

## NURTURING TOLERANCE IN PESANTREN

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Back five years ago in a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) in the small city of Jombang, East Java, amidst a tranquil crack of dawn a congregation of male *santris* (students of *pesantren*) was performing their morning prayer in the mosque. While they were absorbed in the rituals, a Dutch Catholic priest who had spent the previous night at the *pesantren* was observing them from behind. Sitting cross-legged at the outer part of the mosque, he was attentively watching them perform the rituals and patiently waiting for a dialogue with some *santris* to be scheduled after the prayer. Later on that day, after a dialogue with *santris*, the priest had a warm, friendly conversation in the Arabic language with the *kyai* (leader of *pesantren*) on various religious and humanitarian issues. The Catholic priest, upon returning to his country, wrote that his stay at the *pesantren* and dialogues with the *santris* and *kyai* was one of the most beautiful moments in his life. He thanked the *kyai* and *santris* for their hospitality and warm welcome.

Three years later, the *pesantren* hosted a multi-religious delegation from a Norway-based inter-faith organization that came to Indonesia to see how religious pluralism is internalized and practiced here. The dialogue between the delegation and the *santris* was warm, open and sometimes filled with bursts of laughter. The *santris* enjoyed not only stories about far away life especially among its teenagers, but also the opportunity to practice their English. They had no prejudice at all to the delegation, moreover because one of them who happened to be the leader was a Norwegian Muslim lady with a headgear. The *santris* and the European guests exchanged views and perspectives on different topics especially relating to the lives of Muslims and Christians in Europe.

The above stories are just two ‘episodes’ in the activities of many *pesantrens* in Indonesia, including Jombang which is known as a city of thousand *pesantrens*. Countless Western and non-Muslim researchers and activists have visited and even lived in *pesantren* for different purposes. Some of them conducted anthropological studies using the popular

method of participant observation; some others taught English, while others were interested in learning deeper about Islam. These direct encounters with ‘outsiders’ have been an invaluable experience for *santris* which has nurtured awareness and appreciation of differences and diversities. It is not surprising, therefore, that *pesantrens* in Indonesia have produced broad-minded and tolerant personalities and alumni such as Abdurrahman Wahid or Nurcholis Madjid, two out of quite a few Muslim intellectuals and scholars widely reputed for their integrity in religious pluralism.

When asked about religious justification on their openness to outsiders, including non-Muslims, some *santris* immediately referred to the Prophet Muhammad’s saying that whoever believes in God and in the hereafter, s/he has to respect her/his guest. This prophetic saying (*hadith*) is a strong religious basis for *santris* to be confident in respecting their non-Muslim guests. There is no limitation in this *hadith* as to whom the respect should be addressed in terms of religion, for example to Muslim guests only. The limitation applies in terms of time, which is three days. To a visitor of more than three days, the host is not obligated to give a special treatment.

Another *santri* refers to the teaching on brotherhood that is prevalent among members or followers of *Nahdlatul Ulama* or NU (Resurgence of Ulemas), the so-called largest Muslim organization in Indonesia. The teaching advocates three levels of brotherhood that need to be uplifted in pursuing peaceful coexistence of all humankind. First, is brotherhood among Muslims (*ukhuwwah Islamiyah*); second, is brotherhood among people of the same nation (*ukhuwwah wathoniyah*), and third, brotherhood among all human beings (*ukhuwwah basyariyah*) regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion and nationality.

The above illustration of tolerance and pluralism in *pesantren* might sound ‘awkward’ amongst the emerging stigmatization against *pesantren* in the aftermath of the JW Marriot bombing. The suicide bomber, Amsar, reportedly was an alumnus of a *pesantren*, the Al-Mukmin in Ngruki, which is led by the alleged cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir. This association of *pesantren* with a suicide bomber can obviously ruin the image of moderate and tolerant *santris* in thousands of *pesantrens* who have demonstrated these traits as their built-in characters as illustrated in the examples above. From outside, judged from the names or physical appearance, these two types of *pesantren* may look alike. But in terms of teachings and moral values nurtured they are completely contradictory, just like night and day. In a *pesantren* like Ngruki, a dialogue with ‘the other’ (people with different interpretations of Islam or those who are non Muslim) would not be possible. These people are regarded as ‘kafir’ or infidels and there is no point in dialoguing with them. Their blood is even considered ‘halal,’ meaning that it is allowable to shed their

blood. So, one should never make any generalization when talking about *pesantren*. There are thousands of moderate *pesantrens*, but there are radical *pesantrens*, as few as five according to Sidney Jones, that appear like, to borrow the term used by Bassam Tibi in his book *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, ‘a horse of another colour.’

One unique characteristic of moderate *pesantrens* which has enabled them to produce tolerant and pluralistic people is their balance in teaching Islamic legal aspects (*Fikih*) and the spirituality (*Sufism*). This approach can be traced back to derive from the nine saints (*wali songo*) who spread Islam on the island of Java peacefully. This spirituality dimension is what probably missing in radical *pesantrens*, who prefer to stand in a binary position: right/wrong, halal/haram, me/the other, heaven/hell, etc. As a result, they produce people with an exclusionary stance who see the world as black and white and who lack the beauty and inner meaning of the religion: peace, tolerance, respect, love and care for others, and other esoteric and humanitarian traits.

This type of Islam is not typical Indonesian. Islam in Indonesia has been known as tolerant, pluralistic and adaptable to local cultures. But the last three decades have witnessed the growing phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism that tends to practice religious teachings in a rigid and exclusive way. Moderate *pesantrens* should be alert of this and enhance their teachings on pluralism to their santris.