

Islam of Mercy and Compassion¹

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Abstract

This paper looks at coexistence in Islam and Sufism, and takes Indonesia as a case study. It is divided in three parts. The first part explains the basic idea of cultural coexistence in the Islamic creed and history — the former includes an explanation on the two faces of Allah, anger and love, and the teachings of the Quran on coexistence with non-Muslims; the latter explains the “Protection (*Dhimma*) system” and “*Millet* system” as concrete examples of coexistence. The second part is dedicated to inquiry into coexistence in Sufism — it elucidates the theories of “oneness of being (*waḥda al-wujūd*)” and “oneness of religions (*waḥda al-adyān*),” and the practice of saint veneration as examples. The third part is on inquiry into coexistence in contemporary Indonesia. It introduces the policy for religious equality based on *Pancasila*, the notion of “religious moderation (*Moderasi Beragama*),” that of “Indonesian Islam (*Islam Nusantara*),” and the “Convey Indonesia Program” conducted by Syarif Hidayatullah State University Jakarta; it concludes with the active role of Sufism in this inquiry.

Introduction

There is a popular perception, of very recent origin, that views the practice of Islam as being marked by a general image of violence and exclusiveness. That is why we easily imagine that we do not have anything to learn from Islam about coexistence. Islamic society, however, has undergone majority-minority problems and sectarian contradiction, and therefore has learned many lessons from its history.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, we provide a rough overview of the Islamic creed and look at the wisdom of coexistence in Islamic history. The second section deals with the wisdom of coexistence in Sufism. In the third section, we will discuss the trial of coexistence based on Islam and Sufism in contemporary Indonesia. I believe the case of Indonesia will give us a good example of the quest for coexistence through “Asian

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Islam,” which is mainly based on the Indonesian tradition of Sufism and saint veneration.

1. The Bases of Coexistence in Islam

1-1. Two Faces of God in the Islamic Creed

While the God of Judaism is often depicted as the god of anger and jealousy, that of Christianity is ideated as the god of love. The God of Islam, Allah, however, is often said to possess both anger and love. First, we will look at the face of anger. In the notion of Allah, justice (*‘adl*) is considered as being as important as unity (*tawhīd*). Allah is himself just and commands mankind to be just. When humankind is against this justice, Allah shows his anger (*ghaḍab*), with which mankind is destined to go to hell. Muslims are requested to pay attention to this fact and to live a just life every day. Common Muslims can be said to follow the commandment neither to meet this anger nor to enter hell. The guideline for this justice is a commandment and forms the so-called “six creeds and five pillars.” This commandment is gathered and compiled as Islamic jurisprudence (*sharī‘a*).

There were people who meditated on the anger of Allah. They were ascetics (*zāhid*, pl. *zuhhād*), who appeared in the 8th century. They were fearful of Allah. Fear is called *taqwā*. They fear Allah to contemplate the existence of themselves rather than to avoid punishment in hell in the hereafter. Here, we find the notion of sin, which can be considered to be near to the idea of original sin in Christianity.

Allah has another face of love and salvation. His attribute of *rahma* (mercy or compassion) symbolizes this face of Allah. All the chapters except one of the Quran begin with the passage of “In the name of Allah, the Merciful and the Compassionate (*bism Allāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm*).” Ascetics and the first generation of Sufis meditated the *rahma* more deeply. They believe that the existence of Allah Himself is full of mercy and compassion, and they are happy if they are given mercy and compassion. Here appears the notion of thankfulness (*shukr*). Its antonym is infidelity (*kufr*), whose original meaning is ungratefulness.

A couple of notions of loftiness (*jalāl*) and beauty (*jamāl*) fully shows these two faces of Allah. The two attributes are contrary to each other but are combined in Allah. That is why Allah has both names of the Lofty (*al-Jalīl*) and the Beautiful (*al-Jamīl*). If we adopt the notions of the love of anger and that of love, the Lofty represents the former and the Beautiful represents the latter. While Allah has both sides, the face of love and beauty has been emphasized more. The expression of *ḥadīth*: “Allah said ‘My mercy precedes My anger’” is a good example. This notion of mercy is the basis of the ideal of coexistence among various people in the Islamic world.

1-2. The Teachings of the Quran

Although the word *ta‘āyush*, which is often used with the Arabic equivalent meaning

“coexistence” these days, does not appear in the Quran, we can find some phrases from which we can draw some ideas about the coexistence with the believers of the other religions.

As for those who have not fought against you for your religion, nor expelled you from your homes, God does not prohibit you from dealing with them kindly and equitably. God loves the equitable. (Q60: 8)

shows that the Quran recommends peace if people are not in the fighting situation.

Had your Lord willed, everyone on earth would have believed. Will you compel people to become believers? (Q10: 99)

And say, “The truth is from your Lord. Whoever wills—let him believe. And whoever wills—let him disbelieve.” (Q18: 29)

shows that Islam does not compel the heathen to convert.

Do not insult those they call upon besides God, lest they insult God out of hostility and ignorance. We made attractive to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return, and He will inform them of what they used to do. (Q6: 108)

shows the prohibition to the Muslims to insult the heathens.

Today, all good things are made lawful for you. And the food of those given the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them. So are chaste believing women, and chaste women from the people who were given the Scripture before you, provided you give them their dowries, and take them in marriage, not in adultery, nor as mistresses. (Q5: 5)

shows the legality of food that the people of Scriptures cook and that of marriage with them.

1-3. Wisdom of Coexistence in Islamic History

Based on the basic Islamic creed mentioned in the last section, we will look at how Muslims have lived together with other religious groups in Islamic history. The Islamic world has a history of coexistence with other groups, albeit perhaps not the ideal equality-based coexistence of today. “Protection (*Dhimma*) system” is a good example. This system guarantees the life, property, and belief of non-Muslims with the conditions that they do not inhibit Islamic beliefs and that they pay tribute to Islamic dynasties. We can estimate that this system was very tolerant at the beginning of the Islamic regime (7th–9th century CE), especially when we compare it with the Christian treatment of the Jews in the same period. Each religious community was admitted with autonomy because it is believed to have its own jurisprudence based on a received prophecy from God. Therefore, the Islamic legal system

does not intervene its autonomy.

We can find another example of coexistence in the “*Millet* system” in the Ottoman Empire. *Millet* (Turkish loan word from the Arabic word *milla*) means a religious community. This system worked very well as a principle of coexistence among religious communities when the power of the Ottoman Empire was predominant. Only after its decline (caused by the imperial invasion of the European countries that claimed the protection of the Catholics and Protestants) did the system become incompetent. The notion *millet*, which originally meant a religious community, came to have a connotation of nationalism. This change led to the independence of Greece and Balkan countries from the Ottoman Empire.

2. Coexistence in Sufism

As I mentioned in the first chapter, it is Islamic jurisprudence (*sharī‘a*) that is administrated based on Allah’s face of anger and loftiness. Here, Allah is considered to divide between good and evil and to give the rules and order to Muslims. On the contrary, Sufism is based on Allah’s face of love and mercy. Although Sufism is generally translated as “Islamic mysticism,” it also includes an ethical element. Sufism shares this characteristic with *sharī‘a*, as both are based on the division between good and evil.

Sufism, however, has a different characteristic from *sharī‘a*. This is a mystical element that tends to overcome the dichotomy between good and evil. In the case of Sufism, this mystical element is based on the notion of love, which is called *maḥabba*, *ḥubb*, or *‘ishq* in Arabic, which is on the same line as Allah’s face of mercy and affection. Mankind loves Allah, and at the same time, is loved by Allah. Here, mankind departs from his own ego and is enfolded by Allah’s love. The experience of annihilation of ego and union with God is called *fanā’*. When they reach this experience, the seekers of Sufism overcome the dualism and conflict in the world. This is because Sufism has an affinity with the notion of coexistence.

The theory of “oneness of being (*wahda al-wujūd*)” is the theoretical systematization of this experience. This theory has had a strong influence on the history of Islamic thought throughout the Islamic world. For example, most of the ‘*ulamā*’ were adherents of this theory in the Ottoman Empire. According to this theory, the world should go back to the sole reality, which is called “existence (*wujūd*).” The term “existence” derives from Islamic philosophy, which in turn derives from Greek philosophy. The theory of “oneness of being” claims that only “existence” exists in the world in the real sense of the word and that the phenomenal world appears from the self-segmentalization of this one “existence” with the addition of essence (*māhīya*). We ordinarily imagine that the world is full of conflict between things which are independent from one another. However, if we follow this theory, we can realize that such a conflict is meaningless because there is no independent existence other than “existence” per se.

The theory of “oneness of religions (*waḥda al-adyān*)” has been developed from the theory of “oneness of being.” Although different religions and beliefs exist, the differences among them rely only on superficial rituals and doctrines. The truth behind them, according to the theory of “oneness of religions,” is single. If so, conflict among the communities is meaningless. For example, Dārā Shukūh (d. 1659), a prince of the Mughal Empire, believed that Hinduism and Islam accorded with each other. Because he was among the dignitaries of the empire, which included many Hindus under its control, this theory was not abstract but a pragmatic idea. He, however, was defeated by his brother, Aurangzeb (d. 1707), and could not be enthroned. That is why he could not conduct the theory as a policy of the empire towards the heathens. Aurangzeb, the sixth emperor, and Dārā Shukūh’s brother, exhilarated in the absolute veracity of Islam; disagreeing with the idea of the fundamental accordance of Islam with Hinduism. This is one of the many cases in which the ideal of monistic coexistence, which has continued through history, was not achieved.

Now, we can turn to the topic of saint veneration, which was developed with a deep relationship with Sufism from the middle ages. The difference of religion is often surmounted in the saint veneration. For example, Hindus and Christians often visit the mausolea and tombs of Muslim saints. In addition, we can observe Muslims who visit Hindu or Christian saints. Such phenomena are often observed in countries that include the believers of multi-religions. In Mamluk Egypt (1250–1517), for example, manuscripts show that Muslims often visited the mausolea of Christian saints. The Egyptian people in those days even venerated the families of ancient Pharaohs as saints.

3. Coexistence in Indonesia

Two billion Muslims live in Indonesia, which is counted as the largest Muslim population in a single country. I would like to focus on Indonesia to investigate the struggle for coexistence in the contemporary Islamic world. Contrary to the case of Pakistan, which is counted as the second largest Muslim population (and determines Islam as the state religion), Indonesia admits six religions’ equality in the country’s principles called *Pancasila*. The six religions are Islam (the population of its believers occupies 87% of the total population of Indonesia), Protestant (7%), Catholic (3%), Hindu (1.7%), Buddhism (0.7%), and Confucianism (0.05%). The Jokowi government, as of 2021, promotes a policy for religious equality amongst them.

Here, I would like to report my own experience during my stay in Jakarta between November 2019 and February 2020. Television channels continually broadcast mottos such as “Dear Christian friends in Indonesia, Congratulations for Christmas” and “Let us live as friends with all mankind” to promote the celebration of Christmas by Indonesian citizens. They also featured a video of a visit to a Christian church in Bethlehem by Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the State of Palestine and Palestinian National Authority as well as the Chairman

of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). I understood this to be a way to emphasize the harmonious situation between Muslims and Christians.

I also experienced the Day of Imlek, which is the New Year's Day according to the Chinese calendar and at the same time understood as the birthday of Confucius. Television programs streamed the celebration of Imlek as a chance to promote the compatibility between Islam and Confucianism as Christmas between Islam and Christianity.

However, we must pay attention to the fact that the relationships between religions have not always been one of coexistence. Ex-president Suharto (1968–1998) repeatedly encouraged the oppression of the Chinese religions. The situation only changed as recently as the turn of the millennium, when the fourth president Abdurrahman Wahid (reign 1999–2001) tried to respect the religious rights of minorities. Wahid struggled to preserve an open system for Chinese culture in Indonesia. This religious policy was inherited by the present government.

I would also like to report the negative campaign against the celebration of Christmas. Some Indonesian citizens complain of the excessive costs of celebrating Christmas, a minority religion. We can analyze the present religious situation in contemporary Indonesia as follows: on the one hand, the country has the ideal of religious equality and coexistence; on the other hand, many Indonesian citizens are against this policy. These two tides are competing with each other.

4. Role of Sufism in Contemporary Indonesia

The activities of so-called “Islamic fundamentalists” are increasing and have become a major problem in contemporary Indonesia. A growing number of youngsters are attracted by fundamentalistic organizations such as the Islamic State. The government tries to propose the idea of “moderate Islam (*Islam Moderat*)” to repress the activities of fundamentalists. It is the notion of “religious moderation (*Moderasi Beragama*)” that is closely related to that of “moderate Islam.” This notion is promoted by the Ministry of Religion. A Ministry cleric wrote an article entitled “Importance of Religious Moderation.” The following are excerpts from this article:

Extremism, radicalism, hate speech, and the cracked relationship within the religious societies is the problem which Indonesian people face at the moment. Therefore, the mainstream program of this ‘religious moderation’ is evaluated to be important and will find a chance (to solve the problem).²

According to LHS (Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, the minister of religion as of September 2019 when this article was written), (religious) moderation obliges us not to fight

2 Tarmizi Tohor, “Pentingnya Moderasi Beragama (Importance of Religious Moderation),” <<https://kastara.id/13/09/2019/pentingnya-moderasi-beragama/>> (browsed on 25 October, 2020.)

against the extremists, but to hug, preserve and become a friend with them.³

Nahdlatul Ulama, the biggest Islamic organization in Indonesia, proposed a new idea of “*Islam Nusantara* (Indonesian Islam)” in 2015. This is the argument that Indonesia has its own Islam based on the Indonesian cultural tradition as opposed to the *sharī‘a*-oriented (Islamic law-oriented) or *fiqh*-oriented (Islamic jurisprudence-oriented) Islam that is widely adopted and spread by Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, although this idea admits the universality of Islamic law itself. When the modern era came, Sufism and saint veneration were harshly attacked mainly in the Middle Eastern, especially the Arab world. The main critics are like “Sufism is against Islamic law,” “Sufism is a heretical deviation from the original Islam,” and “Sufism is a kind of vernacular superstitions.” However, in Indonesia, especially in Jawa Island, people have continued to venerate “*wali songo* (nine saints),” and such saint veneration (as well as Sufism) has been the basis of Indonesian Islam. The idea of “*Islam Nusantara*,” which claims a unique and independent understanding of Islam, is harmonious with the notion of “*Moderasi Beragama*.”

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly supports the policy of “*Moderasi Beragama*.” A good example is that it promoted the “Convey Indonesia Program” through cooperation with Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta. The main aim of this program is also the promotion of moderate Islam in order to oppose the escalation of “*Islam Radikal* (radical Islam).” “*Islam Radikal*” is equal with the aforementioned “*Islam Ekstreme* (Extreme Islam)” and these terms are used to point to so-called Islamic fundamentalism. The main characteristic of this project is to promote moderate Islam through an education program for youngsters, who often might be inclined to join movements that reinforce beliefs in Islamic fundamentalism that tend to be espoused by teachers in the schools. Sufism is one of the principal columns of this program.

Let us move on to the topic of Sufism itself in contemporary Indonesia. We can find many lectures, talks, essays, and articles on Sufism on the internet. The following are some examples:

Terrorism begins from the anger... This is inner illness which we must avoid. Sufism is an oasis to the modern mankind who are trapped in hedonism, consumerism, materialism, and radicalism.⁴

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ KH Ali M. Abdillah, “Tasawuf, Oase Spiritualitas di Zaman Modern (Sufism, Spiritual Oases in the Modern Era),” <<https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/82776/tasawuf-oase-spiritualitas-di-zaman-modern>> (browsed on 26 October, 2020.)

The illness of terrorism begins from *fiqh*-oriented understanding of Islam. Such an understanding of those with ‘only *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence)’ easily makes it radical because *fiqh* is [only] in black-and-white. Therefore, a way to remove somebody from the origin of extremism is the well-balanced understanding of Islamic jurisprudence with Sufism and ‘*tarekat* (Sufi orders).’ If one based himself on the understanding of Sufism, he will feel the freshness and the inner (spirituality).⁵

From the second citation, we can easily understand that they propose the Indonesian understanding of Islam based on both Sufism (and Sufi orders) and Islamic jurisprudence, contrary to the Saudi understanding of Islam which is focused on Islamic jurisprudence. This proposal overlaps with the aforementioned proposal of “*Islam Nusantara*.”⁶

Conclusion

I mentioned the term *rahma* which means mercy or affection at the beginning of this article. This is the key term to understand Allah. This is used as the antonym of *ghadab* which means anger. The former endorses Sufism and the latter Islamic jurisprudence, both of which are the two cores of Islam. Modern and contemporary Islamic society emphasized the latter, while the former seems to be lack a similar level of following or legitimacy. Islamic jurisprudence is based on the strict distinction between good and evil. In the pre-modern Islamic world, the “Protection (*Dhimma*) system,” which can be understood as coexistence with discrimination, worked out. On the contrary, I believe if we have something to learn from coexistence in the modern and contemporary Islamic world, we can draw wisdom from Sufism.

Before closing this article, I would like to mention the concept of “Islam of Love (*Islam Cinta*).” Haidar Bagir (1957–), an Islamic thinker and publisher in Indonesia, proposed this concept. He is conducting the educational and publishing program called “‘Islam of Love’ Movement (*Gerakan Islam Cinta*).” His “Islam of Cinta” means the aforementioned understanding of Islam based on the notion of *rahma* (mercy). This understanding is based on Sufism. Sufism is raised as a counterpart to Islamic jurisprudence, which is related to the notion of *ghadab* (anger). When he explains the concept of “Islam of Love,” Bagir sometimes interchanges the expression with the expression of *kasih saying*. *Kasih* means cherish and caress, and *sayang* means lament with those who suffer in mind and body.

In the contemporary Islamic world, we can find tendencies to make much of mercy and compassion; not to beat our enemies but embrace them. I believe there will be an ideal coexistence of such tendencies in the future based on Islamic wisdom.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ Here we should pay our attention to the fact that they do not seem to promote this idea to the general Islamic world but limit themselves within Indonesia. This is why we cannot conclude that this proposal has strong influence in the Islamic world at the moment.