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**The Challenge to Developing Contextual Theology
In Pluralistic Society in Indonesia.**

By:

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Introduction.

The Association of Theological Schools in Indonesia (Persetia) was founded in 1963 at a gathering of 16 Theological Schools sponsored by then The Indonesian Council of Churches that originally consisted of mainline Protestant Churches. Persetia has now 36 members and it is opened to any denomination of Protestant Churches and thereby has an ecumenical character. Out of 36 Theological schools, 19 have become members of the ATESEA. Within these 36 member schools, there are about 8000 students enrolled. The main goal of these theological institutions is to train pastors for congregations all over Indonesia which minister to about 15 millions Christians.

The aims of Persetia as an association is to facilitate and enable member schools to develop institutionally and strive together to develop theological thinking in an Indonesian context, or more accurately to say “to develop contextual theological thought” in order to serve the churches and to enable the churches to serve the Indonesian society better. It is, however, not an easy task to do with regard to the changing nature of Indonesia’s social problems. There was time when the focus was given to Indonesia’s rich cultural heritage and thereby developing theological thinking that enable Christians to practice Christianity through making use of such rich cultural expressions. This is to avoid being alienated from our own culture. This concern is still valid, but we are now in a time where the focus is given to social problems and various kinds of social injustices, thereby developing theological thought with social analysis to understand the structural injustices and to do an ideological critique that enable the churches and Christians to take part in the praxis of social transformation toward a more just society.

Most recently Indonesia has been undergoing a social conflicts where religion has played a significant role in those conflicts. This terrible experience has brought a new challenge to develop theological thinking that enable a peaceful relationship between people of different

religions. This paper will focus its attention on this phenomenon and its consequence to developing contextual theology in the setting of a pluralistic society. We will also try to give some practical implications of such an effort.

I. The Pluralistic Nature of Indonesian Society and the Social Conflicts in it.

Indonesia has been known from the very beginning as a pluralistic society in terms of ethnics, cultural and religious backgrounds. Its population is more than 200 millions which makes it the fourth largest country in the world. Muslims make up 90 % of the total population which means Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. As a nation we have a motto: “unity in diversity” which has helped us live in a relatively harmonious relationship for quite a long time. However, at the end of last century and the early years of twenty first century, this country experienced bloody social conflicts with religious and ethnics dimensions to them. Thousands of people became victims of these conflicts.

Though these conflicts involved two communities, namely Christian and Muslim, many experts came to the conclusion that these were not really inter-religious conflicts in the sense that the main reason was not religious, but rather factors of politics and economics. This is to say that it was the struggle to gain domination in political and economic spheres that caused the social conflict between the two communities. Once the conflict started, it was very hard to stop, especially when there have been so many victims. The situation was : “to kill or to be killed.” In that dilemma, people tend to find justification in religion for instance for the sake of defending religion, “it is right to kill in the name of God.”

According to some experts, there are three inter-related factors that caused the violent conflict in recent years. I will mention just two in this presentation.

First is the politicization of religion. Ann Shoemaker argues that conflict between groups based on religion in Mollucas is a reflection of the collapse of social capital as a result of the dynamic of development, especially the political processes during the New Order leadership. She continues by saying “how was it the communal bond in Mollucas be torn down, thus neighboring people were motivated to kill each other? How to explain such immediate change and the collapse of social trust?”¹

Politicization of religion takes various forms. For instance, the faulty transmigration policy of the government, is interpreted religiously as a political maneuver to “Islamize” other regions having rich natural resources and important Christian population with Muslim immigrants from other parts of Indonesia. Such policy can easily be interpreted as an effort to balance the

¹Conflict Resolution Homepage, August 17, 2004:2

population based on religion, which in turn will effect the result of an election of the head of government in those areas.

In addition to this, the spontaneous transmigration of people of Bugis, Makassar, Button who are Muslims was perceived as intentional effort to outnumber the Christian in Ambon in order to win the election of people representatives who then will elect the governor or the head of the district.

Another form of political process that created religious tension was the Islamization of bureaucracy. Dawam Rahardjo says, that “since the early 1980s, people have seen the symptoms of ‘Islamization of bureaucracy.’ This kind of process creates tension especially in Christian stronghold areas or in the areas where Islamic and Christian communities are more or less balance in number. It was under the growing dominance of ICMI (The Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association) that the policies of the central government were seen through the lens of Islamization: placing Muslims in the strategic positions throughout Indonesian social hierarchy and promoting the cause of Islam.

All these examples have destroyed the social trust as an essential element of social capital. Therefore a trivial accident or a small personal tension between just two individuals is quickly transformed into communal tension involving a large number of people of the two communities: Islam and Christian. In other words, we may conclude that the root cause of the social conflict is the struggle for domination in political and economic spheres.

The second interrelated factor identified by some experts is the latent suspicion based on the issue of Islamization versus Christianization.

As a distinct sociological unit, each religion looked apprehensively toward the others, and felt its free existence to be constantly threatened by the maneuvers and movements of the other religion.² In brief, there is little mutual trust toward each other’s intention so that relation between different religious communities is still mainly dominated by a hostile image about the other, specifically the disturbing image of Christianization versus Islamization. Rahardjo says that “the hostility between Islam and Christianity arose because of aggressive religious proselytization, and dominance of the economy and the mass media by the Christian minority.”³ He further says that Christianity is perceived as an active, aggressive and triumphalistic religion that wants to conquer the world for its faith. At least, it is being suspected of trying to become the dominant

²Agus Rahmat W, “Interreligious Conflict and Reconciliation in Indonesia,” in <http://www.passievoorvrede.nl>

³Dawam Rahardjo, “Pluriformity in the Development of Islam in Indonesia and Religious Revival” in *Religion and Politics, An Islamic Perspective*, 36

culture in the New World Order. In brief, it is Christianity and not Islam that is seen as as being a militant religion and hence, almost by definition, as needing to be resisted.

On the other hand the transmigration program of the central government is easily perceived or suspected as an act of political maneuvering to Islamize other regions having rich natural resources and important Christian populations, by bringing Muslim migrants from other part of Indonesia. It is this kind of latent suspicion and hostility that contributes to the social and violent conflicts, especially in areas where the numbers of the two communities is more or less equal.

By the politicization of religion and the misuse of religion by several interest groups, it seems that instead of pacifying the latent social tensions that had been present in society, religion tended to amplify the tensions further to the point where they finally burst into violent communal conflict. In other words, religion had been used or misused to amplify the social tensions that already existed.

II.The Challenge to Develop Contextual Theology in a Pluralistic Society.

Such social conflicts mentioned above were a real concern for many including theologians and theological institutions. The challenge is to develop a kind of contextual theology to address such an issue. There is a great need for a contextual theology that will help us to develop a peaceful and harmonious relationship between people of different religions and faiths. This is a valid concern for our fundamental faith teaches us to bring peace. But how?

There are theologians especially within the Christian circles who argue that one of the reasons of inter-religious conflict is the absolute truth claim in every religion. Once you hold an absolute truth claim about your faith, you are doing violence to other people who have different truth claims, and therefore it will drive people to conflict.

The argument follows, therefore, that we must abandon our own absolute truth claim. This means that our truth claim must not absolute. Furthermore they argue that our truth claim is a kind of language game which is valid only to our own community. At the most, we can only claim the truth of our faith but truth can also be found in other faiths. We can even learn from other faiths things that can enrich our spiritual life.

However, can we still witness our faith to others? Can we abandon our own Christian identity for the sake of peace and harmonious relationship? These are the tough questions we must face when we struggle to develop a contextual theology of peace in the context of social conflict in a pluralistic society.

Looking back at the social analysis of the root cause of social conflict, I wonder whether we are asking the wrong question. Is it true that having an absolute truth claim about our faith will automatically lead us to social and violent conflict? If the analysis given above is correct, that the root cause of violent social conflict were economic and political interest, then why do we try to find the solution in another factor, namely the absolute truth claim? I do believe that absolute truth claims have the potential to cause social conflict if it is followed by an effort to dominate others ideologically, economically and politically. Such a truth claim or ideology has been called “legitimizing identity” according Manuel Castells.⁴

Many are struggling with the question whether an attitude that respects differences in religious faith must result altogether in the abandoning of one’s own religious identity? Ali Enginer from Pakistan once said that religion has at least two function. First, religion functions to give identity to someone, and identity creates walls and distance from other people with a different religious identity. Second, religion functions as moral guidance to a meaningful life, that brings us closer to our fellow human beings and other creatures. Can we maintain and nurture our Christian identity without being alienated from our fellow human beings and other creatures?

Christians as a minority, living in a predominantly Islamic society, sometimes feel threatened and desperately in need of nurturing their Christian identity as an “identity of resistance.”⁵ But is it healthy to do so? Or, do we need to develop a “project identity”⁶ based on our faith heritage together with people from different faiths to overcome the root cause of conflict: that is the greed for domination in various areas of life? We must dig from our own faith tradition the resources which inspire us to struggle with other people to overcome social injustices that creates the gap between the have and the have not.

Again, what we are trying to show you is not a final answer to the challenge of developing a contextual theology in pluralistic society of Indonesia. Our theological institutions are part of that struggle and the struggle will in turn focus our future direction of doing theological education.

III. Some Practical Implications

Based on the context stated above, theological schools in Indonesia need to work together with other faiths’ institutions and schools. This is done by visiting other faiths’ institutions,

⁴Manuel Castells, The Power of Identity, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 8.

⁵Idem.

⁶Idem.

offering joint programs, as well as exchange students and lecturers. More and more members of Persetia go through this path. For example, for graduate degrees they accept Muslim students. Also they invite Muslim lecturers from Islamic theological schools to teach Islam. Another example, the Faculty of Theology of *Duta Wacana* Christian University has a joint doctoral program with *Gadjah Mada* State University and *Sunan Kalijaga* Islamic State University – in cooperation with GTU at California, USA. This program is called “Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies” (ICRS). Besides, the same school (*Duta Wacana*) also offers a master degree program on peace studies and conflict transformation, whose students come from many different backgrounds of faith, study and work.

In developing contextual theology, some schools have centers for the study of religions; feminist theology (in cooperation with other faiths’ institutions and with NGOs); peace. Persetia held a study institute on mediation and conflict transformation for lecturers of its school members.

For training pastors in parishes, theological schools offer an intensive study on Islam (i.e. for two weeks) where they can learn about, meet with, and visiting different kinds of Islamic groups.

Beside those degree programs, some member schools of Persetia have been involved in mediation and other efforts to bring peace in times of conflicts, poverty, and natural disasters. As an academic institution, theological school can become a source of transformation from conflict to peace. Usually this is done by theological schools as part of their ministries in society.

Conclusion

In the pluralistic Indonesian context, schools of theology can no longer work by themselves in preparing students for ministry. Learning and working together with people of other faith is really needed. By so doing, theology has broader horizons in developing a contextual theology in Indonesia, where pluralism, poverty, and conflicts happens.