

Discourses on Religious Pluralism: Islamic Practices of Tolerance in the Classical and Modern Times

Tumin^{1*}, Anisa Dwi Makrufi², Halim Purnomo³

¹ Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta

² Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta

³ Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta

* Email: tumin@umy.ic.id.

ABSTRACT

Islam is the religion of peace. It was first revealed in Mecca and spread out around the world through the last Prophet and Messenger of Allah SWT, Muhammad (peace be upon him), and his Companions. Compared to other religions, currently Islam is considered as the biggest population after the Christianity in term of its adherents. However, in the current time, Islam has experienced vast challenges from other religions like Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. They claimed that Islam has promoted terrorism, hostility, hatred, and intolerance to other religions. This propaganda can be easily found in the written materials, such as book, paper, magazine, newspaper, and social media. For that reason, religious pluralism has become a big issue in the contemporary time. Therefore, this paper tries to respond to the issue and its problems by tracing back to the main source of Islam, Al-Qur'an, and looking at the practices of tolerance in the classical and modern times. In doing so, this paper reviews relevant literature related to the concept of religious pluralism, the practices of tolerance and its development in the prophetic tradition, Islamic history, and the relationship between Islam and other religions since the classical time to the modern time. Ultimately, this paper aims to foster a peaceful relationship and harmony among the existing religions in the world based on the teaching of Islam.

Keywords: Religious Pluralism, Islamic Teaching, Qur'anic Model, Tolerance, Harmony

1. INTRODUCTION

Islam is derived from an Arabic word, which literally means submission, obedience, and peace. Whereas a Muslim is a person that follows the Islamic teaching by admitting Allah SWT as the only God and Muhammad PBUH is the last messenger and prophet in this world. Admittedly, Islam's history begun in Mecca, Western Arabia around 610 CE (Demant, 2006). Since its emergence, Islam recognizes the practices of other religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, even though they are not in accordance with Islamic teaching. Islam mentioned them as the people of the books or people of the scripture.

Therefore, there was a practice of mutual co-existence among them, especially in the context of social

relationships. However, Islam was put to the test when its teaching and practices are questioned as extremism. Even there was a case from non-Muslim who lived in the Islamic regions in the classical time who should pay the tax to the government and then they considered it as an intolerance relationship and a discriminatory in nature to other religions (Emon, 2012). Thus, religious pluralism becomes the most debated issue among people of all walks of life (Muhammad Shukri & Abdul Razak, 2018; Thoha, 2011).

Eck (2006) argued that the plurality of religious traditions and cultures has come to characterize every part of the world today. In line with that argument, Beckford (1999) described that religious pluralism has four different dimensions, namely empirical forms of diversity in relation to religion, normative or ideological

views about the positive value of religious diversity, the frameworks of public policy, law and social practices which accommodate, regulate and facilitate religious diversity, and relational contexts of everyday interactions between individuals and groups identified as religious.

From the Islamic perspective, Islam promotes mutual tolerance as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH and his Companions. Everyone is free to practice their beliefs as long as they respect each other. It is written in the Qur'an Surah Al-Kafirun verses 1-6, when Allah SWT describes the idol worshippers in Mecca:

Say, "O disbelievers I do not worship what you worship Nor are you worshippers of what I worship Nor will I be a worshipper of what you worship Nor will you be worshippers of what I worship For you is your religion, and for me is my religion." (Q.S. 109: 1-6)

According to Boase (2005), Al-Quran was revealed with the principles of universalism and religious cultures in human civilization. As mentioned in the Qur'an Surah Al-Anbiya verse 107, Surah Al-A'raf verse 158, and Surah Al-Hujurat verse 13 that the mission of Messenger Muhammad sent down into this world is to give mercy for all humankind and the commandment for every human being in each tribe to know each other among them.

And we have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds (Q.S. 21: 107)

Say, [O Muhammad], "O mankind, indeed I am the Messenger of Allah to you all, [from Him] to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. There is no deity except Him; He gives the life and causes death." So, believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered prophet, who believes in Allah and His words, and follow him that you may be guided (Q.S. 7: 158)

O mankind, indeed, we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted (Q.S. 49: 13)

Based on the above description, Islam is nowhere towards terrorism, hostility, hatred, and intolerance. In fact, the teaching of Islam promotes and fosters a peaceful relationship and harmony among the existing religions. Hence, this paper presents some evidence of religious tolerance from Al-Qur'an and Sunnah as practiced in classical and modern times.

which accommodate, regulate, and facilitate religious diversity, and relational contexts of everyday interactions between individuals and groups identified as religious.

2. THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Pluralism brings a contentious connotation and even goes to some changes with the rapidity in development and modernization of the world (Muhamad Shukri & Abdul Razak, 2018). In the modern era, one of the leading spokespersons for religious pluralism is John Hick (1922-2012). He described that:

"Stated philosophically such a pluralism [i.e., religious pluralism] is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is manifestly taking place – and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent. Thus, the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological "spaces" within which, or "ways" along which, men and woman can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfillment" (Hick, 2001, p. 565)

In this case, religions are said to direct the believers into the Real by producing the right changes. For that reason, Hick (1985) argued that there is no one religion is true. He believed that everyone in this world ultimately worships the same God (The Real). People know God by different names because of different interpretations and religious experiences. In addition, Hick pointed out that religious pluralism is the view that the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place in different ways within the context of all the great religious traditions (Hick, 1985). This idea was supported by other scholars such as Samartha (1990), Byrne (1995), and Galston (2005).

On the contrary, Roumeas (2015) has a different concept of religious pluralism. According to her, there are at least four religious pluralism meanings consisting of, namely theological, sociological, philosophical, and political ideals. She argued that religious pluralism as a political ideal aim to have a peaceful interaction among individuals or group of different religious faith and can lead to religious interfaith dialogue. It portrays religious pluralism as a way of living harmoniously within the society and merely beyond the toleration because such differences should be celebrated.

From the perspective of Islam, Al-Qur'an has a specific model of pluralism. Boase (2005) argued that all

followers or believers from different religions like Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Sabeans will enter paradise if they do good deeds and stay away from bad ones. Allah SWT mentions in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 62:

Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans [before Prophet Muhammad] - those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve (Q.S. 2: 62)

In addition, Islam teaches its followers to be tolerant and courteous to other religions because for Muslims religious pluralism is God's desire. It means that a sense of tolerance is a form of a minimum requisite for Muslims. Al-Qur'an captures this message in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 256:

There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So, whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing (Q.S. 2: 256).

3. THE PRACTICES OF TOLERANCE IN THE CLASSICAL TIME

As a fair and justice religion, Islam encourages its followers to treat other people in a dignified and humane way. According to Muhammad Shukri and Abdul Razak (2018), a Muslim country can operate harmoniously without any religious tension among its masses by abiding by the principles of fairness and justice. In the classical era, there were many examples of how Muslims can co-exist with other religions and cultures in a harmonious way. During the Golden Age of the Muslims (750-1258), for instance, people of all races and ethnic groups lived and worked together for the Muslim empires at that time, especially in the cities of Baghdad and Cordova. People of different religions and beliefs such as Muslims, Jews, Christians, and the worshippers of fire collaborated to expand knowledge and conducted scientific research like translating ancient manuscripts from Greek, Persian, Indian and other languages into Arabic.

More specifically, during the Prophet Muhammad SAW and his Companions era, people of different beliefs and tribes were treated justly. Muhammad Shukri and Abdul Razak (2018) described the community as a society based on the philosophy of loving, caring and sharing. Muslims and non-Muslims shared an understanding of living peacefully in mutual tolerance and respect of one another's religion. The four caliphs and jurists after the Prophet Muhammad SAW also treated Muslims and non-Muslim as well with fairness

and justice. From these historical moments, it proved that Muslim rulers provided safety, security and protection to non-Muslims living under their rule while upholding their religious beliefs.

The main thing that turns Muslims to be tolerant is based on the concept of *tawhid* or Oneness of God as the cornerstone of the Islamic teachings. However, Hashim Kamali (2009) in *Diversity and Pluralism*, argued that Muslims' attitude of being tolerant in acknowledging the rights of others to practice their religion does not mean to say that they accept the practices in other religions to be equal and same to the practices in Islam. The best Muslims, on the other hand, would agree with religious pluralism when it calls for tolerance and coexistence.

Boase (2005) described the practices of tolerance between Islam and another religion that has been practiced for a long time. According to him, Islam dealt with the issue of religious diversity and unity of faith in Medina in the most concrete fashion, as the Prophet Muhammad SAW had to deal with both the Jewish tribes of Medina and the Christian community of Najran. There is one verse that appears in the first major of Medinan Surah, and which is then repeated verbatim, in the last but one major Surah to be revealed to the Prophet before his death. This is the only verse repeated in the same words in the Qur'an. The fact that this verse occurs at the beginning and end of the Prophet's political career means that neither the words nor the purport of these two identical verses were abrogated.

The two verses as described by Boase (2005) are mentioned in the Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah verse 62 and Surah Al-Maidah verse 69:

Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans [before Prophet Muhammad] - those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve (Q.S. 2: 62)

Indeed, those who have believed [in Prophet Muhammad] and those [before Him] who were Jews or Sabeans or Christians - those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve (Q.S. 5: 69)

In addition to that, there is not a coercion for the people of other religion to convert into Islam as it is clearly stated in the Quran Surah Al-Baqarah verse 256:

There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So, whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold

with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing (Q.S. 2: 256)

Moreover, the constitution of Medina (*Sahifat al-Madinah*), where the Prophet Muhammad SAW, and his Companions made legislation for multiple people from distinct religions in the community based on justice, tolerance, equality, and peace. This description indeed denotes that early Muslims people were more pluralistic in terms of a religious sense compared to the Muslims community nowadays. Underneath this legislation or document generates a legal autonomy and complete cultural for each religion and ethnic tribe so that they felt enjoyable there. Besides that, the Jewish people were not obliged to pay any tax and there was no written clause to be exiled from there. The similar work tied all people as the other groups to the agreement whereby they jointly establish a single ummah or community a word where today is widely applied for the Muslim Community which is believing in one God and has no association with anything as an essential foundation for them (Boase, 2005).

In addition, Norman (1979) added that the form of tolerance was performed by the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, who could get into Jerusalem around 638 CE. He was permitted to make a prayer in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher but considered and preferred to pray outside because he feared if his action later would be an example and justification to change the church with the mosque. Additionally, he also warranted the freedom, security for the Christians in worshipping as well as the equal respect for the Jewish people. Not only that, he also became the judge when there is a protest in relation to resettlement between the Jews and Christianity as well as he personally witnessed the process of cleaning the Temple Mount once Jewish families went back to the old city.

4. THE PRACTICES OF TOLERANCE IN THE MODERN TIME

There are many kinds of practices and examples of tolerance in modern times. Among others are the practices of interfaith dialogue and interreligious prayers among religions. According to Hashmi (2002), there have been increasingly joint events and meetings conducted by various religions in many countries. It surely provides a mutualistic talk like doing the interfaith dialogue, seminar and also conference where the participants come from different countries and religious backgrounds in order to discuss on some issues and give the solution so that finally they live in harmony and tolerances among them (Giorda & Pace, 2014).

Such kinds of programs lead to creating a peaceful relationship and promoting religious and cultural diversity among them. The teachings of Islam must be interpreted as a command of continuous dialogue and advocating for tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims. Ultimately, it will strengthen the relationship between the fellow believers and will create a real sense

of tolerance and unity (Hasmi, 2002). This phenomenon is one form of application of religious tolerance. Al-Qur'an calls in the Surah Ali 'Imran verse 64, "*a word of common assent*" (*kalimat an sawa*), namely, that "we worship no one except God and ... we do not take one another as lords beside God" (Q.S. 3: 64).

Boase (2005) pointed out several principles of the interfaith dialogues extracted from the Qur'an. The first principle shows that there is no coercion in a matter of faith as it is obviously affirmed in the Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah (2: 256). This verse shows evidence that Islam is not spread by the sword and enforcement of conversion to Non-Muslims. The second principle states that there is no insult to the other beliefs during the interfaith dialogues as it is mentioned in the Qur'an Surah Al-An'am (6:108). It is because they naturally grew up as a child with their belief system where other people could not distract their feelings and convictions by insulting their objects of worshipping. Moreover, there is no single person who has the power to change another person to God except with His guidance. Thus, the human being can only show a good attitude to other people.

The third principle is to leave or not to interact with those people who mock other faiths. This is recorded in the Qur'an Surah Al-Maidah (5: 57-58). "*Do not take for your friends such as mock at your faith and make a jest of it ... but fear God, if you are believers: for when you call to prayer, they mock at it and make a jest of it – simply because they are people who do not use their reason.*" Those who have interactions and communication with such people are hypocrites as it is inscribed in the Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah (2: 9) and Surah An-Nisa' (4: 142). The fourth principle is to speak with softness when discussing with those who do not believe in our beliefs, and to talk with politeness, wisdom, self-restraint, and forbear from the discussion of our beliefs with those who have no eagerness to hear. Al-Quran reports in Surah Al-'Ankabut (29: 46), "*And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner*" and endure with patience what they say, and part from them with a fair leave-taking."

The fifth principle is to attract the people to function their mind and their intellects to examine and analyze the truth of God's Saying. It is because there is no conflict between reason and faith. It is drawn in the Qur'an Surah Ali 'Imran (3: 65), "*O People of Scripture, why do you argue about Abraham, seeing that the Torah and the Gospels were not revealed till long after him? Will you not, then, use your reason?*" The last and final principle is do not enter and explain deeply, especially in relation to the attribute of God and the truth of God's revelation. It is emphasized in the Quran Surah Ghafir (40: 4) and Al-Hajj (22: 8).

In addition to interfaith dialogues, there is also a practice of interreligious prayer among religions. According to Sugirtarajah (2012), this idea was posted by John Hick. Even though it is quite difficult to implement because of the different conceptual and beliefs, but it can happen in the community with different religions and

beliefs. Hick (1985) elaborated by giving an analogy and applied the terms multi-religious prayer (MRP) to signify that there is a gathering between Christian and Muslim who are going to pray jointly but each of them using their own prayers and explicitly it does not join in their prayers. The multi religious prayers may work in public or in private. Moreover, there is also interreligious prayers (IRP) among other religions by providing the example such praying together in specific events or meetings involving delegates or participants across the globe, like what happened in the United Nation meetings and the official commemoration on specific tragedies, earthquakes and much more.

5. RESPONSE TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Humanity began as one and must remain as one. It is unity in diversity. This human diversity, including religious diversity, is a normal situation. As a matter of fact, it is the consequence of the diversity of human cultures, languages, races, and different environments. Allah SWT describes in the Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah verse 213:

Mankind was [of] one religion [before their deviation]; then Allah sent the prophets as bringers of good tidings and warners and sent down with them the Scripture in truth to judge between the people concerning that in which they differed. And none differed over the Scripture except those who were given it - after the clear proofs came to them - out of jealous animosity among themselves. And Allah guided those who believed to the truth concerning that over which they had differed, by His permission. And Allah guides whom He wills to a straight path (Q.S. 2: 213)

On the other hand, the emergence of religious pluralism is due to the theological position. Boase (2005) described this condition by saying that historically religious pluralism emerged as a theological position defended as such among Christian thinkers only in the twentieth century. Prior to that, there were thinkers of various religious persuasions who advocated something that today we might call religious pluralism, at least in the form of a degree pluralism, but modern religious pluralism arose specifically in reaction to widespread Christian views about salvation.

Based on the above issues of human diversity and theological position, Boase (2005) explained three major conducts to the phenomenon of religious diversity and how we should respond to the topic. The three major conducts are:

1. People who look at it as a menace to their belief system. It is supported by militant extremists and conservative exclusivists who usually impose

their doctrinal beliefs on other people and declaring their own truth for teaching and practices. In addition, they deem themselves as holy soldiers, fighters, and Crusaders of God.

2. People who consider it as diversity as a mercy and as a form of charity from God. Such people realize it as a gift for creating harmonious lives among them so that they have a passion to interact each other with the mutual relationship and having a sense of togetherness in the community. Moreover, they regard the religious pluralism is a way of life and a good platform to be implemented and preserved in their lives.
3. People who are influenced by modern cyclical science consider religious diversity as an anachronism. It is mostly supported by the secularist and they also stated that religion leads them to superstitions and fanaticism.

In response to the above issue, a prominent scholar in Islam, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1921-1986), emphasized the idea of natural religion (*din al-fitrah*), which is a natural endowment for humankind. In this view, al-Faruqi explained that Islam holds every human being naturally born with the *fitrah*. He strongly believed that people are bestowed with the capacity to know God. He justified with the hadith of the Prophet: "Every child that is born, is born in the state of being a Muslim (to worship none but Allah) and his parents convert him to Judaism or Christianity or Magianism as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?" (H.R. Al-Bukhari). Furthermore, he argued that all religions are initially based upon the religion of God. However, departing from the original religious concept, the primordial and innate monotheism is the work of culture and history that led to the existence of the plurality of religions (Muhamad Shukri & Abdul Razak, 2018).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has indicated that the term religious pluralism is somehow a debatable issue. There is a different concept of religious pluralism derived from Western and Islamic scholars. However, there is a strong relationship or interaction between Muslims and non-Muslim since a long time ago until the present time. In general, religious pluralism can be defined as living peacefully among the people of different faiths and beliefs without any hatred and intimidation towards others with different concepts of God.

From the Islamic perspective, the term religious tolerance is more applicable and acceptable than religious pluralism. As part of the Islamic teachings, mainstream Islam calls for the Islamic concept of Oneness of God (*tawhid*). Based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, it admits the rights of others to practice their religious beliefs. Hence, as a religion of peace, Islam promotes a peaceful co-existence with people of different faiths and beliefs. Finally, the practices of tolerance

among religions should be preserved continuously to foster harmony and peace in this world.

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