Foundations of the Society of Mercy

Trust, Justice, and Ethics

Nyong Eka Teguh Iman Santosa
Program Studi Manajemen Pendidikan Islam
Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo
Sidoarjo, Indonesia
peziarah@umsida.ac.id

Abstract—**Rahmatan lil alamin is an Islamic idea that gives an insight of imagined society called the Society of Mercy. This paper tries to dig out its basic foundations by using early Islamic historical writings as major references. They are the works of al-Zuhri, Ibn Ishaq and its recension by Ibn Hisham, al-Waqidi, and Ibn Sa'd. The focus is on how the Prophet Muhammad carried out his mission as a mercy to all nations in the historical context of Muslim and Non Muslim interactions. This study comes to a conclusion that a society of mercy had been exercised by the Prophet Muhammad on the basis of trust, justice, and ethics. This result is helpful to define our contemporary world and its better future by fostering any efforts such as global peacemaking, interfaith cooperation, intercultural understanding, and alliance of civilizations to sustain common welfare and justice. Here, the idea of rahmatan lil alamin dictates that being mercy is not an exclusively Islamic project. It is offered to everyone regardless their primordial backgrounds to contribute in its attainment.**

Keywords—society of mercy; trust; justice; ethics; Islamic history

I. INTRODUCTION

Muhammad is mentioned in the verse 107 of al-Anbiya', the chapter 21 of the Qur'an as the Messenger of God with a mission to be a mercy to all people, *rahmatan lil alamin.* There are two interrelated terms forming this phrase. The first is the term *rahmatan* or "as a mercy" that in literal sense is easily perceived in harmony with tolerance and peace and in conflict with intolerance and violence. The second is the term *al-alamin* that conveys a meaning that the mercy is for all people.[1] It means that Muhammad's prophetic mission is supposed to be universal in character. Islam is not isolated merely for the Arabs where Muhammad originated and began his mission, but for all nations regardless their races and ethnicities. This divine message is a worldwide mercy.[2] Such claim, however, had been facing challenges and hesitancy from the early days of Muhammad's prophetic career.[3]

At this point, it is important to do a more in-depth study of whether *rahmatan lil alamin* is a living idea or a mere utopian delirium. This idea is very valuable to attract particularly Muslims to engage global efforts with others in creating peace and justice. It is evident that our Today's world is still facing critical problems related to our humanity and existence on earth. Here, Muslims definitely could contribute to shape our better future by articulating their religious wisdom. The universal spirit of *rahmatan lil alamin* potentially drives Muslims to do their best share. The idea could *"illuminate an inclusive and emphatic Islamic perspective enforcing the survival of unity and diversity. It is important [...] to manage diversities and fighting any abuses against humanity."*[4] It could inspire Muslims today to transform and enlighten their world preferably; to embrace the call for supporting and sustaining peace-making efforts.

This paper focuses on the issues of Muslim and non-Muslim interaction particularly on how the prophet as a mercy to all nations was treating non-Muslims in his time. This study is confined into accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's interaction with his non-Muslim contemporaries as depicted in the selected early Islamic historical writings. Therein, Muhammad's inter-religious interaction is functioned as a research indicator of the realization or materialization of the idea of *rahmatan lil alamin* . It will confirm whether the idea has its historical foundations in reality or sheer abstract faith.

Although the discourse materials come from the remote past, the results must speak to contemporary audiences in the present by further elaboration. Therefore, the peak of this research is to identify moral foundations underlining the imagined multicultural society fought by the Prophet Muhammad. It subsequently brings the past to dialogue with the present or even to inspire the future. It will justify the study that it is worthy to take as well as ensures its scientific contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study deals with an idea that was produced and articulated in the past namely *rahmatan lil alamin* . It makes this effort connected with the works of intellectual historians.[5] How was an idea or were ideas living in the past becomes their concern. How intellectual life with a variety of reflective activities was working in a given period in the past shapes their passion. This study investigates how the idea of *rahmatan lil alamin* was exercised by Muhammad the prophet during his mission period through the eyes of Muslim intellectuals of the first four generations after his career. This approach could be illustrated as the work of musicologists. According to Peter E. Gordon, as musicologists intellectual historians *"might trace a theme and all of its variations*

throughout the length of a symphony."[6] Symphony is an integrative blend between many tones and various music instruments. Gordon said that an intellectual historian should not only focus on tracking a general theme (idea or concept) without recognizing possible detail variations. However, a major theme can be found and fully identified only when the full range of variation is not be ignored. So, intellectual historians can take a distance from details of their object of study in order to see it as a big picture. And they can also approach and penetrate it as close as possible to identify its subtle elements and factors intertwined in certain historical and intellectual landscape.

In doing so, this study explores historical narrations of Muhammad and his prophetic mission as a mercy to all nations. It is done by identifying how early historians had pictured and represented Muhammad and his prophetic mission in their historical writings. The focus is on the issues of Muslim and non-Muslim interaction. There are four selected biographies of the prophet taken here. They are *Al-Maghazi al-Nabawiyyah* by Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 124/741-2),[7] *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah* by Ibn Ishaq (d. 151/768)[8] and its recension by Ibn Hisham (d. 213-8/828-33),[9] *Maghazi Rasul Allah* by al-Waqidi (d. 207/822),[10] and *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* by Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/844).[11] These early biographies of the Prophet Muhammad are widely considered as primary references in the study of Islamic history. Those prominent figures represent two generation of intellectuals *(tabaqat)* in the field of Islamic history. Al-Zuhri is regarded from the second generation of Muslim historians, while the rest is from the third generation. The works of the first generation were lost and not available. This fact makes their works referential for later studies on early Islam.[12]

III. RESULTS

The early Islamic historical writings studied in this research had portrayed how the Prophet Muhammad treated and behaved to non-Muslims. Their accounts on inter-religious affairs are adequate materials to comprehend how the idea of *rahmatan lil alamin* had been exercised by the Prophet. Those writers were almost in one voice in representing the Prophet as an ideal figure. He was the chosen one. His personality was special with exceptional miracles. God seemed purposively to prepare him to carry a great mission as His messenger and a mercy to all nations. His advent was described in these literary works had been prophesized and known among the Arabs. This prophecy came from the people of the Books including Jews and Christians and also from native Arabs who practiced divination.

When Muhammad started his prophetic career, a relatively pluralistic religious life had developed in the Arabian society, particularly in Mecca where he was born and grew up. Along with the practice of idolatry or polytheism which was prevalent there were also Christianity[13] and Judaism.[14] The Prophet himself was described as someone who had interest in a religious reformation movement at his time called *al-Hanifiyah* and even he did practice it before his prophethood.[15] Moreover, he did respect existing social orders and laws that conformed or would not harm his mission. He affirmed the sincere oaths and alliances made in

the pre Islamic era including the incident occurred between the Scented One *(al-Mutayyibun)* and the Confederacy *(al-Ahlaf)*. He also glorified the confederacy of Fudul *(hilf al-fudul)*, a covenant made to fight any wrongdoers whether they were a native Meccan or an outsider. In the battle ground, he had allowed the old tradition namely a duel *(al-mubarazah)*. He himself accepted a challenge to duel. The Prophet never opposed the war or justified violence.[16] Before his advent, he had participated in the tribal war called Fijar. Though the writers illustrated that Muhammad was a leading figure who was not concerned with violence when peaceful solution to be a potential alternative benefiting all parties. Overall, the Prophet evidently kept his respect to the honor of the social status of tribal elites. Despite of his military campaign against his enemies, he did not intend to topple down any leaders from their leadership over their people. He kept respect to the existing status of tribal leadership and agreement. He did not hesitant to consult them in many occasions. In carrying his mission, the Prophet sought of supports from possible sources including notables among the Quraysh polytheists. The 'Medina Constitution' that embraced various tribes as one *'ummah* highlights this character.[17]

The articulations of the idea could be inferred from many inter-religious occasions which were depicted in these early Islamic historical writings. Therein the Prophet had devoted his efforts to realize his mission to be a mercy for all nations. It had manifested in the characterizations of the Prophet made by the writers. It was obvious how they tried to idealize the Prophet by providing accounts that represented his noble lineage and character.[18] Even the polytheists with their animosity were mentioned that they sometimes realized the nobility of the Prophet's personality.[19] In other words, the inter-religious accounts in those early Islamic historical writings are taken to serve as *"a legitimizing device"*[20] to affirm this ideal.[21] In Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's account this idealization could perceived as an endeavor 'to provide images of greatness' as well as 'to preserve and admire the past'. Nietzsche had differed three methods for history namely a monumental method, an antiquarian method, and a critical method.[22] *"The monumental answers the need for action by providing images of greatness. The antiquarian responds to the need to preserve and admire the past. The critical, which is destructive and emancipatory, brings the past to the bar of judgement."*[23] In addition, a moralist intention could also influence the idealization of the Prophet. It means that the biography of the Prophet serving as *"a vehicle for moral instruction."*[24]

The writers depicted the Prophet's profile as a trustworthy by describing his insistence to keep any commitments he made such as the agreement of al-Ḥudaybiyah that seemed unfavorable towards Muslims. They had also portrayed the Prophet's assertiveness in confronting the treachery of his enemies. It was appeared in the campaign against the Quraysh when they ripped the agreement of al-Ḥudaybiyah. In addition, he had also demonstrated his firmness over three Jewish tribes of Medina who abandoned the treaty: Banu Qaynuqa', Banu al-Nadir, and Banu Qurizah. Alongside these features, the Prophet was represented as a forgiving man. In the opening of Mecca he chose to forgive and make a way

out for the Quraysh to save their lives though he was definitely able to avenge their very hostility toward his mission. The writers had also displayed the enthusiasm of the Prophet in making any efforts to bring people into the salvation path of Islam.[25] He kept a good relation with polytheists who did not embattle him. He did the same thing with the hypocrites who lived under his protection. He treated them respectfully. He was an open-minded person. This character can be seen through the documents known as the covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the monks of St. Chaterine Monastery.[26] He built an inter-religious linking bridge not a separating wall.

From investigating the Prophet's personality within the early Islamic writings whether those aspects were elucidated or not the finding is apparently positive. First, the Prophet tried hard to get a peaceful solution for any problems. It was always preferred to be the first answer. The Prophet offered a peace agreement to any parties. It was also what he did in his early days in Medina. He sent emissaries to Arab and Non-Arab tribes calling them to create peace. As for the delivery of interceptive raids against the Quraysh caravan should be understood not by neglecting the history of 13 years of his peaceful efforts during in Mecca. Second, the main interest of his mission was actually so tolerant. He wanted the call for monotheistic faith *(tawhid)* was not hindered, despised, or even oppressed. He promoted a religious freedom. Thus, his struggle was not to impose what he believed upon others for Islam expressly forbidding any religious compulsion. His living history proved that he was able to live side by side in peace, work together, and love each other with those who had different beliefs. It is clear enough in his life in Mecca, Medina, and after the Opening of Mecca. He allowed Non Muslims to be integral part of the 'Ummah.[27] They have rights and responsibilities that must be respected and protected. Third, the violent option will be taken when there was a betrayal. It had been occured in the cases of some Jewish tribes in Medina namely Bani Qaynuqa', Bani al-Nadir, and Bani Quraydah.[28] The Prophet could also choose this option against those who openly hostile toward his mission, for instance, the Quraysh. Even in situations where violence was deemed justified, the Prophet continued to pursue a peaceful solution that minimized unnecessary casualties. The Opening of Mecca *(Fath al-Makkah)* could be an example. Even if the mass executions occurred as upon the people of Bani Quraydah, then the story which was written by the Muslim historians mentioned that the actions had been conducted fairly. Their treason over the believers those days could not be accepted. When the situations were so crucial, that was Medina besieged by the alliance forces their deed had put Muslims in danger of perish. Moreover they by themselves requested that the decision upon their fate submitted to Sa'd b. Mu'az. Furthermore, there is an indication that this such story was a later invention using the sources of earlier Jewish history.[29]

The authors especially Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri, Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Sa'd showed the other sides of the practice of warfare exemplified by the Prophet. War was simply an instrument in between, not a final destination. When a peaceful solution was reached, then the plausible demand was the coexistence of mutual respect and no coercion in religions. It corroborated

the thesis compiled by Muhammad Mahmud Taha. Here, Taha disagreed with Muslim scholars who saw Islamic wars as *"purely defensive wars"* in order to refute the Orientalists' claims that *"Islam spread by means of the sword."*[30] For him, Islam used the sword *"to curtail the abuse of freedom."* It was known that the sword was the law commonly accepted at that time. Therefore, it was a sensible instrument to remind the people to take heed by doing justice, good deed, and generosity towards relatives and avoiding what was shameful, blameworthy, and oppressive[31] including killing their children in fear of poverty and committing obscenities.[32] *"In justifying the use of the sword, we may describe it as a surgeon's lancet and not a butcher's knife. When used with sufficient wisdom, mercy, and knowledge, it uplifted the individual and purified society."*[33]

The four early Islamic historical writings were written particularly in telling the story of the Prophet's life and his struggle for his prophetic mission. The four references had shown how the life of the Prophet was a portrait of true perseverance. How he practices steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success. In Mecca he had proven it by keeping patience in facing the hostility of the Quraysh. In Medina, he had lived his life as a serial of military campaigns against who treated him unjustly and perpetual diplomacy and treaty of peace to achieve his mission.

Those early narratives about the prophet could be classified as the works of the descriptive historiography instead of prescriptive. It seems that it is much influenced by the kind of writing that is a compilation of selected reports and materials of prophetic traditions, rather than an elaborative narrative composition. Although these historians in the production process selected and structured systematically the contents that could support an intellectual design to reinforce the idealization of the figure of Muhammad as God's prophet and messenger, but in general they presented them descriptively. They tended to provide the history as actually looks like, not to prescribe how the history should look like. This dichotomy is based on the reflection on the philosophy of science that can be mapped into two orientations, between prescriptive and descriptive. The prescriptive philosophy of science is oriented towards showing what science should look like.[34] While the descriptive philosophy of science tries to identify what science actually looks like.[35] So, the later prefers to describe facts rather than to prescribe what is supposed efficacious. The prescriptive one usually moves from a portrait of science that comes as a finished product, while the descriptive actually attempts to get an explanation of what underlies the production process of the science.[36]

If we connect these findings with theoretical studies about the meaning of *rahmatan lil alamin* , interestingly, there is a different orientation. The descriptive character in the early narrative works is more a style of presentation while it cannot be denied that the historians approached the life history of the prophet as a religious truth that essentially affirmative. It makes sense to say that the works of describing, explaining, interpreting, and representing the past[37] in all these historical writings had been infused by such reason of religious commitment.[38]

IV. CONCLUSION

The idea of *rahmatan lil alamin* is not floating in a vacuum. It is voiced in a real historical context. It has been articulated and exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad. He had incessantly fought for his prophetic mission till his death. Therein *rahmatan lil alamin* is portrayed as an ideal that was not realized instantly in once of hand clapping. Rather it is built of brick by brick to be a sturdy building. Its structures grew through active participation in the world. They live in commitment, responsibility, persevering worship, military discipline, exemplary leadership, and orderly society. At this point, there are at least three main principles that underpin the building of an ideal society envisioned by the Prophet. First is Trust. It manifested in the willingness of the Prophet to create a peace agreement that became an affirmation toward good intentions belong to both or all parties involved. The contents of the treaty were items that all parties agreed with. Sticked on the agreement was the valid proof of commitment to the truth. Second is Justice. It is emphasized in Islam. Its measuring criteria were the points of agreement that have been made or it could be propped on a mutually acceptable prevalence. Here, the Prophet taught his followers to do just in any circumstances including warfare, dealing with captives, slaves, and spoils of war. The Prophet distinctly prohibited any kinds of doing unjustly. Third is Ethics. The Prophet obliged himself and his followers to have firmness to the commitments that had been made, to maintain mutual trust, and to act justly. All these should be done by respecting ethical values and moral considerations especially in inter-religious contexts.

Therewith the prophetic career of the Prophet as mercy for all people is about how to improve and save the decadent society; how to transform it into a civilized one. Here, Islam is a spirituality that breathes and ingrained in the praxis. It does not live in silence, but in hectic diplomacy and battlefield. So far, there is an impression that the idea of *rahmatan lil alamin* leads to pacifism, resisting all forms of violence. However, it is noteworthy that Islam in its historical records has carried its missions oftentimes with instruments of justified violence. The realization of mercy for all nations by using these instruments is truly evident in the works of the biography of the Prophet. Though, the condemnation of acts of terror in the name of religion today could be intended to assert that Islam itself opposes such action; to inform that violence in Islam is not violence minus ethics. It must be tightened by moral considerations. There is rationality laid under this acceptance. When we analyze the violence practiced by the Prophet, we will find it disembogues into a single reason namely to uphold justice or to end injustice. It includes the punishment against those who break the agreement and the opposition against those who are hostile toward Islam.

Justice is indeed the point of moderation in Islam. It makes a society in a balance state. It prevents people from excessiveness *(ifrat)* and laxity or negligence *(tafrit)*. In a situation of tribal violence in the beginning of the seventh century, trust and commitment to the agreement became the most highly valued virtues among Arabs. It was a basis that mediated relations between the allies as well as with enemies. It sustained the establishment of tolerance and united differences in a consensus. Instead, betrayal was perceived as the most unforgivable crimes in an environment where the trust became its radix. Trust became the foundation for building the social order. Without it was chaos. Trust was further embodied in a commitment to adhere to a set of mutually agreed consensus or that had been in effect and generally accepted. Doing justice then could mean doing according to that mutual commitment while injustice was doing its opposite. When trust and justice had broken down, at the same time the meaning of *rahmatan lil alamin* had been emptied in practice. This is the solid and resilient foundation in the span of a long history and civilization that the Prophet and his companions, the believers, had fought for. In the house of humanity in which trust and justice are ethically respected and upheld by its members, human beings as a whole, would rediscover their dignity.

This research finds that the idea of *raḥmatan lil ʻālamīn* in truth confronts the traditional or essentialist view among Muslims that sees Islam as the one and only solution for the worlds. The idea in contrary suggests the opposite meaning and significance. The Prophet Muhammad fighting for the realization of mercy for the worlds was not alone. He struggled hand in hand with his contemporaries both Muslims and Non Muslims. They had partaken side by side as one ʻ*ummah,* the community of *rahmah,* the society of mercy that is established upon its basic foundations: trust, justice, and ethics. It makes that being mercy for the worlds is not an exclusively Islamic project. It is a universal wisdom that openly offered to everyone regardless their primordial backgrounds to make efforts of its attainment. All people and religions are treated equal in respect to function their own selves at best as a mercy, not a curse, for the worlds. Here, the idea of *rahmatan lil alamin* could inspire the spirit of global peacemaking, interfaith cooperation, intercultural understanding, and alliance of civilizations.

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[34] The prescriptive philosophy of science can be found in the works of Karl Pearson (1857-1936), A.J. Ayer (1910-1989), Karl Popper (1902-1994), and Imre Lakatos (1922-1974). See: K. Pearson, *The Grammar of Science* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900); A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Penguin Books, 1946); K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002); I. Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations* (Cambridge: Cambrige University Press, 1976).

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[36] See: R. Nola and H. Sankey, *After Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend,* (Dordrecht: Springer Springer Science+Business Media B.V., 2000).

[37] See: F.R. Ankersmit, "Historical Representation", *History and Theory,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (Oct., 1988), pp. 205-228) and J. Zammito, "Ankersmit and Historical Representation", *History and Theory,* Vol. 44, No. 2 (May, 2005), pp. 155-181.

[38] John Finney introduces a theory of religious commitment that is indicated by group norm conformity and behavioral and cognitive consistency in five dimensions namely ritual practice, knowledge, experience, belief, and devotional practice. See: J. Finney, "A Theory of Religious Commitment", *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring, 1978), pp. 19-35.