

Money, religion and the sacred

The phenomenon of Dimas Kanjeng Taat Fribudi has attracted public attention. Reputed as having the supernatural power to multiply money, Dimas won the trust of thousands of followers from all walks of life across the country.

Behind this phenomenon lies a complex reality and relationship between money and religion.

Money really has incredible power. No other object in the world could rival money for its great influence on the history of human civilization.

Money serves not only as a means of exchange. The dynamics of history have shown that money was behind the rise and fall of civilizations.

A long time ago, Aristotle said that *appiness* (Greek: *eudemonia*) as the *urpose* of human life could be achieved through continually and consistently doing the good work. But now happiness generally means exuberance over money, wherever it may come from.



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Sadly, while money has no intrinsic value, it is widely used to assign value to everything else, even things that are priceless and irreplaceable, such as family relationships, the human body and human lives.

No wonder, then, that slowly but surely, human beings as the creators and regulators of money are turning to instead be controlled and enslaved by it. The old adage "man makes money but then money makes the man" rings true.

Paul Piff, an expert in social psychology from the University of California, in a publication entitled *Wealth and the Inflated Self: Class, Entitlement and Narcissism* (2014), the result of years of research, has found that a person that has more

wealth is apt to be unethical, narcissistic and greedy.

Therefore, thinking pragmatically that an abundance of money will protect Indonesians against the crisis and that those who possess a special gift to double money, like Dimas Kanjeng, are a valuable asset for the nation, is simply misleading and unfounded.

The huge power that money possesses is the key factor that makes it an attractive commodity for religion. In the era of secularism, when religion loses relevance in public discourses and when a majority of people in developed countries do not believe in God — money becomes the new prima donna that is considered helpful in boosting the credibility of a religion and the image of its leaders.

At least that is the case in a number of countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia over the last few decades with the phenomenon of prosperity gospel that can attract millions of pragmatic-minded people to

worship.

The core teaching is that God will reward those who diligently and faithfully give money to the church with multiple financial blessings. In this context, the selling point for the congregation, of course, is not "God" but the lure of money.

Money is sanctified and becomes the *sine qua non* for divine intervention and manifestation. Those who have plenty of money will look like the recipients of grace and acceptable in the presence of the Almighty.

By contrast, poverty, suffering and misery are taken as evidence of a curse inflicted by God. Slowly but surely, "wealth" and "money" become new vocabulary in religion, alongside sacred words like "holy", "godly" and "spiritual".

Conversely, "poverty" becomes a key term adjoining "unclean", "sin" and "infidel". Poverty is forbidden, taboo and denied, whether in the sacred spaces or in the rituals of worship.

That is why to this day, many fi-

nancial scandals and corruption cases afflict prosperity gospel leaders and see them go to jail. Anything will be done to maintain a jet-set lifestyle in order to be seen as a capable leader that provides evidence, not just a promise.

The economic crisis that hit the US and Europe in 2008 had a large impact on many prosperity gospel centers, even bankrupting some of them. However, this fact did not deter the prosperity gospel preacher.

Instead of sympathizing with those who were in crisis and impoverished, they considered the financial crisis a means of purification of the faith that will bring more people to seriously come to God.

Kate Bowler, who specializes in studying this phenomenon in the US, in her book *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2013), concluded: "The prosperity gospel was universally touted as God's 'ultimate bailout plan'. From the perspective of their loyal followers, these preachers are valu-

able assets of the nation, who are often not heard or obeyed.

The prosperity gospel phenomenon that began in the US and had been "sold out" in the poor countries may not grow quickly without internal drive and motivation.

This internal motivation in turn then experienced sanctification and even deification. As Kate Bowler put it, "the prosperity gospel was constituted by the deification and ritualization of the American Dream".

The phenomenon of Dimas Kanjeng with his thousands of loyal followers should prompt us to reflect seriously on what is wrong with this nation.

What actually motivates people to believe in God now? Which is the most sacred thing in the community, God or money?

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