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TOWARD A PLURALIST PUBLIC THEOLOGY: Negotiating Faith, Power, and Identity in Indonesia's Public Sphere

MENUJU TEOLOGI PUBLIK YANG PLURALIS: Negosiasi Iman, Kekuasaan, dan Identitas dalam Ruang Publik Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the tensions and transformations within public theology in Indonesia by responding to Fr. B. Hari Juliawan's account of Southeast Asia's socio-political challenges. While Juliawan outlines issues such as labor, migration, and democratization, this response insists that theology must go further, it must interpret and engage, not simply describe. In Indonesia, public theology has often remained insular, framed either by a "theology of nationality" during the New Order or a post-Reformasi "theology of religious identity." Both models, however, tend to treat the public sphere as a battleground for dominance rather than a space for shared responsibility. Through a critical reflection on events like the political rise and fall of Ahok and the symbolism of Christian presence in public life, the author illustrates how public theology in Indonesia has often failed to address the country's pluralism and widespread poverty. Drawing on Asian theologians

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such as Felix Wilfred, Aruna Gnanadason, and Peniel Rajkumar, the article advocates for a pluralist public theology, one that moves from the center to the margins, from contestation to solidarity. Such a theology, rooted in humility and justice, holds promise for a more inclusive and dialogical engagement in Indonesia's complex religious and political landscape.

Keywords: Public theology; Indonesia; pluralism; religious identity; social justice; marginality; democratization

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menggali ketegangan dan transformasi dalam teologi publik di Indonesia dengan menanggapi analisis Fr. B. Hari Juliawan atas tantangan sosial-politik Asia Tenggara. Jika Juliawan memetakan isu-isu seperti tenaga kerja, migrasi, dan demokratisasi, respons ini menekankan bahwa teologi tidak cukup hanya mendeskripsikan; ia harus menafsirkan dan terlibat secara aktif. Di Indonesia, teologi publik kerap bersifat tertutup, berakar pada "teologi kebangsaan" era Orde Baru atau bergeser menuju "teologi identitas keagamaan" pasca-Reformasi. Namun keduanya cenderung memosisikan ruang publik sebagai arena perebutan pengaruh, bukan sebagai tempat tanggung jawab bersama. Melalui refleksi atas peristiwa-peristiwa seperti jatuh banggunya Ahok dalam politik serta makna simbolik kehadiran Kristen di ruang publik, penulis menunjukkan bahwa teologi publik di Indonesia sering gagal menjawab realitas pluralisme dan kemiskinan struktural. Dengan merujuk pada pemikiran teolog Asia seperti Felix Wilfred, Aruna Gnanadason, dan Peniel Rajkumar, artikel ini mendorong lahirnya teologi publik yang pluralis, sebuah teologi yang rela bergeser dari pusat ke pinggiran, dari kontestasi menuju solidaritas. Teologi semacam ini, yang berpijak pada kerendahan hati dan keadilan, membuka jalan bagi keterlibatan lintas agama yang lebih inklusif dan transformatif di tengah kompleksitas kehidupan beragama dan politik Indonesia.

Kata-kata Kunci: teologi publik, Indonesia, pluralisme, identitas keagamaan, keadilan sosial, marginalitas, demokratisasi

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, I was invited to participate in an international conference on Public Theology at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, where I gave a response to the paper of Fr. Dr. B. Hari Juliawan, with the title "The map of Asian Situation from the Perspective of the Social Sciences". I think Fr. Juliawan has succeeded very well in painting a stark picture of Asian, or better, Southeast Asian reality. He focuses on three issues: labour, migration, and democratization. Concerning these three issues, he also pays attention to the war industry and the digital-communication industry. Behind all three issues, we can see his concern for the people. Contrary to many bright paintings of the reality of Southeast Asia now and in the future by others, he does the opposite: despite the increase of rich people, there is still suffering and pauperization in Southeast Asia, especially among the poor, which forms the majority of the people of Southeast Asia. The poor are becoming poorer, and maybe they become poorer so that the rich can become richer! I might be mistaken in my reading of Fr. Juliawan, but I think that is what he tries to bring to the surface, and I agree with him. My agreement comes out of a reflection on the context of Indonesia. So the scope of my response is even narrower than his!

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Unfortunately, from the perspective of the pastoral circle, fr. Juliawan only presented a description and analysis of the context, with no interpretation or action planning. The circle is not completed: there is no solution to the problem. But then, who can give a convincing solution to the difficult situation in Southeast Asia? Even government and non-government institutions are struggling to overcome the problem, partly perhaps, because they are also part of it. If even the government does not know how to overcome the problem, then the church or churches should not pretend that they know the right solution to the problem of suffering in Southeast Asia.

But, following the stages of the pastoral circle, at least we should try to interpret reality. I know that there was in the past a very impatient sage who ridiculed his contemporaries who liked to interpret the world. Stop interpreting and start changing the world! Well, before we act, we should interpret, and I name this process of interpreting, a public theology. Not just theology, but public theology, as the problem has affected many people, and not just Christians.

DISCUSSION

Public Theologies in Indonesia

For some, the term “public theology” is superfluous: isn’t theology always public? But I observed that in Indonesia, theology is done for the church, not for the public. Of course, when it comes to matters which are important for the public, the church will publish “statements”, or better “pastoral letters”, for instance, annual ecumenical joint Christmas pastoral letters by PGI (The Indonesian Communion of Churches) and KWI (The Indonesian Bishop’s Conference). It concerns public matters, but is addressed to Christians, and only indirectly to the public. Indonesia is a Pancasila state, where theoretically, nationality is placed above religion. There is no state religion. Still, religion is a dominant factor in public, so there is a public sphere/space, where adherents of religions could state (and perhaps, realize) their aspirations.

During the New Order regime, Muslims and Christians created their *discreet* public theologies, which I refer to as “theology of nationality” (Ind: “teologi kebangsaan”) for this public sphere/space. Here, they tried to reconcile Pancasila with the core tenets of Islam and Christianity. But in post post-New Order era, which ironically was named “The Reformation era”, the trappings of religion in the public space, especially from the religion of the majority, became more and more visible and dominant. Of course, this is resented by the Christians, and this resentment gave way to communal battles in the eastern part of the country (Poso, Ambon and Halmahera) from 1999-2002 (others 1999-2004). These battles did not benefit either party, so in the end, Muslims and Christians made peace with one another. After the communal battles were over, Muslims and Christians re-lived their theologies of nationality. For more than a decade there was a relatively peaceful period between the two communities that lasted until the election of Jokowi as president in 2014. Precisely under the period of Jokowi, which for many of us, marked the emergence of a real civil society, there was what observers called a “conservative turn” on the side of the Muslims that again created tensions between Muslims and Christians (Fr. Juliawan refers to this term in page 5 of his paper).

This conservative turn signified a change in Muslim public theology from a theology of nationality to a theology based on religious identity. I will refer to this public theology as “theology of religious engagement/identity”. Many interpreted this “conservative turn” as a moderate strand. People become more conservative than before, willing to wear Muslim dresses in public, for instance, because in the past these dresses were regarded as “un-nationalistic”. They are still

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nationalistic, and they still pay allegiance to Pancasila, but they want to appear in public as Muslims, not just as Indonesian citizens. But in the year 2016, it looked as if the conservative turn had suddenly become a radical turn. The cause of the change was political, namely the campaign preparations for the local election of the new governor of Jakarta in February 2017, but the events in 2016 involved perceptions from Muslims and Christians on the relationship between religion and the public space.

The 2017 gubernatorial election is now history, but it is still worth remembering: in 2016, the incumbent governor, Ahok, who is a Chinese and a Christian, decided to go for re-election. Before becoming governor of Jakarta, he was vice-governor, while Jokowi was governor. Then Jokowi became president, and Ahok replaced him as governor. He became governor through appointment, and not through election. But he was very successful in his first term. Many Christians rejoiced that the governor of Jakarta was one of them, and as there were many Chinese among the population of Jakarta, they could double rejoice. They still adhere to a theology of nationality, but the success of Ahok in his first term made him an icon among the Christians and such they also turn to a Christian model of theology of religious engagement. In other words, they also made a conservative turn! The 2017 gubernatorial election became a testing ground, whether the people of Jakarta are ready for a Chinese and a Christian, to become their leader. They seem to be optimistic that Ahok will win the election. But they were disappointed. Although there were Muslims who supported Ahok, the Muslim majority became influenced by the rhetoric of radical factions, Ahok was accused of blasphemy, and in the end he lost the election. After the election he went straight to prison because the court decided that he is guilty of blasphemy. The process of democratization which fr. Juliawan referred to, seems to be detrimental for the future of Christians, and I am not surprised that after the Ahok affair many become nostalgic for the undemocratic New Order era.

Contesting Public Theologies in Indonesia

So, there are two public theologies in contemporary Indonesia: Muslim and Christian theologies of religious engagement/identity. It is difficult to evaluate whether they are moderate or radical theologies. Maybe it suffices to say that on the whole, they are following a moderate way, but on occasion, they could become radical and intolerant of others. They could become theologies of contestation. Right after Ahok was declared a suspect by the court, and perhaps because of anti Ahok demonstrations of November 4 and December 2, 2016, hordes of FPI (Front Pembela Islam, Front of the Defenders of Islam) members entered the malls of Jakarta, as well as in other cities, and demanded the dismantling of Christmas decorations, especially Santa hats. These Santa hats are commonly worn during the Christmas season by the mall attendants regardless of their religion. According to the FPI, Santa hats and all the paraphernalia of Christmas are symbols of Christianity. Their attempt to do this failed because this time the government reacted strongly. What was the reaction of Christians regarding the Santa hats?

It is common knowledge that Santa hats have nothing to do with Christian faith. So, the view of FPI that they are Christian symbols is wrong. Surprisingly, many Christians had the same view concerning the Santa hats. Many are hurt and feel insulted by the intervention of the FPI on the malls of Jakarta. For them, the fact that the windows of shopping malls are filled with glittering Christmas trees and that inside the shops, attendants are wearing Santa hats is somehow related to Christian faith. At least it proves that to a certain extent and to for a certain moment (once a year), the workings of the politics of Christian presence are visible in the public sphere/space, in this

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context, the market! So it is also contestation, on who will take control of the market. Suddenly, for them, Santa hats have acquired a *political* significance. To be religious means to be political, and the difference between the religious and the commercial has become blurred. In many Christmas celebrations that year, also outside Jakarta, and especially in provinces where Christians form the majority, people started wearing these stupid hats, even inside the churches, as a show of defiance against FPI. Both Ahok and Santa hats are part of the discourse on the politics of Christian presence in the public space.

The Need for a Pluralist Public Theology

The Korean theologian, Sebastian Kim, has written a book on public theology (*Theology in the Public Sphere*, 2011), which for him is a conversation between church-communities and society. But as we have seen above, I also had to describe the way Muslims in Indonesia formulate what they mean by public theology. What has recently happened in Indonesia does not have any parallel with examples of public theology in the otherwise comprehensive book of Kim. All his examples, including those from South Korea, are about Christians and church-communities doing public theology in countries that have a tradition of Christianity, or as in South Korea, where the demands of social justice meet the expectations of the religion of the Christians, which is no longer a minority. It is also clear that both Muslims and Christians regard the public sphere/space as an area of contestation, not an area of conversation. Neither is taking seriously the fact, or the context of Asia, which has been described long ago by Aloysius Pieris (*An Asian Liberation Theology*, 1988), namely, religious plurality and poverty. Both are doing public theology that is unrelated to religious plurality and poverty. Perhaps what Christians need in Indonesia is a pluralist public theology. In this respect, Indian Christians are thinking ahead of Indonesian Christians. I mention three of them:

First, Fr. Felix Wilfred, who envisions an “inter-religious Asian Public Theology” which ceases to be sectarian and becomes inclusive (in two articles, “Towards an inter-religious Asian Public Theology” [2015] and “On the Future of Asian Theology: Public Theologizing” [2013]). Second, Aruna Gnanadason, a feminist theologian who has written “Explorations in Public Theology: A New Expression of Faith and Witness” (2010) and third, Peniel Rajkumar, a Dalit Christian, who state that public theology means to side with those at the margin (“Ek-centric Engagement – Reshaping Christian Engagement in the Public Space from the Perspective of the Margins” [2016]). What interested me is their insistence that a pluralist public theology that does not view the public sphere/space as an area of contestation can only come from the struggles of the people who are on the margins. Christians in Indonesia are a minority, although many theologians deny this fact. According to them, in the Pancasila state, all have equal status, so do not use the terms majority and minority. But in regard to numbers, it is clear that Christians form a minority. Maybe they could reconsider their former public theology with a public theology that is more suited to their situation as a minority.

To make this clear, I have to go back to Ahok, who was successful in his first term as governor of Jakarta. He started to fight corruption and mismanagement in the municipality and established the initial steps to overcome the age-old problem of traffic congestion. But not all his policies are laudable. His policy of evicting the poor from the river banks of Jakarta and bulldozing their houses to resettle them in newer facilities was condemned by students and human rights activists. A former Catholic priest, Sandyawan, tried to plead him by showing an alternative to the rejuvenation of the river, which does not need to relocate the people, but his plea went unheeded.

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Ahok had not sided with the poor and the weak. But for his supporters, Ahok is without blemish. It means that the supporters, too, have the same ideology as Ahok. What is important is to be at the centre and dominate the public sphere/space. The poor of Jakarta are Muslims, and the same holds for the majority of the poor in Indonesia. There are poor Christians in Indonesia, particularly in the rural areas of Eastern Indonesia, but the majority of the poor in Indonesia are Muslims. A pluralist public theology can only become a reality if Christians are ready to move from the centre to the margin and show real solidarity with the poor, whether Christians or Muslims, but since the majority of the poor are Muslims, *with the poor Muslims*.

CONCLUSION

Just before the third millennium, Hans Küng has introduced Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigms in history of thinking into theology (*Theology for the Third Millennium*, 1988). We can also refer to the discreet public theologies of Muslims and Christians as paradigms. First, there is a paradigm of theology of nationality. Secondly, there is a paradigm of theology of religious engagement/identity. According to Kuhn, at one point, there could be a change, which is called a "paradigm change". Science progressed in this way. Old paradigms are discarded, and people take up new paradigms. But Küng hesitated in following Kuhn in matters of theology. So he is not talking of paradigm change but "paradigm shift". There is a shift, but it is not necessarily a change. If we apply his insight to my interpretation of the situation in Indonesia, then maybe we can say that there is a paradigm shift from a theology of nationality to a theology of religious engagement/identity. But I prefer Kuhn: for the sake of the poor in Indonesia, the existing public theologies of the two communities should be transformed into one pluralist public theology, or, by using Wilfred's term, "inter-religious public theology", and from the perspective of the people on the margin.

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