

Indonesia and the Future of Muslim-Christian Relations

BY BERNARD ADENEY-RISAKOTTA



Twenty years ago, Farsijana and I married in Berkeley, California, and moved to Indonesia. We arrived just after President Suharto's resignation. His 31-year rule over, Indonesians were navigating difficult times, including tensions between Christians and Muslims. Some Christians feared that Islamists were trying to take over the country. At the same time, Muslims worried about Christianization and the growth of the church. Deadly conflicts broke out all over the country. Most foreigners fled, as many countries issued travel bans for Indonesia. We decided to stay.

We were energized by Indonesian hopes for a just and democratic society. Duta Wacana Christian University offered us a nice, safe house in an enclave of Christian faculty and staff. However, we wanted to be agents of reconciliation, breaking down barriers. We decided that by building a home in a Muslim neighborhood, we could connect with Muslims, in addition to the Christians we met through the university and our church. Could we, as Christians, also be part of a Muslim community? Twenty years later, we still believe the answer is yes.

A Long History and Complicated Present

Indonesia is the fourth largest nation-state in the world, with a population of more than 260 million.¹ This includes the largest Muslim population in the world (209 million), roughly two thirds as many as in the entire Middle East region.² In fact, the Middle East is home to just 20 percent of the world's Muslims, while the Asia-Pacific region is home to 62 percent of the world's Muslims.³ The Muslim population is 87 percent of Indonesia's population,⁴ while Christians make up 10 percent of Indonesia's population (26 million).⁵

Indonesia never experienced widespread "wars of religion" like the ones that plagued Europe for centuries.



PC(USA) mission co-workers Bernard and Farsijana Adeney-Risakotta

Immersed in a culture that highly values tolerance and harmony, the church thrived, growing from about 3 percent of the population at the time of Indonesian independence from the Netherlands (1945) to the current 10 percent. For some Muslims, this is an alarming demographic shift.

Some people wonder whether interreligious peace is now under threat. Are Indonesian Muslims becoming more intolerant of non-Muslims? Related to that question, we must also ask how non-Muslims treat Muslims—both in Indonesia and the rest of the world. The more often Islam is subjected to blanket condemnation and attack in the West, the more adamantly Indonesian Muslims assert their identity as Muslims. Over the past 30 years there has been a dramatic growth in the practice of orthodox Islamic piety in Indonesia, and, today, signs of it are apparent everywhere.

Western domination of media, technology, wealth, science, education and weapons doesn't result in submission to Western superiority; rather it results in resistance in the name of transcendent values that Muslims find in Islam. Sometimes intolerant acts against religious minorities in

Indonesia, including Christians, accompany the resistance. Despite these pockets of conflict, most Indonesian Muslims and Christians continue to live side by side in peace.

Religion in Indonesia

The Indonesian Constitution is based on five principles (Pancasila):

- 1) the Great Unity of Deity—there are various religions but only one God or transcendent principle;
- 2) the Oneness of Humankind—there are many races and cultures, but one humanity;
- 3) the Unity of the Nation-State of Indonesia—more than 13,000 islands, many languages and cultures, but one nation;
- 4) government based on sovereignty of the people—a representative democracy;
- 5) social justice for all Indonesians.

The first principle implies that all “world religions” are good and worthy of respect. Indonesians often say they have neither a monoreligious (Islamic) state, nor a secular state that separates religion from the public sphere. Instead they have a multireligious, monotheistic state. All Indonesians are guaranteed religious freedom in the Constitution, although there is no freedom to spread antireligious ideologies, such as atheism.

Globalization and digital communication mean that events, ideas and trends in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, Africa and America deeply impact Indonesia. Indonesia is the third largest user of Twitter in the world (after the U.S. and India). Events—like Brexit and the election of President Trump—and the attitudes behind them ripple into Indonesia.

Muslim-Christian Relationships

Portrayals of Islam as a dangerous enemy of the West lead many Indonesians to feel that their religion

Religious Harmony in Indonesia?

BY DÉSIRÉE M. YOUNGBLOOD

Indonesia is a very religious country. In fact, belief in the one and only God is one of the five principles of the national philosophy (known as Pancasila) and signs of this belief are many. On Java, Muslim mosques are everywhere. On Bali, Hindu shrines are outside most of the homes and businesses. In North Sulawesi, a Christian church seems to be on every block.

The national motto of Indonesia is a Javanese phrase, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means “unity in diversity.” Most of the Indonesians whom I met said that they get along well with their neighbors of different faiths. While the majority of Indonesians live in harmony, religious extremism and some cultural practices threaten Indonesia’s “unity in diversity.”

To ensure that everyone claims a religion, Indonesia requires every driver to have a religion declared on his or her driver’s license. Although this requirement was established with the intent of supporting Pancasila, it can be abused in the hiring process so that a workplace only includes people of the “correct” religion.

Although many children befriend children of other religions, they are not allowed to marry a person of a different religion when they are grown. Interreligious marriages are forbidden in Indonesia, so one person in an interreligious couple must convert.

Radical Muslims have declared their intent to push Christians out of Indonesian political offices. In early 2017, the Christian governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, cited a verse from the Quran as evidence that Muslims could vote for non-Muslims. An edited version of his citation was circulated and he was accused of blasphemy against Islam. He received a two-year prison term.

In a conversation with some college students, I learned about religious inequality in the school system. In public schools, Muslim holidays are observed by all children, including the Christian children, but the Christian children are not allowed to celebrate their own religious holidays. A Christian teacher would be prosecuted under the blasphemy law if she attempted to proselytize students. Yet, Muslim teachers try to convert children without any repercussions, according to the college students.

Yogyakarta, which is known as the center of education, is also considered to be a city of religious harmony. Yet, Majelis Mujahideen Indonesia (MMI), a group known for its ties to Al Qaeda, is based in Yogyakarta. At the opening ceremonies of the Synod Assembly of GMIM (Christian Evangelical Church of Minahasa), Gomar Gultom, the General Secretary of the Indonesian Communion of Churches, warned the churches to stay vigilant because of the threat of church bombings in Jakarta by Muslim extremists.

In a seminar with women pastors of the GPIB (Protestant Church in Western Indonesia), I learned that building a Christian church in a Muslim-majority area can prompt demonstrations. Everything is fine when they begin building a new chapel, but as soon as they put a cross on the building, extreme Muslims will stage demonstrations.

Most Indonesians try to adhere to Pancasila and honor each other’s religions, but religious extremism and suspicion of “the other” can threaten even a society built on diversity.



In Kuta, Bali, a parking lot shared by a GPIB church, a mosque and a Hindu temple stands as an illustration of the Indonesian hope for religious harmony. The three houses of worship share space and resources, seeking to live harmoniously.

is under attack. Religious tensions and populist trends spread fear of the other, prejudice against those who are different, and anger against those perceived as a threat or an enemy. Just as American nationalism and religious practice surged after 9/11, so Indonesian nationalism and Islamic identity intensify in response to anti-Islamic rhetoric in the West.

Indonesia is as complex as the United States or any other country with different religious groups present. Therefore, no single mindset typifies Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia. However, we *can* simplify the many possible attitudes of Muslims and Christians about each other into three main views.

At Odds

One perspective—also common in the United States—is that Christianity

and Islam are implacable enemies. Both are embroiled in an unending and primordial competition for worldwide dominance. Each see the other as, at best, misguided, or, at worst, the embodiment of evil. They believe the very survival of their religious community depends on defending themselves from the aggression of their rival, if necessary with military means.

This perspective has a long history in Indonesia. It is part of a narrative that sees Western colonialism, imperialism and capitalist exploitation as not only between the global North and South, but also between Christianity and Islam. This view led early Islamists to fight for an Islamic state in the early years of the Republic. They were defeated by the nationalists. Most Indonesians accepted *Pancasila* rather than Islam as the philosophical foundation of the country.

Separate But Equal

A second perspective, which is more popular in Indonesia than the first, views the different religious communities as ideally tolerant of each other, but best kept strictly separate. Even in tolerant Java, villages that are 99 percent Muslim are reluctant to allow a new church to be built in their community—just as small, majority Christian towns in the U.S. might not allow a permit for building a mosque. Some Balinese villages are very sensitive about allowing a mosque or a church into their Hindu neighborhood.

Some Indonesians like to quote a Koranic verse that says, “For you is your religion and for me is my religion” (109:6). An extreme of this position results in a kind of religious apartheid. Religious communities are “separate but equal,” even though some are more equal than others! Nevertheless, for many Indonesian Muslims and Christians, keeping strictly separate is rather impractical. Many families include both Muslims and Christians. Many schools, universities, government agencies, businesses and civil society organizations are religiously mixed. Keeping apart in such conditions does not seem to prevent conflict; rather, it breeds distrust.

Different But United

A third perspective views different religions as part of God’s plan. According to this common Indonesian theology, God has been working throughout history, in all parts of the world, revealing God’s Way through prophets. There have been many prophets, some of whom founded religious communities. There is truth in all of them, even though they do not agree on many points. All of them urge high moral principles, compassion and justice. All of these religions promote belief in one God or one transcendent principle (e.g., Nirvana or Dharma).

Even though most sincere believers think their religion is the best, or

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most perfect, revelation, they see no point in fighting over it because all religions are from God. God has allowed religious diversity on earth, and so should we. People from different religious communities should work together on common problems, like poverty, corruption, environmental destruction, violence and violation of human rights.

This third “ideal type” is still the dominant view in Indonesia, but some people wonder whether the other two types are gaining in popularity, influenced by worldwide circulation of fear and prejudice against those who are different. The following story is a simple illustration of how neighborhood practices strengthen communal solidarity across religious lines.

Neighbors First

When we first moved into our Muslim neighborhood, we noticed that during the fasting month of *Ramadan*, our neighborhood mosque served a dinner every night, after the sun went down. I knew most of our neighbors were poor and wondered how they could afford to serve a meal every night to the poor of the village. Farsijana commented that those who are better off contributed towards the meal. She suggested we contribute to the nightly meal. For me, this was a startling idea! After all, we contribute to our church.

Farsijana laughed and teased me by saying, “You just think that way because you are an American.” She explained that Indonesian Christians often contribute to the buildings and programs of mosques. And Indonesian Muslims often contribute to the Christian churches’ good work.

Since then, every year we contribute to the sunset meals during the month of fasting. In return, every year, the mosque sends us an offering of meat after the Muslim day of sacrifice (*Idul Adha*), which celebrates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son to God. How beautiful it is

when sisters and brothers live in peace! If we are all willing to sacrifice, in love of God and our neighbor, we may find that our family not only includes Christian neighbors, but also neighbors from other faiths. 🍷

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Notes

1. Central Intelligence Agency, “Indonesia,” *The World Factbook* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2017).
2. Pew Research Center, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections,” April 2, 2015; www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/.
3. Pew Research Center, “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World,” August 9, 2017; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.
4. Pew Research Center, “The Future of World Religions . . .”
5. Central Intelligence Agency.

Temples and the Timeless Quest

BY NANCY THOMAS



Left: At the Borobudur, the Buddhist temple compound site, tour guide Happy Sulistaiwan describes the significance of various carvings. Right: Global Exchange participants at the Hindu Uluwatu Temple, overlooking the Indian Ocean

Indonesia’s rich temple history provides a strong and visible foundation for the first of the five principles of the Pancasila—belief in the one God. During our time in Yogyakarta, we visited the Buddhist Borobudur Temple and the Hindu Prambanan Temple, dating back to the seventh and ninth centuries, respectively. Our incredibly knowledgeable tour guide, Happy Sulistaiwan, brought the history of these temples to life for us as he conveyed the stories of their construction, use, meaning, destruction by earthquakes and reconstruction across millennia. He interpreted stone carvings etched by Hindu and Buddhist faithful as they struggled with how to live their lives and their reasons for being.

Happy also offered insights into the unifying themes across religions. Viewing seventh-, eighth- and ninth-century representations of the spiritual journeys of Hindus and Buddhists was a powerful experience. It affirmed for me that a connection with the sacred has inspired people for centuries.

We also visited two breathtaking and centuries-old Hindu temple sites in Bali. Both were perched on the edge of the Indian Ocean—one on a volcanic outcropping that becomes an island at high tide, the other on a high sheer cliff with surf pounding below. It was profoundly apparent during our brief time at each of these sites that they were chosen as places for worshipers to reflect on the wonder and majesty of creation. Some of us chose to participate in a rice blessing. In that experience, and in each of the temple visits, I felt a connection to the one God—who is worshiped in so many different ways and places—and to others seeking the divine.