Islam and Pluralism: The Challenge of Religious Life in Multicultural Societies

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 ABSTRACT

Religious pluralism is an inevitable reality in modern multicultural societies, including Indonesia, which is rich in religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. In this context, Muslims face the challenge of practicing their faith while coexisting with followers of other religions. This study aims to examine Islamic views on pluralism and identify the challenges Muslims face in practicing their religious life within a multicultural society. The research employs a qualitative approach through a literature review of several books and journals relevant to the study. The findings indicate that Islam supports values of coexistence, peace, and tolerance, as reflected in the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. However, theological and social challenges persist, such as religious exclusivism, social prejudice, and religion-based political polarization. The study suggests that intensive interfaith dialogue, multicultural education, and strengthening the role of religious leaders in promoting tolerance can help address these challenges. In conclusion, Islam provides a strong foundation for living within pluralism, but its application in daily life requires more intensive efforts from various parties.

Keywords: Islam, Pluralism, Multicultural

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion is closely related to the unity of society and has a mutual influence. Religion contains universal sources of values and morals that can address life's challenges by shaping human behavior and attitudes. Without religion, humans as social beings cannot be considered fully complete. Prominent theologians, Dalai Lama and Leonardo, explain in their dialogue that a successful adherent of a religion is someone who becomes more patient, has a sense of humanity, ethics, responsibility, care for others, and strives to create a better world. Religion can function effectively through deep dialogue, indicating that it can play a significant role, as long as one's behavior in daily life reflects personal improvement, with religion serving as a reflection of that person's character. In reality, religion is not an isolated value but is integrated into human behavior (Lestari, 2020)

Islam, in essence, is the law or divine commandments found in the holy scriptures and the teachings of the Prophet, which include God's commands, prohibitions, and guidance to serve as a guide for human life, leading to happiness in this world and the hereafter. The characteristics of Islam represent distinctive traits or specific qualities inherent in Islamic teachings (Alim and Sujdrajat, 2024).

Indonesia is a country with a remarkable diversity of ethnicities, tribes, cultures, languages, and religions, unrivaled in the world. While the six officially recognized religions in Indonesia—Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—are followed by the majority of the population, many Indonesians also express their religious beliefs through hundreds of indigenous religions and traditional belief systems. The number of local religious or belief groups in Indonesia reaches into the hundreds or even thousands (Hakim, 2019).

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach, utilizing sources from several relevant journals and books. Qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena from the participants' perspectives (Siyoto & Sodik, 2015). The literature study approach is a research method that reviews several theories (Ramdhan, 2021). The presentation of data in this research is done using a descriptive method. Data presentation is carried out to provide an overview of the whole or specific parts of the whole picture. At this stage, the researcher attempts to classify and present data according to the main issues (Ramdhan, 2021). This research focuses on analyzing the research object of Islam and pluralism and its challenges in multicultural society.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. The Islamic Perspective on Pluralism

In the Indonesian language dictionary, pluralism originates from the word "plural" which means the expression of multiple different meanings. Meanwhile, pluralitas refers to diversity that is based on priorities and characteristics. (KBBI, 1990). Pluralism is not a new phenomenon for Islam. Theological and historical contexts dictate that Islam cannot be separated from other religions. The specific forms of relationships between Islam and other religions have evolved into three contemporary meanings of pluralism that have become the foundation of Islamic theology and history. Firstly, pluralism is an active engagement in diversity and differences to build a common civilization. This understanding can be seen in the

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history of Islam where pluralism goes beyond just recognizing diversity and differences. It actively involved in integrating diversity and differences to achieve a higher social objective - unity in constructing civilization. In Nurcholish Madjid's perspective, pluralism is the essential tie to the diversity in cultural relationships. Secondly, pluralism expands on tolerance.

The deep understanding of others leads to mutual understanding that fills the tolerance with something constructive and effective towards the first objective of building common civilization actively. Therefore, pluralism is not relative; it recognizes the full values of groups with different beliefs. Active tolerance refuses relativism, such as the simplistic statement that all religions are the same. Pluralism recognizes that the diversity of existence is a potential force to commit actively in constructing active tolerance towards building civilizations. This active tolerance highlights the case of Spain (Andalusia) in Islamic history.

Thirdly, based on the second meaning, pluralism is not relativism. A profound understanding of other groups or individuals leads to commitments for the greater good. Islam, as it progressively relates to other religions, establishes a common platform with Judaism and Christianity. So, Islam provides a theological foundation for believers to accept pluralism's existence, which is the concept of diversity in the presence of other religions. This is supported by Al-Qur'an that recognizes religious plurality, freedom of religion, tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and having positive attitude towards other believers. Al-Qur'an clearly stipulates the responsibility of Muslims towards other non-Islamic religious communities. The main argument for religious pluralism in Al-Qur'an is based on the relationship between individual faith and its public projection in Islamic society. Regarding personal faith, Al-Qur'an adopts non-interventionism (no human authority can disturb personal beliefs). Meanwhile, in public projection of faith, Al-Qur'an's attitude is based on principles of consistency, which means the willingness of the dominant community to provide a dialogue to other religious communities without imposing their opinion. Based on this principle, the majority of Muslim populations in Indonesia can represent a community that acknowledges, respects, and practices religious pluralism. (Rachman, 2010)

Theologically, pluralism is discussed through hermeneutics, where the Qur'an explicitly states that Islam is the continuation of the religion (Millah) of Ibrahim. Islam is not only connected to history but also shares a common platform with Judaism and Christianity. Through this common ground, Islam provides a theological foundation for its followers to accept pluralism, which is a concept of diversity regarding the

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existence of other religions and the importance of establishing good relations with their followers. The Qur'an also acknowledges the reality of religious pluralism, freedom of religion, peaceful coexistence, positive relations, and cooperation with people of other faiths. Additionally, the Qur'an explicitly requires Muslims to act justly towards non-Muslim communities and to protect places of worship of all religions. (Rachman, 2010)

The main argument for religious pluralism in the Qur'an is based on the relationship between personal faith and its public projection within Islamic society. Regarding personal faith, the Qur'an adopts a non-interventionist stance (no form of human authority should interfere with an individual's inner belief). In terms of the public projection of faith, the Qur'an's stance is based on the principle of consistency, which is the willingness of the dominant religious community to provide freedom for other religious communities to follow their own rules. Based on this principle, the majority-Muslim society in Indonesia can serve as a reflection of a society that recognizes, respects, and practices religious pluralism. (Mustofa, 2015)

2.2. The Role of Islamic Figures and Thinkers in Relation to Pluralism

In modern times, the discourse on pluralism in Islam has been developed by contemporary Muslim thinkers such as Fritjof Schuon, Sayyed Hossein Nasr, Hasan Askari, and Abdul Aziz Sachedina. In Indonesia, there are figures like Nurcholis Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, Ahmad Syafii Maarif, and the younger generation of progressive Islamic intellectuals led by Ulil Abshar Abdalla. (Mustofa, 2015) The most frequently mentioned figure is Abdurrahman Wahid. According to Abdurrahman Wahid, Islam must emerge as a unifier of the nation and a protector of diversity, capable of addressing the challenges of modernity, so that Islam becomes more inclusive, tolerant, egalitarian, and democratic. He stated that upholding pluralism in society does not merely rest on a pattern of peaceful coexistence, as this can still be vulnerable to misunderstandings among groups, which at certain moments can lead to disintegration. Instead, there must be a high regard for pluralism, along with the awareness to engage in genuine dialogue and mutual understanding, fostering a give-and-take relationship between groups. Abdurrahman Wahid developed pluralism through both action and thought. We should adopt an inclusive attitude, not limiting our interactions with others, even if they belong to different religions. (Sari & Dozan, 2021)

One of the main challenges in promoting religious pluralism is the existence of tensions and conflicts rooted in differences in belief and religious interpretation. Sometimes, narrow and radical understandings of religious teachings can trigger intolerance and discrimination against followers of other religions. This requires religious leaders not only to prioritize dialogue and mutual understanding between religions but also to resolve the tensions and conflicts that may arise from differing viewpoints. Additionally, external influences such as identity politics and religious extremism pose serious challenges in promoting religious pluralism. There are efforts to exploit religious differences for political purposes, which can worsen interfaith relations and threaten the harmony that has been built. Religious leaders need to be vigilant against attempts at polarization and radicalization that can disrupt social stability and damage interfaith cooperation. (Mangalik et al., 2024)

2.3. The Challenges of Religious Life in a Multicultural Society

Multiculturalism is defined through various perspectives and academic fields such as philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Multiculturalism arises from the issue of human oppression solely due to differences. It highly values humanity because it views all humans as equal, capable of working together and respecting one another despite differences in religion, race, culture, and ethnicity. (Agustian, 2019)

Currently, religious differences have become one of the most significant issues requiring serious attention. This problem is so severe that it can lead to national disunity, social conflict, and even the outbreak of civil war and conflicts among citizens. On one hand, the diversity of a nation can enrich its cultural landscape, but on the other hand, it can also create gaps. The potential for conflict lies in the broader nature of religion, especially in the Abrahamic religions of Islam and Christianity, both of which claim to be missionary religions. The process of mission or da'wah that lacks clear guidelines can cause unrest and jealousy among followers of other religions, ultimately leading to conflict. This friction is one of the most effective triggers for mutual hatred, resulting in slander between religious communities. In Haedar Ali's book, Religion and the Crisis of Modern Humanity, it is explained that, broadly speaking, there are five main factors that cause religious conflict in society. First is social stratification, the differences in social status within society, such as economic status among religious leaders or adherents, which can cause social jealousy. This stratification is a complex and structural factor that strongly influences other factors. Second, economic and political interests: not only do community groups

have clear interests, but religious leaders and adherents also compete for economic resources, which are vital for livelihood, and for political power assets. Third, the interpretation of religion: different religious interpretations, including differences between schools of thought, can lead to excessive fanaticism. Fourth, the mobilization of da'wah activities as an effort to increase the number of followers involved in da'wah or adherents to a certain ideology. Each religious group carries out da'wah both within their own religious community and towards those of different faiths. Fifth, religious belief in something deemed absolute and fundamental, which involves a core certainty of faith for every adherent. This religious belief is fundamental and sacred. From the explanation above, it can be seen that the challenge of religious pluralism is the diversity of beliefs and religions practiced by the people of Indonesia. This creates small frictions and even large-scale tensions, which, if left unchecked, can lead to national disintegration. (Lestari, 2020)

2.4. Efforts to Bridge Challenges in Religious Life

In the context of a multicultural and pluralistic society, it is important to use effective learning methods to enhance interfaith understanding among students. One method that can be used is the dialogical approach, which encourages open and respectful discussions among students from various religious backgrounds. Through interfaith dialogue, students can exchange views, understand differences in beliefs, and find common ground in the values of the religions they follow. Educational institutions play a crucial role in restoring the values of pluralism to students. In the context of education, pluralism refers to the recognition and respect for the diversity of religions, cultures, and public opinions. Educational institutions, such as schools, have a unique opportunity to foster this by shaping students' attitudes and understanding of pluralism through various educational methods and strategies. (Mangalik et al., 2024)

One example of an effort to bridge the challenges of religious life in society can be seen in Serdang Bedagai Regency, which is known for its pluralistic community. The people of Serdang Bedagai consist of various ethnic groups, cultures, and religions, resulting in a diverse cultural life that thrives in this multi-ethnic and multicultural society. One tradition that continues to be preserved is the "Jamu Laut" ceremony, a ritual to ward off calamities practiced by the Malay community of Serdang. Additionally, there is the "Kuda Lumping," a traditional cultural heritage of the Javanese people, and the "Aruh" tradition of the Banjar people, celebrated during the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. This tradition is unique because it involves many

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participants, with a communal feast served on a tray shared by four people, symbolizing togetherness and strengthening brotherhood. Another example of cultural harmony can be found in the Bali village of Pegajahan, where residents from different religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, live peacefully and harmoniously without any conflicts or disputes related to ethnic, religious, or cultural differences. The Balinese culture in this village is well-known and even attracts cultural tourism due to the strong preservation of Balinese traditions. One notable place is the iconic Hindu temple, Pura Panataran Dharmaraksaka, which is not only visited by the Balinese community but also by the general public. By preserving culture and mutual respect for differences in the multicultural society of Serdang Bedagai, these efforts serve as an effective way to bridge the challenges of religious life.

4. CONCLUSION

The challenges of religious life in a multicultural society highlight issues faced by the Muslim community in the context of living in a pluralistic and multicultural society. Religious pluralism presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Muslims to affirm the universal values of Islam, such as tolerance, justice, and peace. In a multicultural society, interfaith dialogue is essential to prevent conflicts and strengthen harmony. The main challenge is how to understand religious and cultural differences without losing one's religious identity. Therefore, a deep understanding of Islam's inclusive teachings and openness to diversity is crucial in building harmonious religious life amidst diversity. Since Islam highly values differences, as outlined in the Qur'an and Hadith, embracing diversity is fundamental to fostering peaceful coexistence.

From the results of previous writings, it has been stated that religion agrees with the concept of pluralism in the life of a multicultural society. This is because humans are created as different nations and tribes, especially in Indonesia, which consists of many ethnic groups, religions, and cultures. However, in a multicultural society, challenges still remain, as differences often become a source of problems.

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