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# RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

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The Potential for Conflict and Peace

ONE WORLD  
THEOLOGY  
**14**



**ONE WORLD THEOLOGY**

Edited by

**Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth**

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## THE POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT AND PEACE



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**RELIGION AND VIOLENCE**  
**The Potential for Conflict and Peace**  
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# Religious Violence in Indonesia, and What to do about it

Franz Magnis-Suseno

## Four typical cases

Last August an Indonesian lady of Chinese background in the North-Sumatran city of Tanjungbalai lost control of her self. No longer able to stand the blaring prayers of the mosque precisely opposite her house she demanded with a loud voice that the loudspeaker be turned down. In no time news that a Chinese had insulted Islam spread thru the social media. The women and her house could be saved, but six Buddhist temples were burned down. Days later the city demanded, that a six meter high Buddha statue which Muslims had long objected against be put down.

In July a Catholic priest was attacked during mass at a Medan church, but members of the congregation wrestled him down. Later the man said, he had got his inspiration from the killing of a priest by two ISIS sympathizers in Paris.

In July 2015 a small Protestant Church (GIDI) held their national congress at the city of Tolikara in Indonesia's most Eastern Province Papua. Since the congress coincided with the Muslim feast of Idul Fitri they demanded that Muslim Eid prayers not be held outside their mosque, so as not to disturb the congress with their loudspeakers. But the Muslims held their prayers – as is custom in Indonesia – at an open field because their mosque was much too small. Members of the congregation confronted the Muslims, some stones were thrown, and some wooden shops of the Muslims, including the mosque, were burned.

Four months later, ten churches in the strongly Muslim region of Singkil (North Sumatra) were torn down under the pretext that they had no building permits.

These four recent cases of religious violence show the complexity of the respective backgrounds. In Tanjungbalai clearly old anti-Chinese sentiments broke to the surface, causing shudder among the ethnic Chinese community (they remembered the last big anti-Chinese riots in 1998 that led to the downfall of president Suharto). In Tolikara the situation was the opposite. Muslims were the minority, consisting of migrants from other parts of Indonesia. The GIDI itself is an evangelical Church, consisting only of indigenous Papua, and they also reject other Protestant communities and Catholics. Background of their "intolerant" behavior was the fact that most Papua reject Indonesian authority over Papua. While in the Singkil region of strongly Islamic Aceh province the members of the different congregations whose churches were closed down were migrants from the neighboring, majority Protestant, Batak people. Thus, as in Tolikara, it was also a protest by indigenous people against newcomers.

As background: Of the 255 million Indonesians (60 % of them living on the island of Java) 87% are Muslims, 10% Christians, 2/3 of them Protestants, 1,7 % are Hindus (mostly the Balinese), 0,7 % are Buddhists, 0,5% belong to indigenous religions. According to the *Forum for Communication of Religious Communities (FKUB)* there happened 442 interferences with freedom of worship of Christians by Muslims in Indonesia during the last ten years.

#### **Four types of religiously motivated violence**

We can distinguish four types of religiously motivated violence in Indonesia. The first one I would call "normal intolerance". Meaning that people just do not like to have activities of other religions in their vicinity. Thus traditionally Muslim communities – or, f. i. Christians on Timor, a traditionally Christian region – do not want to have other religious communities operate their houses of worship amongst them. In general there is no violence against persons, and communications in daily life run smoothly. But opening a new house of worship of another religion amongst them would give, one could say, official recognition to the fact that there are "others" and there, suddenly, resistance springs up. While existing houses of worship of minorities are usually not disturbed.

Tanjungbalai, Tolikara and Singkil belong to a second type where groups of different ethnicities live together, without really being



integrated. Which is often the case in Indonesia. People of different ethnicities meet everyday at markets or using public transportation, but actually they do not communicate. If then one community is indigenous and the other consists of migrants – which usually are economically more successful, – the situation is potentially explosive. Small incidents – youths teasing each other – can lead to communal violence, even in the capital Jakarta.

Of special concern are anti-Chinese sentiments still smoldering beneath the surface. The 3% Indonesians with Chinese background dominate a big part of the country's economy. In a typical city all (!) the shops at the bigger streets would be owned by Chinese. The majority of Indonesian Chinese actually are Christians, not Buddhists, and since Christians and Muslims are the two big religious communities competing in Indonesia, their situation as double minority is exposed.

The third form of religiously motivated violence – the attack in Medan – stems from Islamic fundamentalist radicalism. One could call it ideologically motivated violence. It is rooted in a priori hatred of "heathen, associaters and hypocrites". Since the fall of President Suharto terrorism sprang up again in Indonesia (there have been spates of terrorism before). Its climax were the Bali bombings 2002 in which more than 200 people were killed. Logistically amazing were the Christmas bombings in 2000 – more than 30 bombs exploded within 60 minutes at Christian churches in an area stretching over 2,000 km, killing 17 people and wounding more than 100. There are several terrorist groups in Indonesia, now partly connected with the IS. But the Christmas bombings show something else. They were never really investigated. Although after the Bali bombings some known Muslim terrorists were found involved, the extreme sophistication of these attacks suggest something more sinister, namely that the real planners were among what is called black military, groups in the Indonesian military resenting their loss of political power after the fall of Suharto. In post-Suharto Indonesia the military still enjoy impunity from judicial prosecution.

The situation in Indonesia is particularly precarious for religious groups outside the legally recognized six religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism). While the existence of the recognized religions and their full status as Indonesian citizens is not questioned even by Islamic hardliners,

Shiites, Achmadis, and local Islamic sects like Gafatar are object of hate speeches and physical attacks. The state does not give them full protection, thus they have repeatedly become of mass attacks and violence. At this moment there are still more than one thousand Shiites and Achmadis living in shelters since many years because they cannot return to their villages.

The fourth form of religiously motivated violence were, of course, the two terrible civil wars between Christians and Muslim that raged from 1999 till 2002 separately in two Eastern Indonesian provinces, where almost 8,000 people were killed and more than half a million people displaced. These conflicts were quite typical. In both places a Protestant indigenous majority was replaced by Muslim migrants and lost corresponding political power. In both places a small incident lead to full-fledged war, with warzones and green lines where overstepping with the wrong religious identity meant immediate death. Both sides committed massacres. In both places traditional local customs limiting tribal wars were no longer effective, since since they long been intentionally destroyed by the Suharto government. When peace was finally restored – by energetic involvement of the Indonesian vice-president Yussuf Kalla, a no nonsense politician of strong Muslim credentials who had the trust of the Christians – both warring camps had become aware, that they were in fact played up by, mostly military, power brokers in Jakarta. Now Christians and Muslim in both regions have built up networks of communication that proved able to abort any attempt – there were several – to rekindle the war.

### **What to do?**

One can learn a lot about religiously motivated violence from Indonesia. Obviously, only the third category is purely ideological, with very little “rationality”. It is rooted in apriori fanaticism against the “enemies of religion”, apriori in the sense that the perpetrators have nothing personally against their victims. Their understanding of their religion justifies violence – and, of course, psychology could explain much about this kind of religious mentality.

This situation is recognized by Indonesian mainstream Muslims. For them this fanatical, violence embracing understanding of Islam poses a theological, social and cultural challenge. They worry about

their young people being infected by it. They have countered by promoting an Islam that is supporting of the Indonesian state and its plural society. According to them Islam in Indonesia should, precisely because Islam is an universal religion, be integrated into Indonesian culture. They even regard pluralist, non-proselytizing Christians as their allies. They rack their brains on how to undermine a radical understanding of Islam theologically.

But the three other forms of religious violence are clearly the result of a complex mix of a traditional, but narrow understanding of what Islam means, with conflicting economic and political interests, with feelings of having been left out, thus of suffering injustice. In the background there are very often ethnic tensions. In Indonesia, society has in fact greater problems in handling inter-ethnic than inter-religious conflicts. Even on Java where inter-ethnic tensions do not play a big role, if we look closely at places of intolerance towards religious minorities, very often ethnic factors are in the background. Especially small, ethnically homogenous Protestant congregations whose members come – often by car – from all over Jakarta to worship. In only two or three churches have often very little contact with locals and are easily regarded as intruders.

If we ask what can be done to improve religious tolerance, there are three addressees: the state, the people themselves, and religious leaders and teachers.

*The state:* it can do a lot. It should effectively give protection to all religious communities. In Indonesia six religions are officially recognized: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Although local administrations very often opportunistically disregard the right of minority communities to worship, they experience difficulties in opening churches and temples, but violence is generally not tolerated. But this is different with communities outside these six religions, like the Shiites, the Achmadis or smaller sects. They often are physically attacked by brutal masses, and state apparatus backs off. If the state would insist on zero tolerance towards communal violence, most of such attacks would never develop. Besides, the state should make sure that court decisions in favor of minorities are executed – what often does not happen.

As regards *the Indonesians themselves*, we can actually rely on

a remarkable social capital of tolerance. Indonesians know that close by there are people with a different culture, language and religious orientation. But a harsh economic climate together with ideological incitement to hatred can bring people to participate in mass brutality. The second principle of Indonesia's state philosophy Pancasila, "*just and civilized humanism*" addresses precisely this situation. People should internalize that self respecting people always behave in a civilized and fair manner, and this means, they reject acting violently. People actually know that nobody in their midst should live in fear. But this, too, needs education both by the state and by religious leaders.

*Religious leaders and teachers* are, of course, the most important actors in how their communities see themselves in relation to others. A person like the late Abdurrachman Wahid, for many years head of the biggest Islamic Organization in Indonesia, the Nadlatul Ulama (NU), and from 1999 – 2001 fourth President of Indonesia, one of the most open minded and beloved people of the country, has opened up the attitude of his 40 million member organization and other Muslims towards Christians, Buddhists and others with the effect, that minorities now have close relations with NU and NU itself are proud of these relations. Thus the existence of open minded, pluralist, dialog open religious leaders and intellectuals is of key importance.

### **Some remarks**

It seems useful to remember that religious tolerance was first practiced by Islam. Thus, for example, the old Middle Eastern Churches, about 9% of the population, lived for some 1400 years mostly in peace under Muslim governments (until the Iraq war changed everything). We Christians had no such tradition. Crusades, persecution of Jews and heretics, the inquisition, the burning of witches, the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain: we are now ashamed of our violent past. Christian intolerance was challenged from the outside, by enlightenment (which for quite some time was en tout regarded as a modernist heresy by the Church). The real breakthrough only happened at Vatican II with *Perfectae Caritatis* and *Nostra Aetate* and the unblinking declaration in paragraph 16 of *Lumen Gentium* that God offers salvation to every human being, whatever her or his explicit religious convictions.

This actual Catholic position is highly appreciated by many Indonesian Muslim friends. Especially that Vatican II successfully avoids two pitfalls: exclusivism and relativism. If faith – the condition for being saved – means the surrender to the Absolute how ever it is conceptually conceived, then people of all explicit convictions can be saved. We Catholics need no longer pity – as Saint Francis Xavier did – “good heathen” for going to hell. We are even encouraged to acknowledge that in other religions too there are elements that are “true and holy” (Nostra Aetate 2). On the other hand we reject that “all religions are the same”, and Muslims, of course fully agree. We are beginning to learn together that you can be convinced of the truth of your faith – without having to condemn, or even to judge, other beliefs. Repeatedly I got friendly, smiling reactions from Muslim audiences when I said that that between us there exist differences that cannot be reconciled, but we can leave the final sorting out to the one who is Truth, God. Thus we can have tolerance, and even more, sincere respect, maybe even admiration, towards each others beliefs – without putting our own beliefs at disposition.

This also means that one feels no longer threatened by the mere fact that there exist sincere religious believers very different from oneself. Thus one underlying reason for inter-religious violence, the feeling that the existence of others threaten the claim to universality of my faith, loses power. On a basis of relaxed mutual acceptance it is much easier, then, to find the values we share with people from other religions. The letter “A Common Word”, written by 138 spiritual Muslim leaders to the leaders of Christianity, is an excellent example of this growing awareness that we are rooted in values we own together.

But to raise such an awareness among our communities, thus not only among some intellectual elites, one thing is of paramount importance: getting to trust each other. We have to build up trusting relationships among us. And this needs ongoing communication. Thus in a country like Indonesia, where Christians are a minority, Christians have to take the initiative to open up communications with Muslims where ever they are. Called *silaturahmi*, visiting each other is an established custom among neighbors in Indonesia and almost without exception leads to real friendship and appreciation of each other. Then we should strive for an explicit consensus to reject violence among us under any pretext, and we should commit ourselves to practice our

religions in such a way that no single person or community should have to live in fear because of their religious convictions and practices.

In spite of ongoing instances of intolerance relations between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia have made great progress during the last 25 years. But a note of caution must be added. Such relations should not be taken for granted. An ongoing effort is demanded: dialogue with Islam and other religions, sensitivity for the feelings of other religions<sup>169</sup>, initiatives for communication<sup>170</sup> (which must be actively organized, otherwise communication will slow down), taking time to meet the others. And patience where there are still obstacles.

Thus there is no miracle aid against religiously motivated violence, but if we Catholics try to live the attitudes Vatican II has so strongly reiterated, our relations with other religions, particularly with Islam, could develop like our relations with other Christians developed during the last 100 years.

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<sup>169</sup> Why a local bishop agreed to bless a 42 m high statue of Mary, erected by rich Catholics in a quite Islamic backyard in Central Java in order to get it into the Guinness Book of Records as the biggest statue of Mary in the world, beats me.

<sup>170</sup> I "preach" to parish priests (and even bishops) that they should invest 10% of their time to get into communication with Muslims.