to be inductive-empirical (data-based). It seems challenging for them to meet. However, building a productive theology of life requires the integration of scientific and religious narratives in the same breath. They should not be divided and contradictory one to the other; thus, dichotomous and secularized. Integrating them requires continuous adjustments through renewal mechanisms and ongoing *ijtihad* on regular narratives that are not relevant to the needs or changes of the time.

Activating the Mechanism of *Tajdīd-Ijtihād*: Incorporating Religious Narratives into State Policies

The synergy between state institutions (such as Badan Kependudukan dan Keluarga Berencana Nasional/BKKBN) and religious authorities (i.e. The Council of Indonesian Muslim Clerics or Majlis Ulama Indonesia/MUI) in successfully implementing the Family Planning (KB) policy is one of the best examples of cross-institutional cooperation during the New Order era. The religious groups were tasked with formulating religious narratives about the importance of birth control, while government institutions executed socialization programs across various sectors of society. Unfortunately, some suspected this program to be a political tool of the New Order regime to control Islamic groups. There was even resistance from within the religious circles, rejecting the family planning program on religious grounds, arguing that it was considered killing a fetus, which is clearly prohibited in Islam (*haram*). As a result, the family planning program operated less effectively and came to an end with the collapse of the New Order regime.⁴⁵

The same pattern can be replicated to achieve success in other programs by fostering synergy among institutions and ministries responsible for those programs. For example, the collaboration between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to succeed in programs addressing malnutrition or reducing stunting rates; the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture (Kemenko PMK) synergizing with the Ministry of

⁴⁵ Terence H. Hull, “The Political Framework for Family Planning in Indonesia: Three Decades of Development,” in *Two is enough: Family Planning in Indonesia under the New Order 1968-1998* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003), 57-81.

Religious Affairs, MUI, mass organizations, and local governments to enhance the Human Development Index (HDI); the Ministry of Youth and Sports adopting a similar approach to boost national sports achievements; and so forth. With similar pattern, religion is present in all aspects of public life and can contribute to improving the quality of public life. Religion is not limited to overseeing the implementation of the five pillars of Islam or routine matters like circumcision, marriage, and funeral rites. Beyond that, religion can play a contributive role in enhancing the quality of life for the community.

If religion can be empowered as a driving force in building a better quality of public life, then there lies the contribution of religion to the nation. This is what is referred to in the theoretical construction of social sciences as the ethics of Calvinism; that is, the spirit of advancing human life through the empowerment of religious doctrines or religious narratives. If this is done by this nation, surely the entire energy of the nation can be focused on boosting various achievements index. Like awakening a sleeping or dormant giant, Indonesia will become an unbeatable force by any nation, considering that 96 percent of the total Muslim population in this country (237 million) still believes in the vitality of religion in the public sphere.⁴⁶ With a religious narrative based on the ethics of Calvinism, this nation will excel in various fields, including HDI, life expectancy index, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as well as achievements in sports, arts, and so on.

By emphasizing Calvinist ethics, it does not mean that only the economic dimension is taken from religion, as the seeds of capitalism among the Muslim community, as studied by Max Weber in the context of Calvinism.⁴⁷ Calvinist ethics in this context refer to the religious teachings' spirit to reform and improve the overall quality of public life, encompassing economics, politics, social aspects, health, and so on. If Islamists present the Islamic thesis as 2D (*al-dīn wa al-dawlah*/religion and state), the author proposes Islam as 2D as well (*al-dīn wa al-dunyā*/religion and

⁴⁶ “The Global God Divide,” Pew Research Center, 20 July 2020 (www.pewresearch.org).

⁴⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Harper Collins, 1991); Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (London: Routledge, 1998).

worldly matters), or Islam as a religion and life (*al-hayāh*).⁴⁸ However, it should be noted that what is taken from religion is not the literal spirit or verbatim text from the Qur'an and Hadith. What is taken from both sources is the ethical spirit to improve the conditions of human civilization comprehensively.

Therefore, efforts for reinterpretation, recontextualization, and updating of Islamic teachings through mechanisms such as *tajdid/ijtihād* remain necessary.⁴⁹ Involving religious figures from various backgrounds (mass organizations, Islamic boarding schools, scholarly institutions), such efforts are inherently not difficult to undertake. What is needed is a collective willingness to enhance the quality of public life by identifying and resolving all the nation's issues. Most importantly, there should be no politicization of this program by associating individuals involved with specific political interests. This is understandable because when empowerment activities are overshadowed by political interests, it is ensured that the work will proceed smoothly. Synergy among institutions, ministries, mass organizations, and the government can only be achieved through integrity and shared commitment to improving the quality of community life, nation, and state.

Conclusion

To sum up, this article argues that Indonesia harbors an immensely powerful potential when the ethics of Calvinism is extracted from the teachings of religions—not only Islam—to fully support empowerment efforts in various fields. Unfortunately, this significant potential remains idle. With the resources this country possesses (a significant number of “devout” followers of religions), Indonesia needs one “click” to unearth that extraordinary

⁴⁸ Robert Hefner, *Islam and Citizenship in Indonesia: Democracy and the Quest for an Inclusive Public Ethics* (London & New York: 2024), 26. See also, Masdar Hilmy, *Islamism and Democracy in Indonesia: Piety and Pragmatism* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), 6.

⁴⁹ In its generic sense, *tajdid*—meaning ‘reform’—is an ideologically neutral term. But in relation to the reform movement in Indonesia, this term is closely associated with the reform movement carried out by the Muhammadiyah as a modernist wing of Muslim organization. See, Fauzan Saleh, *Modern Trends in Islamic Theological Discourse in Twentieth Century Indonesia: A Critical Survey* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 82.

potential. Nevertheless, a measured and systematic roadmap or blueprint is required to guide all its citizens towards the collective desired condition; formulating a high-quality theology of public life through the excavation of Calvinist ethics from existing religious traditions and translating it into empowerment programs across institutions, ministries, mass organizations, and the government.

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