

An Urgent Need for a Humanist Theology^{*}

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In 2017, I together with a number of my colleagues from School of Graduate Studies of UIN Sunan Kalijaga conducted research on Islamic religious literature as circulating among Indonesian Muslim youth. We found that the book *Tarbiyah Jihadiyyah* of Abdullah Azzam, an influential jihadist ideologue, was among that circulating literature, though not the most popular one. The book was translated into Indonesian and published by Jazera Press in 3 volumes. The book could be easily found in many bookstores in that year.

Some youth that we interviewed were interested in the book because it inculcated the spirit of *jihad*, which in a certain extent met their religious aspiration and adventurism. This book highlights the importance of *jihad*, the ideal character of *mujahid* (Muslim fighters), and especially the author's experiences in the Afghan war against the communist Soviet Union. The author affirmed that jihad was the essence of Islam, and therefore, it became obligatory for Muslims until the Day of Judgment, quoting Ibn Taimiyyah "*Laisa ba 'da al-īmān billāh syai'un aujaba min daf'i al-ṣa'il 'ala al-ḥurmah wa al-din*" (there is nothing more obligatory after belief in Allah than to ward off enemies who undermine honor and religion).

By this, Azzam claimed that jihad must take precedence over any other religious obligations including the five pillars of Islam: *shahada* (Muslim declaration of belief), prayer, fasting, *zakah* (almsgiving) and *haji* (pilgrimage). According to him, abandoning *jihad* means stopping the pulse of Islam, because the history of the Muslim community was nothing but a struggle with the "sword" on the one hand, and the Quran, on the other (Azzam 2013, I:159–60).

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Since last year at least, the book *Tarbiyah Jihadiyyah* has been seldom found in bookstores. Yet, the reminiscence of the jihadist message remains in the memory of some (former) jihadist activists. Some of them are still dreaming of death in *jihad*. In 2020 I conducted research on the educational background of former terrorist convicts. Knowing my profession as a professor in Islamic studies, one of the former convicts challenged my understanding about the history of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly the Prophet's job and livelihood. He was convinced that the Prophet did nothing but *jihad*; the Prophet might do some trades but after his prophethood, *jihad* became his main profession.

Of course, the history of the Prophet and the Qur'an have been known by many, but the question is why only minority of Muslims have such extreme understanding and interpretation? Knowledge about the life of the Prophet and the Qur'an is not something exclusive to those jihadists; it is accessible to many. Yet, Muslim understandings of their scripture and the history of their Prophet are always mediated by a certain mode of theology and of course complex social and political factors. We may say that "violence-oriented theology" is the one that orients some Muslims toward religious violence.

Young people, the Most Vulnerable?

Studies have shown that many young people have been involved in radical and extremist movements in Indonesia. Indeed, there is a generational issue when we conducted research on former terrorist convicts and ISIS deportees and returnees last year. Former terrorist convicts belong to what we call the "old generation" of extremists, while the latter belong to the "new generation". There are some differences between both. The old generation's perspective of religious extremism was extensively shaped by their social network, while the new generation was much more influenced by open information that had some connection with their religious aspirations. The old generation generally came from lower middle-class families, while the new one mostly came from upper middle-class families. Nevertheless, the so-called old generation of extremists were in fact young people when they were first exposed and

attracted to extremist understanding of religion. In this regard, our question about youth's religious aspiration becomes highly relevant.

As a sociological reality, youth is often described as a social condition in human life development where an individual stands between childhood (as the stage of vulnerability, innocence, and need of protection) and adulthood (the time of total responsibility). In this regard, youthfulness is the time during which an individual experiences a life of "relative autonomy"; he is neither totally dependent nor independent (Bayat 2010, 6). It is a period where most individuals begin to express self-actualization, claim their own space, negotiate with adults, worry about their future, and even rebel against the establishment. From this point of view, we come to an idea about "youth habitus".

The demise of critical leftist streams in the Indonesian political arena leaves political Islam as the only viable canal (Hadiz 2020) that facilitates young Indonesian people who are worried about their future adult status and feel discontent with the current social and political conditions to challenge and even rebel against the current political and religious establishments. The mainstream religious establishments are seen by some Indonesian Muslim youth to have failed to initiate social and political changes that meet their aspiration and expectation. Trends of political Islam that promote radical and violent approaches to social and political changes seem to have attracted some circles of Muslim youth within a more democratized political context. They not only accommodate Indonesian Muslim youth's aspiration for concrete and instant changes, but more importantly correspond to youth habitus and provide a canal to express their youthfulness.

Some Questions about 'Hermeneutics of Violence'

Since the decease of the Prophet Muhammad there have been no single, institutionalized authority which hold absolute rights to determine and define the 'correct' understanding and practices of Islam. Multiple authorities always contest each other in their attempts to define the true, 'orthodox' Islam. This democratic character of Islamic religious authority leads some scholars of Islam, like Talal Asad

(1986), to consider that Islam is a “discursive tradition” whose orthodoxy is sociologically determined by dynamic relation to power.

The Qur’an as the Muslim Scripture remains as it is, but its interpretations are undoubtedly varied. The variety and sometimes contesting modes of the interpretation of the Qur’anic passages depend not only on the cultural and intellectual backgrounds (horizons) of the interpreters, but also on their theological orientations. Indeed, the Qur’an contains teachings about respect and compassion, but the same time it also contains passages related to war in the name of God. Different theological orientations contribute to shaping how Islam is expressed and articulated. While the majority of Muslims believe in the compassionate character of Islam as the true face of this religion, we cannot deny that there have remained a few Muslims who are eager to feature Islam as a religious and political ideology that must take control over people’s life, imagination, belief and practices even if has to be done through coercive and violent measures.

Let me start with an idea of Islamic caliphate, which is seen by some Muslims as the only legitimate system in Islam. In fact, the idea does not have any strong basis from the Qur’an. The Qur’an mentions man as a caliph with the meaning of God’s vicegerent, who would bear the task of managing affairs on earth. Q. al-Baqarah (2):30 mentions caliph in the context of God’s conversation with angels informing them that He would appoint vicegerent on earth. At this point, the attribution of caliph to man is devoid of any clear political authority. Indeed, Q. Sad (38):26 mentions the appointment of David as a caliph. It might be understood as God’s bestowal of political authority since David was King of Israel and Judah. Yet, if we look carefully at the series of passages before Q. Sad (38):26, David’s attribution to caliphate has nothing to do with his kingship. The passages mention that David was alarmed and surprised with two groups of people in conflict when they climbed over the wall of David’s prayer chamber, asking David to settle their dispute.

The meaning of caliphate as legitimate Islamic political authority as proposed by some Islamist movements like Hizbut Tahrir is much more shaped by ideology rather than

the Scripture. Indeed, some reports attributed to the Prophet mention caliph as a political leader, yet the authenticity of such reports is often questioned.

One among a number of the Qur'anic passages often linked to the violent acts by extremist or jihadist groups is Q. al-Anfal (8):60,

وَأَعِدُّوا لَهُمْ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ قُوَّةٍ وَمِنْ رِبَاطِ الْخَيْلِ تُرْهِبُونَ بِهِ عَدُوَّ اللَّهِ وَعَدُوَّكُمْ وَآخَرِينَ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَهُمُ اللَّهُ يَعْلَمُهُمْ ۚ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ شَيْءٍ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ يُوَفَّ إِلَيْكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تُظْلَمُونَ

“And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify (turhibun) the enemy of God and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged”

For some Muslim extremists this passage and some passages before are used to justify violent acts against the unbelievers, terrifying them with all necessary means in war. Of course, the definition of war by extremists might be different from that by other Muslims. Whether Muslims are indeed in a state of war is a matter of dispute.

For those Muslims believing in the compassionate nature of Islam, the passage above is tied with some conditions mentioned in the previous passages. Intense war against the unbelievers was concluded because they violated treaties they had already signed before, and full-force attack could be justified during war time only (Shihab 2008).

In this regard, we may say that theology does matter in determining the meanings of the Muslim scripture. Historically, the Qur'an does not use the word *kufir* as a persona to designate Jews and Christians, but we may recognize that certain Muslims belonging to certain schools of theology start to include them within the term *kufir/kafirun*.

A Need for a Humanist Theology

We are aware that theology does not emerge from a social and historical vacuum. Rather, it is formed and reformulated as a response to certain social and political contexts experienced by Muslim community. However, the so-called jihadist theology

most likely produce interpretations of Islam that tend to be intolerant, authoritarian, and violent. It has become our concern together. We live in a different context of human history where individual freedom is highly respected and human coexistence becomes an increasingly life necessity in a more globalized society. In this context, we need to create and develop a common theology that strongly upholds human values and guides us in the way we interpret and understand our respected scripture.

The document on Human Fraternity signed by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad Tayyib, and His Holiness Pope Francis in 2019 can be seen as an important effort initiated by two contemporary world religious leaders. The document can be a good start through which we may be able to promote a humanist theology, which not only will guarantee a sense of lawful and theologically justified mutual respect among followers of diverse religions and faiths, but also provide people with breakthrough toward a more humanist interpretation of scripture.