

Gerry van Klinken

Revolution, Religion, and “Connectedness”

Greetings from Australia. My name is Gerry van Klinken.

The word “Religion” today means an institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices. The Indonesian word “Agama” means something similar – an external set of doctrines, a holy book, one God, and a set of institutions to make it all work. That was not originally the case.

The Latin word “religio” originally had nothing to do with the gods. It was a particular kind of emotion – a sense of caution, an inner restraint, in the face of the dangers that life presents to us. A farmer who carefully observed the plants and the weather before sowing was said to be *homo religioso*. Instead of a set of institutions, it was a feeling of being connected to the world around one. It was an inclusive idea. There was no absolute religious truth, to be defended with blood.

Then the Roman statesman Cicero redefined the word. “From the very beginning we must persuade our citizens that *the gods* are the masters and regulators of all things,” he wrote. He wanted the Romans to believe in the “immortal gods,” who would tell the people through the priests and magistrates what they wanted. The whole apparatus of Roman religions was born there. The Christian church gratefully took it over. Religion became a hierarchical, authoritarian, social order. There was moreover only one true God, one true book. This opened the way to the terrible wars of religion that Europe suffered over thousands of years.

The Indonesian word “Agama” has a similarly sad history. Originally, this Sanskrit word meant “that which has come down to the present, by tradition.” In Bali today, agama and adat still mean practically the same thing. In the Sanskrit world, agama had to do with dharma, which concerns behaviours considered to be in accord with the ritual order that makes life and the universe possible. Like the Roman religio before Cicero, agama had little to do with the gods.

Later, however, Indonesian Muslims gave agama a new meaning. It came to be associated with the Arabic *din*, “the way-to-be-followed.” It now meant the exclusive worship of One God, as revealed in One holy book. This was an authoritarian, exclusive meaning of agama, and it opened another door to more wars of religion, which continue around the world today.

So, you may ask, what does all this have to do with Indonesia’s decolonization? The 1945 Revolution was one gigantic, tumultuous, collective, act of inclusion. It resisted Dutch colonialism not in the name of the state, nor of the Dutch-appointed feudal aristocrats, but in the name of all the citizens of a free and democratic republic. Everyone was a citizen – Batak and Javanese, Muslim and Christian and kejawen, woman and man, rich and poor.

Fortunately the earlier, inclusive ideas about religio as universal connectedness, and about agama as universal right behaviour, had not disappeared completely. It played a positive role in the long historical arc that culminated in the Revolution. One example. The famous feminist Kartini wrote in a letter in 1902: - “I am a child of Buddha.” She meant by this that she valued Javanese ethics (“zedenleer”). Her Agama Jawa was close to the original meaning of Agama - an inclusive, adat-like set of behaviours, without institutions, hierarchy, or external moral code.

Another example. The first Indonesian mass political movement, Sarekat Islam, had an equally inclusive idea of agama. When it was established in Solo just before World War 1, it embraced communists and muslims without distinction. Colonial Dutch intelligence thought anti-colonial resistance was ideological – nationalist, communist, islamist. But the energy of Sarekat Islam did not

come from an external moral code or ideology. It came from an inner heroism. Not a political party, Sarekat Islam was a movement for freedom, a pergerakan. They were ksatria. Knights like Haji Misbach, who held an individualistic mix of Islamic and communist ideas. He "acted out 'don't be afraid'" during the sugar strikes of 1921. Another Sarekat Islam ksatria was Mas Marco Kartodikromo, who sacrificed himself in Boven Digoel to his own outspoken integrity, regardless of the party platform.

Christians have known such ksatria too, people for whom religio was an inner sense of connectedness. The nation's first Minister of Defence, and its second Prime Minister, was Amir Sjarifoeddin. As a university student he adopted a form of Christianity that was uniquely heroic. His religio was like that of the Japanese pacifist and socialist Toyohiko Kagawa, who helped found Japan's Labour Party. Kagawa "gloried in the belief that Christianity is not a religion of sensible men, but of men gone mad with love for God and man." Amir knew and admired Kagawa. He himself later joined the Indonesian communist party. In 1948 he died like a ksatria, before a firing squad.

Abdurrahman Wahid, President Gus Dur from 1999 to 2001, was also one of them. His religio was humanist, inclusive, generous, connected. So was Cak Nur, Nurcholish Madjid, leader of Muhammadiyah and an academic who until his death in 2005 often said "Islam yes, Islamic parties no!" because he did not like the authoritarian, violent competitiveness the religious parties showed towards others.

Unfortunately the conventional, exclusive meaning of Agama and Religion that Cak Nur disliked has often been the more prominent in Indonesian history. Why should we expect any different? Institutionalized, hierarchical, authoritarian religion, always with its own enemies – this is the norm in today's world.

One of these conventional institutions was the Dutch Catholic Party KVP. Its leader Louis Beel became Prime Minister in 1946, and then Dutch representative of the Crown in Jakarta in 1948. He was one of the main instigators of the bloody military violence inflicted on the Indonesian people in July 1947, and again in December 1948. A Dutch research project has recently revealed the scale of the war crimes committed. For the KVP, protecting Catholic privilege from the dangers of secularism and communism was core business. Indonesians – to them mainly Muslim and revolutionary – were not part of their "connectedness."

Within Indonesia, too, we know many examples of this conventional Agama. The Jakarta Charter of 1945 belongs to it – this proposed constitutional amendment would have seriously divided Muslims from Non-Muslims. (It failed). The genocidal violence of 1965, in part carried out by Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, and Hindus against communists real and imagined, belongs to it as well. So did the agony of neighbour killing neighbour over Agama in Maluku in 1999. This was Religion at its most authoritarian, its most exclusive.

In short, I do believe Religion, Agama has contributed to a greater connectedness among people seeking freedom. But only when it has remembered its original, universal, inward inspiration of connectedness.

I wish you a good interfaith dialogue. Merdeka!

Further reading

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