



24.3.2008 [407-428]

# CHRISTIANIZATION IN NEW ORDER INDONESIA (1965-1998): DISCOURSES, DEBATES AND NEGOTIATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The author offers a discourse analysis of inter-religious relations during the New Order (1965-1998) in Indonesia. The relations between the Muslim majority and Christian minority were tense in this period. Muslims and Christian disagreed on how to interpret the law concerning freedom of religion and tolerance. Muslims claimed that Christians used foreign aid for 'Christianization' and 'Westernization'. Christians, on the other hand, claimed that Muslims curtailed the freedom of religion of Christians by acts of intolerance and violence. Meanwhile, then president Suharto tried to be seen as impartial, for he considered economic prosperity more important than religion.

## Key Words:

- *Christianization*
- *Islam*
- *Indonesia*
- *New Order*
- *Minority*
- *Diversity*
- *Missionary*
- *Universalism*
- *Conflict*
- *Religious freedom*
- *Tolerance*.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world; around 178 million or 88 percent of the population is Muslim. However, Indonesia is also known as the most culturally and religiously heterogeneous state, where other great world religions like Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and other indigenous, ethnic faith traditions have roots and have grown with Islam over the past hundreds of years. The most significant religious minority in the country and the closest rival to Islam is Christianity, which comprises around 18 million or 9 percent of the population with an average growth rate of 2.4 percent annually, a growth rate which is remarkably higher than the total population growth rate of Indonesia (1.83%).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, some provinces outside Java, such as East Nusatenggara, Papua, North Sulawesi and Maluku, are largely Christian.<sup>2</sup>

Both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic and missionary in orientation. As universal religions, they are anchored on the conviction that God's commands cannot be confined with in a particular community but must be proclaimed and acknowledged all over the world.<sup>3</sup> Such theological understanding serves as the motivating force that drives both to fulfill their missionary function as faithfully as they can. Not to follow such 'divine' mandate is to go against the will and purpose of God for the salvation of the world and humankind. Obviously, this universalistic concept of religion that calls for universal and absolute claims can be a source of conflict. In the process of fulfilling their divinely appointed missionary tasks tensions and conflicts often arise. History is replete with cases and events that show a grim picture of conflicts and bloody wars between these two great traditions.

The Muslim-Christian relations in Indonesia can be traced back to at least the Dutch colonial period and has been significantly affected by colonial and state policies and actions. One very prominent concern that has been the bone of contentions between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia and has significantly affected Muslim-Christian relations until now is the 'Christianization' issue. This issue has a long historical root that started in the Dutch colonial period when the Dutch policies were seen as more favorable to Christians but biased against Muslims. The activities of Dutch missionary were viewed as an attempt to eliminate Islam in favor of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Discrimination created animosities, not only between Muslims and the Dutch, but also between Muslims and Christians. The special treatment received by Christians from the Dutch was deeply resented by Muslims who held Christians and the Dutch as 'two sides of the same coin'.<sup>5</sup> The strife

between Muslims and Christians continued and was aggravated during the Old Order period. Here, the Christianization issue was again brought to the surface when the Sukarno government lifted restrictions to missionary activities, which paved the way for widespread missionary endeavors in different parts of Indonesia.

With the shift of presidency from Sukarno to Soeharto, Muslim-Christian relations were still unpleasant. It was observed that some policies and actions of the New Order Government had significantly heightened tensions between Muslims and Christians and it was during this period when the Christianization issue had become more prevalent. Soeharto's strategy of weakening political Islam had a significant bearing on the relationship between Muslims and Christians in the New Order period as some of its methodology involved Christians. Muslims hoped that after the extermination of Communism, which was perceived as a victory of Islam, and with Soeharto's rise to power Islam will play a major role in Indonesian society. Muslims had a double agenda: pushing an Islamic State and reviving the Masyumi. But hopes to establish an Islamic state and to revive political Islam failed as the Soeharto government opposed it. Muslims saw it as serial defeats following on from the battles to decide the philosophical basis of the state during the years 1945-1959. This disappointment, coupled with some government policies, added more problems to the already escalating tension between Muslims and Christians. Key leaders occupying sensitive and higher positions in the government who were Christians and rich businessmen also surrounded Soeharto. This increased suspicion among Muslims that Christians had been working with the government to eradicate Islamic political power.<sup>6</sup> Supporters of Masyumi also accused Christians of using social programs as a pretext for proselytizing.<sup>7</sup>

This paper analyzes critically the dynamics of Muslim-Christian relations in New Order Indonesia as manifested in the way both religious traditions have interacted with certain socio-political and religious issues that concerned them. More specifically, I analyze the socio-political contexts and bases of the 'Christianization' discourses produced by representative Muslim leaders and how representative Christian leaders have responded to them. Moreover, this study also shows how the New Order Government responded to Christianization issues in terms of government policies and actions. Also, it is significant to see how both Muslims and Christians reacted to such policies and actions. This paper, however, does not attempt to present a generalized Islamic and Christian view on the 'Christianization'

issue, but only representative Islamic and Christian views as gleaned from specific discourses of well-known Islamic and Christian figures who were directly involved in the issue during the New Order Era.

### **Representative Muslim Views and Discourses on the threats of Christianization**

The Muslims' perceptions on the issue of Christianization are best described in the way they reacted to at least four significant factors that took place during the New Order period, namely: firstly, the massive conversion of Indonesians to Christianity; secondly, the lifting of restrictions and reopening of missionary activities; thirdly, the building of Christian churches and other Christian institutions among predominantly Muslim communities; and fourthly, the issue of foreign aid for Christian missionary activities.

After the demise of the Communist party in 1966, a state policy was issued for all Indonesian citizens to affiliate with one of the five officially recognized religions. This was seen as important to dissociate Indonesians from Communism, which had become the common enemy of the state. In 1965 the PKI was outlawed, and hundreds and thousands of its followers were summarily executed. Muslim youth groups had connived with some military to carry out the program of eliminating PKIs from village to village and killing suspected communists.<sup>8</sup> In this highly tensed atmosphere it was extremely dangerous not to be able to claim affiliation with a recognized religion lest one be accused of being a communist or atheist. Ricklefs observes that the vast majority of the converts at that time were Javanists, who were seeking protection from Muslim charges that they lacked religion.<sup>9</sup> This political phenomenon had caused a great number of Indonesians to embrace Christianity. It was reported that in a span of six years (1966-71) more than two million Javanese were converted to Christianity. Christians claim that the 1960's had witnessed the revival of Christianity in Indonesia. This claim was backed up by the following statistical data: the increase of the Catholic population from 1966-1967 reached 7.45%. It was also reported that after 1965 in Central Java, sometimes the number of people waiting for Catholic baptism was more than the number of parish membership.<sup>10</sup> Significant growth was also observed among Protestant churches. For example, the membership of the Indonesian Baptist Churches increased

rapidly from 1,317 in 1960 to 3,391 in 1965.<sup>11</sup> Also, from July to August 1966 the East Java Christian Church baptized nearly 10,000 persons. The Karo Batak Protestant Church baptized over 26,000 persons between 1966 to 1967.<sup>12</sup> This unprecedented conversion made a dramatic increase in the Christian population in Indonesia and was hailed by many mission scholars as “the largest group of people (in modern times) ever to become Christians of a Muslim background.”<sup>13</sup>

How this massive conversion of Indonesians, especially Javanese, to Christianity is supposed to be interpreted has puzzled many scholars of religion. There are a number of explanations and interpretations that link this phenomenon to a variety of factors. Some Indonesian scholars suggest that this phenomenal conversion should be linked to wider processes of transformation, that is, religious, political and economic. They believe that the massive religious conversion of 1965 and onward should be understood against the backdrop of government pressures and policies which required all citizens to embrace an official religion. They also observe that some Indonesians decided to become Christian, because they felt there had been too much tension between Islam and communism. Christianity perhaps was the least risky option.<sup>14</sup> Affiliation with any recognized religion was also seen as a means of refuge and securing one's social, cultural and religious identity. For instance, it was cited that most Chinese also converted to Christianity from Confucianism or Buddhism for fear that they might be associated with China and Communism.<sup>15</sup>

Another reason cited for this great influx of new converts to Christianity was because Christians were more willing and open to accept ex-Communists while Muslims were relatively reluctant.<sup>16</sup> Robert Hefner asserts that the conversion of many Javanese to Christianity was as an attempt to seek social, political and moral legitimization and to provide answer to problems of self-identification in a shattered social order.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the above interpretations and explanations, the massive conversion of Indonesians to Christianity threatened and angered many Muslims. The assumption was that Christians took advantage of the messy political situation to advance their aggressive missionary endeavors by giving a home to communist members with a view of converting them to Christianity. More significantly, it was seen as a clear attempt to Christianize Indonesia.<sup>18</sup>

The second significant factor that contributed to the Muslims'

perception of the Christians' attempt to Christianize Indonesia was the re-opening of missionary activities that allowed Western missionaries to propagate Christianity through various mission works in different parts of Indonesia. Soeharto's post-1965 New Order government found Christian missionaries invaluable to its efforts to implement national development programs, especially among outer-island minorities. Western Missionaries then had a free hand in establishing new centers for missionary work through health, education, economic and social development programs. It proved to be of significant help to the government, since missionaries facilitated government aims, such as creating nuclear family households, defining individual economic responsibilities, increasing ties to the national and global economy, introducing bio-medicine and an improved educational system, etc. As pointed out by Lorraine Aragon, the "Soeharto government utilized Christian missions as a tool to implement basic economic programs especially in the peripheries. It also used the weight of non-Muslim minorities to balance itself against reformist Muslim groups who periodically threatened New Order power by agitating for a Muslim state."<sup>19</sup> That the government had become more tolerant towards Christian missionary activities created tense feelings among Muslims.<sup>20</sup> In general, missionary activities were seen as a hideous means of proselytization and Christianization among many Muslims. Christians were also suspected of collaborating with the government to marginalize and to weaken political Islam.

The third significant factor was the building of Christian churches, social services, health and educational institutions in places that were largely inhabited by Muslims. One of the earliest Muslim discourses on Christianization, which appeared during the earlier years of the New Order Era, was the result of the complaints made by the majority Muslims in Meulaboh, Aceh, against a newly built Methodist Church in that area. The Muslims' anger was stimulated by the fact that the church building was built in a place where they claimed the majority of the people were Muslims. This issue was brought to political authorities of the province, who later decided that the church should be moved to a place not offensive to the majority.<sup>21</sup> Lukman Harun, a reformist Muslim activist accused Christians of building churches in Muslim villages when almost no Christian lived there. For him, these Christian aggressive missionary activities were contrary to the true spirit of tolerance based on Pancasila. He also questioned whether it is

ethical for Christians to evangelize people who already have a religion.<sup>22</sup>

The fourth sensitive issue was the use of foreign aid for religious propagation and missionary advancement. In response to the parliamentary question issued by Christian representatives, the Muslim faction in the parliament also proposed a parliamentary question on the issue of foreign aid to finance religious institutions and missionary programs in Indonesia. This question demanded that the Indonesian government should control foreign aid for religious institutions. Obviously, this issue was directed towards Christians who were receiving much larger foreign aid than the Muslims. In response to Simorangkir's speech, Lukman delivered his own piece on the question of foreign aid for religious institutions and the threats of Christian missions due to the existence of foreign aid. Lukman insisted that foreign aid was a kind of foreign intervention in Indonesian internal affairs and it disturbs the positive spirit of tolerance among different religious groups in Indonesia. With that he accused Christians of having adopted "unacceptable missionary methods to convert Muslims."<sup>23</sup> One of these questionable methods was the unexpected door-to-door visits of Christian missionaries to Muslim homes giving material aid, like food, medicine and other goods, to poor Muslims. Lukman suggested that the government should control foreign aid and that all foreign aid should be channeled through the Department of Religion. He also suggested that missionary activities should be restricted only to those who are outside of the recognized religions.<sup>24</sup>

This perception of foreign aid as 'dangerous' intervention coincides with Armour's observation in his book *Islam, Christianity and the West* that generally foreign aid used for missionary purposes is viewed by many Muslims as the attempt of the Western Christians to destroy Islam. To that extent, it should be expected that the response of many Muslims will be hostile.<sup>25</sup>

### **Representative Christian Response: Questions and Appeals to Religious Freedom and Tolerance**

The demands of Muslim leaders to prohibit the building of churches in largely Muslim communities and to restrict and control foreign aid and missionary activities was generally viewed by Christians as a suppression of religious freedom, which to their understanding is against the principle of



Pancasila. In response to the action of the provincial government to relocate the church building in Meulaboh, the Christian faction in the parliament, together with the representatives of the Indonesian Protestant party (Parkindo) and the Catholic party (Partai Katolik), issued a parliamentary question concerning the issue of religious freedom.<sup>26</sup> Simorangkir, a Christian parliamentarian, explained that the basis of the parliamentary question that was issued by Christian leaders was the Aceh Ulama Council statement dated April 18, 1967, concerning a newly built church in Meulaboh. The Ulama stated that Aceh is a special territory of Indonesia, where Islam and custom are interconnected. In this regard, the Ulama Council of Aceh demanded the government of Aceh to withdraw the permission that allows for the building of churches in West Aceh, especially in Meulaboh city and near surroundings. The government of Aceh acceded to this demand and offered to help the process of moving the church to a non-offensive place where Christians can observe and practice their worship freely. Simorangkir had intimated that the statement of the Ulama's and the action of the provincial government, which favored the Muslims' demand to move the newly built Methodist church, forced them to bring up a parliamentary question, the content of which deserves to be cited here in full for thorough analysis:

1. *Does the government agree with us that the case in Meulaboh can be seen as a destruction of the spirit of tolerance among religious adherents in Indonesia?*
2. *Does the government agree with us that the case was a kind of skepticism with respect to performing a pure application of the first principle of Pancasila?*
3. *Does the government agree with us that any attitude of any group or anybody that hinders or curtails religious freedom means a rejection of human rights respected by all of us?*
4. *Does the government agree with us that if no. 3 happened, it will destroy the climate of national unity under the supervision of the New Order?*
5. *Does the government agree with us that this kind of case will influence the possibility for the People's Consultative Assembly to prepare a declaration for human rights?*
6. *Is the government ready to take preventive or repressive steps, directly or indirectly, in order that this kind of case will not occur anymore in the Republic of Indonesian state that is based on Pancasila?*<sup>27</sup>

Quite clearly, the Christians' arguments, as reflected in these parliamentary questions, were centered on the issue of religious freedom, which to them is one of the basic principles of the Pancasila. These questions, however, did not only reflect a religious conviction, but they also appeal to the sensitivity of the New Order's ideological and political



sentiments. The idea of the pure and consistent implementation of the Pancasila, for instance, jives well with the New Order's declaration to apply Pancasila as the absolute and pure ideology of the state. And so, in a subtle manner, Simorangkir suggests that moving the church out of Meulaboh, as supported by the local government, was a violation of the pure intent of the Pancasila. This issue had provoked many responses from Muslims, Christians as well as from the government. There were hints from some government figures that this controversy was a new Communist strategy to divide Indonesians along religions lines.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Response of the New Order: “Absolute religious freedom, no! Foreign aid, yes!”**

The brewing tension between Muslims and Christians was tackled in a plenary session of the Indonesian Parliament on July 14, 1967. In dealing with the question of religious freedom raised earlier by Simorangkir, Saifuddin Zuhri, the Minister of Religion, explained that historically West Aceh district and especially the city of Meulaboh, were almost entirely Islamic. Among the residents were a few Christians who bought the land to establish the Methodist Church with the permission of the local government. Initially the residents of West Aceh did not understand the purpose of buying the land. After having informed about the purpose of the land the residents objected saying that it is not good to build a church at the center of the Muslim community, because it hurt their feelings very much. He said that indeed, Pancasila prescribes religious tolerance, however, any effort to develop religious life should consider the real and specific conditions that can be found in a region. He also explained that the Muslim community was already suffering from economic difficulties and therefore the degree of their ability to afford religious development projects was very low.<sup>29</sup>

This seems to suggest that due to their poverty, Muslims became quite sensitive to the newly built church, because they could not do a same similar project for their own religious life. He then concluded that religious freedom should be tempered by sensitivity to other people's feelings. While religious groups are entitled to freedom to build places of worship, using this freedom should not offend or hurt the feelings of other groups, because to use the right of freedom that exceeds its boundaries in a sense that one prefers his/her own interest without regard to the feelings of others is a wrong way

of using freedom. Zuhri also argued that being in the majority, Indonesian Muslims had been quite tolerant with religious minorities.<sup>30</sup> This position seemed to favor and support the argument taken by the Muslims in Aceh. It goes without saying that Zuhri believed the Muslims were angered and had reacted violently, because Christians were insensitive to their feelings (maybe of being psychologically feeling threatened) and that in their aggressive missionary attempts Christians were in a sense misapplying, or more so, abusing religious freedom. This is obvious in Zuhri's response, although he said this in an indirect and gentlemanly manner. The Christians still opposed the provision to restrict missionary activities. They justified their position both theologically and politically by invoking the provision of religious freedom in Pancasila and by pointing to the Islamic *da'wa*, which was carried out systematically in predominantly Christian areas.<sup>31</sup>

Again, in response to Lukman's question on foreign aid for religious purposes and concerning his demand to restrict missionary activities, Zuhri explained that in principle, the government has no objection to foreign aid for religious institutions provided it is not binding. He also explained that due to the economic crisis the government could not financially support religious developments in the country and so foreign aid might fill this gap. He agreed with Lukman however that the government should really have control over foreign aid and foreign aid must not be used to hurt feelings of others and must take into account psychological dimensions, i.e. Muslim feelings. This position of the Minister of Religion was substantiated by Soeharto's national speech in front of the Parliament on August 16, 1967. Soeharto explained that the state guarantees religious freedom for every citizen, but he also insisted that religious propagation should not hurt the feelings of other religious groups. Based on Pancasila and the 1945 constitution, religious freedom is guaranteed and therefore there is no reason to make a distinction between a religious minority and the majority. He concluded that foreign aid for religious institutions was welcome in Indonesia.<sup>32</sup>

The Christians, although, were not very much satisfied with the declaration of the government, but they were somewhat relieved that foreign aid was still welcome in Indonesia. Muslims, on the other hand, were not really satisfied with the way the government was handling the issue and pursued their parliamentary question on the Christians' usage of foreign aid for religious expansion. However, for the sake of political stability the

government pressured Islamic groups to stop discussing the issue.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, Soeharto wanted to appear neutral and tried to reconcile the arguments of both sides by skipping away with the more sensitive and delicate details of the issue.

The tensions caused by the parliamentary questions and the frustrations of Muslims with the government's seemingly unfavorable policies had led to another violent reaction. On October 1, 1967, a group of Muslim youths in Makassar, South Sulawesi, destroyed about twenty Christian churches and burned bibles.<sup>34</sup> While Muslims say that it was a sort of a personal vengeance on a Christian teacher who maliciously maligned the Prophet Muhammad by accusing him as adulterous, it could also be interpreted in a broader sense, as something triggered by the perception of the aggressiveness of Christian activities amidst Muslim communities. Christians reacted strongly to these attacks and called it 'well planned' and 'organized attacks'. They said that three months before the attack the two radio stations in Makassar were already airing provocative Muslim preaching, and during the attack there were loud speakers from the mosques shouting "Allahu Akbar, defend your religion, be a martyr." The Makassar attack became a national issue and provoked a lot of arguments, both from Muslims and Christians. Some Muslims like Natsir said that the attack was not good but for him the case was a sign of Muslims' disgust over the Christians' aggressive missionary activities. Some suggested that the attack should be understood from the recent Meulaboh case where missionaries went on door-to-door visits to Muslim homes. Christians did not agree to this kind of reasoning. Again, they insisted that the action was against Pancasila and urged the government to take action against it. They lamented that the authorities did not do anything to prevent Muslim aggression. Simurankir, in his speech to the national congress of Parkindo in Bandung, 1967, responded to the issue and in some ways acknowledged that Christians might have adopted certain ways that might have offended Muslims. However, he maintained that the problem is not aggressiveness of certain missionaries but religious freedom.<sup>35</sup>

### **Representative Muslim-Christian Debates: On Issues of Religious Freedom and Tolerance**

In response to the Makassar attack, the government organized an Inter-religious Consultation on November 30, 1967, to resolve the conflict. The

main purpose of the consultation was to present the proposed draft of charter, which contained rules and agreements on mission and religious propagation and at the same time the creation of the Inter-religious Consultation Board. The draft was prepared earlier and was presented during the consultation, hoping that in spite of their seemingly irreconcilable positions the two contending parties would finally come to an agreement. One of the proposed regulations was that religious propagation should not be directed towards people who already have a religion. The Christian representatives disagreed and proposed an alternative formulation, in which it was stated that “without reducing religious freedom, religious propagation should avoid ways that could engender inter-religious tension.” They insisted that Christians are bound to a divine mandate to proclaim the gospel and it is their duty to share it with others. In general, they argued that the decrees were unconstitutional because they were against the religious freedom granted by the 1945 constitution. In their official response they said that national unity and development should not be opposed to religious freedom, because it is a fundamental human right that the state must protect. After some heated discussions, the government affirmed the earlier proposal, reaffirming the government's position that religious propagation should not be directed to people who already have religion. Soeharto also maintained his position that religious freedom should not hurt the feelings of others. This decision of the government was resented by Christians who consequently refused to sign the agreement. Thus, the consultation came to a deadlock and led to more personal and insulting rhetoric.<sup>36</sup>

Here, Mujiburrahman observes that in addressing the issue on restriction of missionary activities the Christians developed a nationalistic rhetoric for the simple reason that as a minority they felt that a nationalist ideology was the best option to protect their interests in the midst of the Muslim majority. Also they may be keenly aware that the political context was also conducive to the nationalist rhetoric. The ideological battle between the secular nationalists and the Islamic oriented groups recurred again in this period. In this regard, the Christians, the army and the secular Muslims were against Islamic ideology.<sup>37</sup> Mujiburrahman also observes that the Muslims on the other hand resorted to historical and cultural apologetics. They claimed that while Muslims who are in the majority had played a significant role in gaining Indonesia's independence against colonizers and had remained very

nationalistic now other people seem to forget this contribution and accused Muslims of being non-nationalists and anti-Pancasila. They also resorted to cultural apologetic referring to the West and Christians for their arrogance of cultural superiority and their attempt to dominate non-western cultures. They insisted that Christians' idea of tolerance is Western and is taken to mean that Islamic society should keep silent, even if they see that Muslims are Christianized everywhere in all kinds of ways, including material persuasion. They also said that Christians' arrogance was rooted in their doctrine that the world was divided into two sides: the 'damned' and the 'saved' and the duty of Christians is to save the damned by converting them to Christianity.<sup>38</sup>

The Christians believed that in order to solve inter-religious disputes, they just have to go back to the law of the state and the Pancasila. They insisted on religious tolerance, though in some ways they also agreed that it should be exercised in accordance with the 'noble ethics of conscience' and the order of the applied law. In the consultation, the Christians also tried to convince the Muslim leaders that there was nothing to worry about Christian missions. This did not convince the Muslims. Instead, the Muslims blamed Christians for the failure of the consultation. Thus, more squabbles and bickering ensued and fueled more animosities between the two factions. Hamka, for instance in his response to Tambunan's statement that the consultation was not actually a total failure, had bluntly said that he too thinks that the consultation was successful and positive for both Christians and Muslims. It was positive for Christians, because in the consultation they openly declared that it was their sacred mission to proselytize Muslims. It was also positive for Muslims, because now they are strongly convinced that the Christians would not be happy unless Muslims followed their religion. It was also positive for Muslims because now they are more aware of the Christian threat of a new style of crusade funded by foreign countries.<sup>39</sup>

Representative Muslim leaders also alluded to the declaration of the World Council of Churches in a meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelization in Geneva attended by a Christian and Muslim participant from Indonesia, strongly urging Christian churches and organizations to "suspend their misused diaconia activities in the world of Islam." The conference further urged that all material assistance donated by outside churches and organizations "henceforth be distributed whether possible through or in cooperation with the governments."<sup>40</sup> It seems to appear that while Christians were accusing Muslims of violating the spirit of

the Pancasila, the Muslims were implicitly accusing Christians of violating and contradicting the pure intention of the declaration of the World Council of Churches that prohibits Christians to engage in questionable means of propagating the Christian faith. In spite of that, the Indonesian Christian community refused to accept what they perceived to be a politically motivated restriction of their religious self-understanding and activity and pointing again to the fact that since Islamic *da'wa* among Christians is not affected by this policy it could only be understood as a move against Christians.<sup>41</sup>

### Summary and Reflections

Generally, 'Christianization' in New Order Indonesia was perceived by many Muslims as a conscious and willful political and religious attempt to impose Christianity and to eradicate Islam in Indonesia. At the core of the issue was the accusation of representative Muslim leaders that Christians were using questionable means and approaches in propagating the Christian faith and converting Muslims to Christianity, which include the building of churches and other related institutions in predominantly Muslim areas and communities, aggressive missionary door-to-door visits to Muslim homes, the use of diaconia and social services as means of proselytizing and converting Muslims to Christianity and Western intervention through foreign aid for missionary activities. To resolve this issue of Christianization, representative Muslim leaders demanded that the government should prohibit Christians from building churches and related institutions in places and communities where Muslims are in the majority, control and regulate foreign aid, which is often used as a tool for evangelization and proselytizing activities, and restrict religious missions only to people who have no religion. For Muslims, the restrictions on Christian missionary activities and foreign aid were important not only because they posed a threat to the majority status of Islam in Indonesia, but also because they saw it as an antidote to prevent conflict and violent confrontation

Of course, the feared Christianization campaign that will finally eliminate Islam did not take place, at least not during the New Order Era. As pointed out by Mark Woodward, in the late 1980s and 90s Indonesian society, the government and even the armed forces became much more self-consciously Islamic. Attendance at Friday prayers and the percentage of

people fasting during the month of Ramadan increased dramatically. Thousands of mosques were built, some with support from a foundation supported by the Soeharto family.<sup>42</sup> By the end of the 1980s, overflowing crowds praying in the streets were a common sight on Fridays. Soeharto himself went on the Hadj. Islamic publishing flourished and Soeharto endorsed the founding of the Association of Muslim intellectuals and the establishment of an Islamic Bank in 1990.<sup>43</sup>

In response to the Muslims' demand to restrict missionary activities and foreign aid, representative Christian leaders argued for religious freedom and tolerance as a basic religious right, affirmed and provided by the Pancasila. To them, this religious freedom does not only include the freedom to practice one's own religion, but to propagate the same as it is mandated of every Christian to be a witness for Christ and to his saving activity in the world. The building of places of worship and Christian missionary activities are therefore inherently in line with this freedom. In that sense, to restrict Christian missionary activities and to prohibit Christians from building their churches was viewed by many Christians as a clear violation of their religious freedom and a senseless disregard of the pure and noble intention of Pancasila that provides for such basic right. To resolve the conflict, representative Christian leaders insisted that the basic human and religious right and freedom as embodied in the Pancasila must be respected and acknowledged by all. To them, the source of conflict is not in their so-called aggressive and offensive missionary activities, but in the inability of their Muslim counterpart to respect and acknowledge the rule of Pancasila.

How religious freedom is supposed to be defined and understood is really an important consideration here. It seems that while Pancasila provides this basic religious right to all officially recognized religions of Indonesia, there is no clear definition and explanation on how it is supposed to be interpreted and actualized. Muslims and Christians were at odds on this issue and had different understanding of the meaning of religious freedom. The Muslims viewed religious freedom (as expressed by Rasjidi, a prominent Muslim leader and reformist) as simply the "freedom to practice one's religion in one's religious community."<sup>44</sup> For Christians, on the other hand, religious freedom does not only mean individual freedom to practice or live out one's religion with in his/her own faith community, but the freedom to preach and share the gospel with others. It is also the freedom to build new



places for worship, to hold religious assemblies, to preach religion to people of another religion and to change religion.<sup>45</sup> 24.2.2008 [187-204]

Relative to the question of the definition and meaning of religious freedom is also the definition and meaning of religious tolerance. Christians insisted that in consonance with their basic religious freedom Muslims must show some degree of openness and tolerance towards them. However, again, how tolerance is supposed to be defined and understood was another problem. As it appears, the idea of tolerance is rather complex. Nikiforoya points out that the limits of tolerance are wide and mobile, ranging from indifferent neglect of 'otherness', to the urge to support and protect it. In the historical sense, tolerance means to concede to a lesser evil in order to avoid a bigger one, i.e. it always means the priority of one's own values and simultaneously tolerance towards those who are different and often treated as inferior. Tolerance is not only a policy or legislation, but also the emotional state of a person. It forms under the influence of social processes, as well as under individual experiences. Tolerance also depends on the level of society, traditionalism or modernity.<sup>46</sup> Nikiforoya believes that the cultural differences over this question create some serious problems. What is religious freedom for example from the viewpoint of Islamic culture and from the viewpoint of Christian culture, which is obviously influenced by Western culture? Some scholars, like James Piscatori, admit that Islam and the West are at opposite poles with respect to human rights and tolerance.<sup>47</sup> In the context of a highly heterogeneous society like Indonesia to define religious freedom and tolerance is really a daunting challenge.

Hamman and Buck define tolerance as a "policy of patient forbearance in the presence of something which is disapproved of or disliked. It is the recognition of the necessity to provide opportunities for other persons to be agents of their own ideas, faiths or behaviors. More importantly, the principle of tolerance promotes understanding and appreciation of many values espoused by various religions."<sup>48</sup> In other words, tolerance does not only include forbearance of something disliked, but on a positive note it also includes such definitions as acceptance, openness and complementarity. It is not a matter of saying: "We don't need you, and we would rather that you were not around, but we will put up with you and leave you alone, so long as you leave us alone." Rather, it is a matter of saying: "We acknowledge that you are different from us but we respect and accept our differences therefore

our differences should not really be a ground for discord but an opportunity to compliment and cooperate with one another for our common good.”

Harold Coward asserts that respect for other religious beliefs is the true basis of tolerance. For him, tolerance for others does not mean that we give up our critical awareness. Within a relationship of open respect, we can honestly and constructively criticize one another from the criteria of our own deeply-held beliefs. Standing secure in our differences we are encouraged to constructively criticize and to learn from one another. Our criticism is to be constructive, tolerant and undergirded by a moral compassion toward others.<sup>49</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith holds that religious tolerance involves the overcoming of 'one-way thought', which is the real enemy of religious tolerance. He insists that the theological bases of tolerance should not be neglected here. There would seem to be a problem if openness, tolerance and compassion are subordinated to a given religion's higher and more compelling claims for unique and absolute truth. The need is not only for tolerance but should move to cooperation and partnership. He suggests a reformulation of theology that is attuned to contemporary history, i.e. to re-evaluate the notion of finality and absolute claims in the light of plurality.<sup>50</sup>

How Christians reacted to the issue of 'Christianization' as viewed from the perspective of Muslim leaders is not clear. What really are the conditions that warrant such religious misconduct? Is Christianization something that always has a negative connotation? J.B. Banawiratma, a Catholic professor at the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, differentiates 'Christianization' from the notion of faith sharing where individual and communal human rights are concerned. He maintains that “Christian mission or Islamic *dakwah* in the sense of sharing of faith and giving witness are acts of communication. Good communication is the one that is not misunderstood. But 'Christianization' is 'harshly' forcing people to walk through the Christian way of life. It prevents man or woman from being himself or herself and therefore a humiliation to the dignity of human being.”<sup>51</sup> This definition and understanding of Christianization raises the question of whether the building of churches or the mere preaching of the gospel or visits to Muslim homes and the use of social services as means of evangelization should be regarded as acts of 'Christianization'. At any rate, Muslims and Christians are at odds on this issue. For Muslims, religious freedom must be exercised in a way that it does not encroach on the religious

rights and freedom of others.

The position of the state on the issue is ambiguous. Firstly, it sided with Muslims on the issue of restrictions on religious propagation, but it also sided with Christians on religious freedom as long as this freedom is exercised in a manner that does not 'offend' or 'hurt' the feelings of Muslims. Quite clearly, the government failed to define religious freedom specifically in the context of religious plurality in Indonesia. Secondly, the New Order government welcomed foreign aid for Christian institutions but also sided with the Muslims' demand not to make Muslims the target of Christian mission. Perhaps, these ambiguities on the part of the government can be understood in the light of the fact that its primary concern was socio-economic and political stability. And so, the Soeharto government tried to keep the political equilibrium by maintaining a 'neutral' but rather ambiguous stance on the issue. In his analysis, Mujiburrahman observes that the government's efforts at inter-religious dialogue served the state's agenda for political stability, not to build harmonious relationship but only to stop the conflict.<sup>52</sup>

As I see it, there is a need to understand the issue of 'Christianization' during the New Order in Indonesia from a wider context beyond internal considerations. From a broader perspective, the Muslims fear and anxiety seemed to proceed from a feeling of disempowerment and defeat that has enveloped the Muslim world and a perception that it is virtually encircled by hostile powers not only bent on the destruction of the community's strength but also on keeping it underdeveloped and dependent.<sup>53</sup> Radical Muslims believe in a 'conspiracy theory' in which Muslims are the victims of the West. Muslims perceive the West as being inherited by the Judeo-Christian tradition with an agenda to crush Islam. They also regard the West as having an interest in ruling Islamic countries' economies and penetrating their cultures. During the New Order Era, the Masyumi activists condemned modernization as the continuity of Western imperialism in the Muslim world. To this group, modernization was not only incompatible with Islam, but also synonymous with 'Westernization', 'secularization' and 'Christianization'.<sup>54</sup> The history of the crusades and colonialism and the attitude of superiority that went with them are not forgotten. Some Muslims see no difference between those events and the contemporary missionary activities.<sup>55</sup> How this bitter historical memories of the past are to be overcome and remedied remains one of the greatest challenges toward achieving a more positive Muslim-Christian relationship in general and in Indonesia in particular.

## End Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Leo Suryadinata, "Indonesia's Population: Ethnicity and Religion," in *A Changing Political Landscape* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2003), 104.
- <sup>2</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened, Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 16.
- <sup>3</sup> Olaf Schumann, "Christian-Muslim Encounter in Indonesia," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 286.
- <sup>4</sup> Karel Steenbrink, *Dutch Colonialism and Indonesian Islam: Contacts and Conflicts 1596-1950*, trans. J. Steenbrink and H. Jansen (Amsterdam: Rodopy, 1993), 25-27.
- <sup>5</sup> Fatimah Husein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia, The Exclusivist and Inclusivist Muslim's Perspective* (Indonesia: Minzan Pustaka, 2005), 59-68.
- <sup>6</sup> Husein, 82-83.
- <sup>7</sup> Schumann, "Christian-Muslim Encounter in Indonesia," 291.
- <sup>8</sup> B.J. Boland, *The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 146.
- <sup>9</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, "Six Centuries of Islamization in Java", in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. N. Levtzio (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 124.
- <sup>10</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Avery T. Willis, *Indonesian Revival: Why Two Million Came to Christ* (California: William Carey Library, 1977), 180.
- <sup>12</sup> David B. Barret, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in Modern World AD 1900-2000* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 384.
- <sup>13</sup> Willis, *Indonesian Revival*, 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Haryani Saptaningtyas and Pradjarta Dirdjosanjoto "Religious Conversions in Central Java: Struggling for Space in Two Local Communities" (Unpublished and undated article taken from CRCS library).
- <sup>15</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 314.
- <sup>16</sup> Husein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia*, 121.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "The Political Economy of Islamic Conversion in Modern East Java", in *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning: Comparative Studies of Muslim Discourse*, ed. William R. Roff (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 100-102.
- <sup>18</sup> Husein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia*, 123.
- <sup>19</sup> Lorraine V. Aragon, *Fields of the Lord, Animism, Christian Minorities, and State Development in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 24.
- <sup>20</sup> Husein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia*, 122.
- <sup>21</sup> Husein, 83.
- <sup>22</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 34.
- <sup>23</sup> Mujiburrahman, 33.
- <sup>24</sup> Mujiburrahman, 34.
- <sup>25</sup> Rollin Armour Sr., *Islam, Christianity and the West, A Troubled History* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 182.

- <sup>26</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 30.
- <sup>27</sup> Mujiburrahman, 32
- <sup>28</sup> Mujiburrahman, 32.
- <sup>29</sup> Mujiburrahman, 34.
- <sup>30</sup> Mujiburrahman, 35.
- <sup>31</sup> Frank L. Cooley, ed., *The Growing Seed: The Christian Church in Indonesia* (Jakarta: PBK Gunung Mulia, 1981), 212. Also see Ghulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2007), 116-117.
- <sup>32</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 36-38.
- <sup>33</sup> Mujiburrahman, 38.
- <sup>34</sup> Husein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia*, 127.
- <sup>35</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 38-40.
- <sup>36</sup> Husein, *Muslim-Christian Relations in the New Order Indonesia*, 129.
- <sup>37</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 41-43.
- <sup>38</sup> Mujiburrahman, 44.
- <sup>39</sup> Mujiburrahman, 45-48.
- <sup>40</sup> "Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wa," *International Review of Missions* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, October 1976), 457.
- <sup>41</sup> Schumann, "Christian-Muslim Encounter in Indonesia," 292.
- <sup>42</sup> Mark Woodward, "Religious Conflict and the Globalization of Knowledge in Indonesian History," in *Religion and Conflict in South and Southeast Asia, Disrupting Violence*, eds. Linell E. Cady and Shelton W. Simon. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 90.
- <sup>43</sup> Robert Hefner quoted in Woodward, "Religious Conflict and the Globalization of Knowledge in Indonesian History," 211.
- <sup>44</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 49.
- <sup>45</sup> Mujiburrahman, 54.
- <sup>46</sup> Basia Nikiforova, "The Tendency of Tolerance in Islamic-Christian Relations," in *Islamic and Christian Cultures: Conflict or Dialogue*, ed. Plamen Makariev (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001), 111.
- <sup>47</sup> James P. Piscatori, "Human Rights in Islamic Political Cultures," in *Moral Imperatives of Human Rights* (Washington: American University Press, 1980), 144.
- <sup>48</sup> L.J. Hammann and H.M. Buck, eds., *Religious Traditions and Limits of Tolerance* (Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1988), 121.
- <sup>49</sup> Harold Coward, "Can Religions Live Together in Today's World? Intolerance and Tolerance in Religious Pluralism," in *Pluralism, Tolerance and Dialogue: Six Studies*, ed. M. Darrot Bryant (Ontario: University of Waterloo Press, 1989), 15.
- <sup>50</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 198.
- <sup>51</sup> J.B. Banawiratma, "Inter-religious Relationships in Indonesia", in *Viele Wege ein Ziel*, ed. Ludwig Bertsch (Feiburg: Herder), 274.
- <sup>52</sup> Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 55.
- <sup>53</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Christians in a Muslim State: The Recent Egyptian Debate," in *Christian Muslim Encounters*, ed. Waddi Z. Haddad (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1995), 381.

- <sup>54</sup> Anwar M. Syaf'I, "The Clash of Religion- Political Thoughts, The Contest Between Radical Conservative Islam and Progressive-Liberal Islam in Post-Soeharto Indonesia," in *The Future of Secularism*, ed. T.N. Srinivasan (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 210-211.
- <sup>55</sup> Judith A. Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004) 12-13.

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- Haryani Saptaningtyas and Pradjarta Dirdjosanjoto "Religious Conversions in Central Java: Struggling for Space in Two Local Communities" (Unpublished and undated article taken from CRCS library).



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- Robert W. Hefner, "The Political Economy of Islamic Conversion in Modern East Java", in *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning: Comparative Studies of Muslim Discourse*, ed. William R. Roff (London: Croom Helm, 1987).
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