

Christianity and Militancy in Eastern Indonesia: Revisiting the Maluku Violence

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During the Maluku interreligious violence from 1999 to 2002, both Islam and Christianity contributed to the initiation and intensification of the collective conflict. This article examines the role of religion, especially Christianity, and discusses how Christian identities, teachings, doctrines, symbols, discourses, organizations, and networks became some of the contributing factors in the early phases of the Maluku mayhem. It also examines the complex roles played by Moluccan Christian actors, especially the religious militias, in initiating and intensifying the strife, highlighting how Ambonese militant religious leaders framed the violence, recruited, and mobilized the masses in the combat zone, and how the local ordinary Christian fighters portrayed the violence and transformed their everyday experience in the warfare.

Keywords: religion, violence, militancy, Christianity, Ambon, Maluku, Indonesia

Introduction

This article discusses the destructive contributions of religious identities, discourses, doctrines, teachings, symbols, actors, organizations, and networks, especially within Christianity, in the intensification of communal violence in the Moluccas, particularly in the city of Ambon and the province of Maluku more generally. I have analyzed elsewhere (Sumanto 2015) the damaging roles of Islam and Moluccan Muslim jihadists in the exacerbation of collective violence, so I will not repeat it here. What is striking in the literature on the Maluku conflict is that some scholars tend to emphasize, if not overemphasize, the central role of the Laskar Jihad, a Java-based Islamist paramilitary group, in intensifying the violence, while neglecting the contribution of Ambonese or Moluccan jihadist groups, and to a greater degree Ambonese/Moluccan Christian ones. Some scholars (e.g. Sidel 2006) even tend to portray Christians as victims and Muslims as perpetrators of the havoc. This article will thus complement the existing otherwise fine literature on the Maluku conflict.

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It is imperative, however, to note that even though this article focuses on the roles of Christians and Christianity in the fighting, this does not mean that all Christian communities in Maluku were engaged in the battlefield and in the opposition against Muslim groups. As I wrote elsewhere (Sumanto 2013; 2014), there were a number of Christian-Muslim peace groups such as the Peace Provocateurs, the Concerned Women Movement, the Young Ambassadors for Peace, the Baku Bae Movement, the Team 20 Wayame, the Titian Peace Institute, the Maluku Interfaith Center, to name but a few. While some groups were no longer active after the end of the collective conflict, others are still working on peace-related activities, establishing intergroup trust, rebuilding communal ties, healing traumatized war victims, and so forth. There are also numerous individuals—religious leaders, academics, activists, journalists, village chiefs, conflict resolution practitioners, and the like—who have been working tirelessly for peaceful coexistence and interreligious conciliation since the beginning of the violence in 1999.

As for the role of the church, particularly the Moluccan Protestant Church, the region's largest Christian congregation, this also varies from place to place and from era to era, depending on who ran the Protestant Synod and Catholic Diocese, and on local pastors, church officials, and local Christian communities. Whereas in some areas of the "hot spots" (such as Rumahtiga, Poka, Paso, and some places in Ambon city such as Kudamati and Mardika), the Church directly led the violence, it was in the opposing camp in other places. While some Christian elites forced the Synod to back and provide financial and institutional resources for warfare and Christian militias groups, others (such as the former chairman of GPM Synod, Rev. I.J. W. Hendriks and his successor Rev. Dr. John Ruhulessin) defended the Church and Christianity as a source of peace and reconciliation. Similarly while some pastors and church elites established a group of Christian warriors (see below), others created a group of peacemakers.

In addition, although this article focuses on the role of religion, nevertheless I do not argue that religion in itself is the sole source of violence. Certainly religion does not cause communal violence. Just as "guns do not kill people," religion does not slaughter human beings. However, religion provides teachings, doctrines, rituals, symbols, metaphors, and discourses that can be easily used, misused, or manipulated by those (such as actors of violence, agents or "managers" of conflict, and interest groups) with material or immaterial interests. This is precisely what happened in Maluku where radical Christians (and militant Muslims)—both elites and lay people—utilized, translated, and transformed religious symbols, doctrines, and discourses into Moluccan social settings, not only to awaken a spirit of fighting or justify their violent acts, but also to protect and safeguard their lives.

Throughout the region's communal violence, particularly from 1999 to 2002, factors

such as religious sentiment, material interest, and political motives interacted with one another, magnifying and altering the influence each would have had in isolation. Take away one factor, such as religious tension, economic inequality, or political competition, the violence would not have occurred. This is to say that although religion did matter during the outburst of violence in Maluku—and this article will explain how—it is too simplistic to reduce the complexity of the riots to just a matter of religion, without investigating the political economy of Christians and Muslims in the broad and varied social field of Maluku.

Bruce Lincoln (2006, 5–7) divides religion into four domains of varying significance as follows: (1) “a discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status . . .”; (2) “a set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by religious discourse to which these practices are connected . . .”; (3) “a community whose members construct their identities with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices . . .”; and (4) “an institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.”

Building on Lincoln’s model of religion, this article understands “religion” not only in terms of religious doctrines, teachings, and symbols, but also religious agents (actors, adherents, communities, and organizations) who produce and reproduce religious practices, knowledge, and cultures. This is to say that religion is not simply about belief, doctrine, norm, or even ideology. It is also about the social capital that is social networks created by religious actors, namely, in Appleby’s (2000, 9) phrase, “people who have been formed by a religious community and who are acting with the intent to uphold, extend, or defend its values and precepts.”

Since the nature of the Maluku conflict shifts from time to time, this article concentrates on the early periods of the violence, especially from 1999–2002, where religious identities played a big role. This does not suggest that during this period, all Christian fighters (or Muslim jihadists) engaged in the battlefield across the archipelago were motivated purely by religious reasons. There were undoubtedly various motives, both secular and religious. Nonetheless, the contribution of religion in the Maluku conflict settings was stronger and more apparent during this period than after 2002.

After the signing of the Peace Accord in 2002, religious identities were in general no longer a vital ingredient for local religious militants. Some ex-combatants told me that they stopped attacking other religious groups once the security forces and political leaders and elite members of society intervened intensively and started to manipulate

local discord and interreligious rivalry for their own political and economic interests. While some members of militia groups—both radical Muslims and Christians—continued to attack their religious rivals for revenge and other “secular” motives, others ceased to fight once they realized that their sacred, passionate struggle, as they claimed, to defend Christianity or Islam, were being abused and “hijacked” by local and national political elites for their own agenda.

As stated earlier, the battle between religious-cultural priorities was evident from the early stages of the sectarian strife from 1999 to 2002 (Goss 2004; Pieris 2004). During this era, Moluccan Muslim and Christian social actors—war radicals and peace activists alike—correlated local social events to authoritative texts by engaging in theological discourse, commentary, and exegesis. Furthermore the radical groups from both Christianity and Islam selected particular religious ideas, discourses, and texts to provide a theological basis and religious legitimacy for their vision of the “sacredness” of the Maluku war. More specifically, Maluku’s militant anti-Muslim Christians tried to justify their violent acts by quoting verses from the Old Testament narrating the glorious wars of the Israelites and their commanders, such as Saul, David, and Solomon, as well as by referring to particular events within Christian history that sustain the just war tradition.

Thus for Moluccan militant Christians, authoritative texts are not limited to the Bible or Gospel and Christian teachings, but also include historical narratives of Christian-Muslim antagonism such as the Crusades, and Christian-Muslim rivalry during the colonial period in the Moluccas. It is worth mentioning that, as historian of Maluku Richard Chauvel (1980; 1990) has rightly noted, Christian-Muslim opposition has taken place since the European colonials landed in the Moluccas (in Maluku and North Maluku provinces), as a result of unfair political, economic, and religious colonial policy towards local religious communities.

During the Portuguese and particularly the Dutch colonial era, most Moluccan Christians became the colonials’ “golden boys.” They enjoyed some privileges while most Moluccan Muslims suffered from discriminatory colonial policy. As such, Ambonese/Moluccan Christians were seen as “Dutch stooges,” with the exception of anti-Dutch heroes such as Martha Christina Tiahahu (1800–18) and Thomas Matulesy (known as Pattimura, 1783–1817). On the other hand, during the brief period of the Japanese occupation in the early 1940s, most Muslims in the archipelago tended to see the Japanese as the “helping gods” (*dewa penolong*) come to rescue the Muslim communities from the Dutch. It was thus natural that this should arouse jealousy and abhorrence on the part of local Christians, leading to tensions and conflict. Indeed, the Japanese established Islamic jihadist groups in the islands of Ambon, Seram, and Lease, and mobilized Moluc-

can Muslims to fight against what they called “un-Islamic allies” led by the Dutch and Australia (Chauvel 1980; 1990).

A Brief Overview of the Maluku Conflict

Just months after President Suharto’s resignation in May 1998, Indonesia underwent a series of sectarian conflicts, ethno-religious violence, and communal riots across the archipelago. Of all collective conflicts that erupted in post-Suharto Indonesia, the Maluku conflict that began in January 1999 and lasted for more than three years, was the most disastrous for the province, causing thousands of deaths and injuring thousands, with about a third or half of the population displaced and countless properties burnt down (Bohm 2005; ICG 2000a; 2000b; 2001; 2002). The fights between Christians and Muslims in the province of Maluku, especially in Ambon city, as well as in North Maluku, made this region the theater of one of the most shocking conflicts in the modern history of Indonesia.

The tragic saga of Christian-Muslim violence began with a minor incident on January 19, 1999, between an Ambonese Christian public transport driver and a Muslim passenger of Bugis (South Sulawesi) origin in Batumerah in the heart of Ambon city, the capital and hub of Maluku province. Once called the Queen of the East, Ambon City was a bustling, prosperous regional hub serving countless picturesque islands. Unlike previous fighting, which had been quickly resolved by local community leaders, this quarrel soon escalated throughout Ambon and other areas of Maluku province (Seram, Haruku, Saparua, Buru, Kei, Tual, Banda, and so forth) and North Maluku (Ternate, Tidore, Tobelo, Halmahera, among others), with large sections of the population drawn into a continuous stream of rioting. Less than three months after the “Ambon tragedy,” more violence broke out in Tual in Maluku on March 31, 1999. This fell three days after the Muslim Idul Adha festival and two days before the Christian Good Friday. This Christian-Muslim fighting in a remote region of Maluku left hundreds dead and tens of thousands displaced from their homes. Lesser incidents erupted in many other villages around the far-flung regency of Maluku (see, for example, van Klinken 2001; 2007; Bohm 2005; Bertrand 2002; 2004; Wilson 2008).

Collective violence between the majority Muslims (about 88 percent of a roughly 240 million population) and minority Christians (about 8 percent) has been rare in post-colonial Indonesia. When it did happen, it was usually an outbreak of anger against Chinese shopkeepers, who were dubbed Christians although not all Chinese in Indonesia are Christian, such as the anti-Chinese riots in Pekalongan and Surakarta (Central Java),

Bekasi (West Java), and Jakarta in 1998 (Sidel 2006). At the end of the New Order, however, the country witnessed an increasing number of Christian-Muslim tensions and disturbances.¹⁾ The Maluku province, where the population is almost equally split between Muslims and Christians, also saw such conflicts. Christian-Muslim communal violence (not “state violence” against Christians or Muslims before, during, and after colonial times) had been rare in this region until the fall of Suharto’s regime.

It should be noted, however, that violent conflict in Maluku went through several phases, with varying natures or root causes, agents involved in the fighting, and motivations behind the individual actors who participated directly or indirectly in the violence. In other words, the dynamics behind the Maluku violence was ever-shifting, and so was the role of religion at different phases. When the violence erupted on January 19, 1999, at stake were ethnic sentiments and migration issues. Some elite members of society tried to wave the flag of “ethnic chauvinism” and mobilize ethnic groups to oppose each other. Posters, pamphlets, and writings about the hazard of “migrant groups,” especially those from Buton, Bugis, and Makassar in Sulawesi Island, for the continuity and development of the “native” (Moluccan) economies were scattered in public places in Ambon city. At the start of the conflict, religion seemed unpopular and had not emerged on the scene.

In brief, in the earliest chapter of the violence, issues at stake were natives (Ambonese/Moluccan) called “*anak negeri*” (“sons of the soil”) versus migrants (particularly those from Sulawesi but also those from Java) dubbed “*anak dagang*” (“sons of trade”). However, since manipulating ethnic identity did not seem to attract the masses, the “managers of conflict” turned to religious issues to initiate and exacerbate intergroup violence, which worked very well. It is this stage—roughly between 1999 and 2002—that is the focus of my article. During this period, religion became a crucial factor of violence and an important source of mobilization. Indeed, it was religion that aggravated the conflict. In other words, the violence would not have taken the form it did without the role of religion—for both Islam and Christianity.

The next phase of violence in Maluku was dominated by issues of separatism (waged by members of the Moluccan Sovereignty Front headed by Alexander Manuputty) and terrorism (supported by groups linked to Laskar Mujahidin and Jamaah Islamiyah), which is beyond the focus of this article. The most recent communal riots in Maluku that broke

1) Examples of Christian-Muslim tensions during and after the fall of the New Order are: (1) the destruction of churches on October 10, 1996, in Situbondo, East Java; (2) the fight between Protestants and Muslims in Ketapang, Central Jakarta on November 22, 1998, resulting in 14 persons killed and 27 Christian buildings damaged; and (3) anti-Muslim riots that destroyed at least 15 mosques in mostly Christian Kupang in East Indonesia on November 30, 1998 (see, e.g., Sidel 2006).

out in 2010 and 2011 were also complex. In some areas in the province, the riots took place among Muslims from different clans (such as in Pulauw of Haruku Island), while in other regions (such as in Pattimura University in Rumahtiga and some places in Ambon city), the riots between Christians and Muslims were mainly driven by non-religious factors. Still, in some areas (e.g. Central Maluku), it was “regional fanaticism” that motivated the masses. Disputes over borders are also common in today’s Maluku. In short, unlike the previous conflicts, religion is no longer a determining variable for those involved in the riots in Maluku nowadays.

Scholarship on the Maluku Violence

Prior to discussing the role of religion and Christianity in the Maluku turmoil, it is useful to briefly review existing literature on the Maluku conflict in order to locate this article’s theoretical position. Previous works on the Maluku carnage have focused mainly on the socio-historical roots of the violence, highlighting how and why previously relatively peaceful religious communities descended into large-scale violent conflict. Scholars’ opinions vary regarding the root causes of the Maluku conflict, and how local small-scale fighting escalated to a large-scale warfare. Brauchler (2003) elaborates on the importance of cyberspace, particularly the Internet, which was used by “conflict actors” to spread grievances, provocations, and complaints of victimization by the war, which aroused anger and tension among the various warring groups. Aditjondro (2001) underscores the special role of *preman* (street hoodlums), provocateurs, and security forces, whom he identifies as the main actors of the violence. Turner (2006) stresses issues of nationalism and ethnic identities, while Spyer (2002) underlines the role of imagination, the media, and agency in the escalation of the conflict.

Bertrand (2002; 2004) analyzes conditions that augment the potential for violence to erupt. He highlights three major factors: (1) uncertainty over a secular definition of the nation that leaves open the question of an Islamic state; (2) patrimonial features of the New Order authoritarian regime; and (3) a rapid democratic transition after the downfall of Suharto. Unlike Bertrand, who focuses on a macro analysis of historical features of political patterns and national policies of the New Order, van Klinken (2001; 2007) devotes more attention to micro dynamics and conditions. He maintains that the violence was an outcome of struggles among Maluku’s state and non-state elite actors at provincial, municipal, and district levels, over scarce local resources, driven by the “critical junctures” of political transition and the shortcomings of local socio-political structural conditions such as rapid urbanization, high dependence on the state sector, and the speed

of de-agrarianization.

To conclude, scholars of the Maluku conflict have generally emphasized politico-economic dimensions of the violence as well as the central role of state institutions, government, and Suharto's cronies, including the military, in stirring up the violence aimed at destabilizing the nation and regaining political power. Some scholars have indeed blamed the paroxysm of violence on Suharto's New Order regime (1996–98) and the security forces, especially the police and the army, and have left the matter there²⁾ (see, for example, Aditjondro 2001; Tomagola 2000; Bertrand 2002; 2004; Sidel 2006; Muhammad 2011). Although Adam (2009; 2010) emphasized the role of "the masses" in maintaining the continuity of the riots, he nonetheless argues that the driving forces for the conflict were political-economic issues such as land access and forced migration.

As we can see, analysis emphasizing the role of religion in the Maluku violence is clearly missing from existing scholarship. If it does exist, it usually focuses on the role of Islam and non-Maluku Muslim paramilitary groups—not Christianity and Christian warriors. There have indeed been research on the role of religion in communal violence in regions outside the Maluku province conducted by scholars such as Chris Wilson (2008) and Christopher Duncan (2013) for North Maluku, and Dave McRae (2013) for Poso, Sulawesi. Although Schulze (2002) and Sidel (2006) recognize the contribution of religion in generating conflict in Maluku, they tend to see it as an instrument for political and economic ends and ignore other ways in which religion can influence people's social and political actions. Indeed some analysts and commentators argue that religion was simply a tool that Moluccan and non-Moluccan, military or civilian, political and religious elites instrumentalized to achieve economic and political aims.

In short, as Duncan (2013) has rightly pointed out, despite the significance that Christian fighters and Muslim militias placed on religion and religious identity in the fighting, observers—academics, researchers, policy-makers, journalists, NGO workers, political commentators, among others—quickly dismissed the religious framing of the violence. They argue, moreover, that what appears to be a religious war is upon closer analysis really motivated by material-based political interests, socio-economic reasons, and territorial grievances that were mobilized and manipulated by the greedy elites, external provocateurs, or "agents of riots." Last but not least, religious moderates—both Christian and Muslim elites—have also tended to reject the religious factor for the Maluku violence, noting that religion does not teach its followers to commit violence but

2) Compare their studies to Colombijn and Lindblad (2002). Although the contributors of this volume do not speak in one voice, they offer a more nuanced perspective on the violent conflicts, pointing out that the "cultures of violence" in Indonesia reach far back into the country's socio-political history.

instead preaches peace, love, and tolerance. Many argued that the violence was not about religion; rather it was a story of how “greed” manipulated “creed” for political and economic ends.

Religious Significance of the Conflict

Contrasting with claims made by the scholars and religious moderates mentioned above, the “grassroots people” of the Maluku province and Ambon city who took part in the violence and whom I interviewed, namely Christian warriors and Muslim jihadists, were not interested in issues of migration, political ambitions, the market, democratization, decentralization, and the like. While outside observers and religious moderates claim that creed was a camouflage for greed, the “foot soldiers,” the masses engaged in the warfare, declared that political and economic issues were actually just a mask for the true religious goals of the strife. Religion and religious identity were also primordial for Christian and Muslim fighters during the communal riots in North Maluku (Duncan 2013; Farsijana 2005).

This suggests that what the religious moderates think of or idealize as religion might differ from the conceptions of “religious radicals.” While moderates denounce radicalism as irreligious, un-Christian, or un-Islamic, the radicals believe that violence is part of a sacred mission and strongly rooted within their traditions, beliefs, doctrines, and teachings.

Against this backdrop, in a departure from previous analyses and studies that tend to place a singular emphasis on the political economy of the conflict, this article maintains that religious identities and discourses figured prominently in the framing and exacerbation of the Maluku strife. Although later on some local Maluku elites (members of the Moluccan Sovereignty Front and some Christian elites) and “foreign actors” (e.g. those linked to the Laskar Jihad, Laskar Mujahidin, KOMPAK, and other radical wings of Islamic groupings) tried to turn the initial conflict into separatism and terrorism, the Christian and Muslim masses engaged in the fighting still considered religion as a focal point for their involvement in the violence.

Although this article focuses solely on Christianity, this does not mean that Muslims who took part in the strife did not express religious vitality during the Maluku clash. Ex-Muslim jihadists of Ambon and other regions of Maluku whom I interviewed also articulated the same religious concerns and motivations as their Christian counterparts. The militant groups of both religions portrayed the wars as a sacred duty for adherents to defend their religion. The Muslim jihadists framed the fighting as *Perang Sabil* (a war

in the path of God) and therefore their engagement in the combat zones was considered *jihad fi sabilillah* (struggle in God's trail) to protect Islam from Christian invasion and missionary activities (see Sumanto 2012).

Similarly the Christian warriors regarded the Maluku conflict as a *Perang Salib* (the Crusades) intended to guard (1) Christianity from the Muslim *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) and forced conversion (*Islamisasi*), and (2) the Maluku territory, which they saw as a Christian land, linking it to the land of Canaan in the Biblical tradition. Over the course of the communal conflict, religious symbols, texts, teachings, and discourses were scattered throughout the island. The findings of a survey questionnaire I distributed to 100 ex-Christian fighters and Muslim jihadists, mostly under 30 years of age during the turmoil, on the islands of Ambon-Lease, also confirmed this portrayal, highlighting how religion had contributed to the escalation of the Maluku wars and how unearthly motivations became among the major contributing factors for actors involved in the violence.

The Maluku chaos, moreover, had involved non-state local actors (e.g. religious leaders, local Christian fighters, Ambonese Muslim jihadists, the masses, and civilian groupings) in initiating and exacerbating the mass violence.³ Throughout the communal conflict, Maluku's local actors were active agents and not passive victims, as commonly portrayed by political observers and social scientists.⁴ The Maluku case thus illustrates the appearance of not only "Muslim politics" (cf. Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Hefner 2005) but also Christian politics. During the communal violence, both Muslims and Christians displayed violent and antagonistic behavior. As in Muslim politics, Christian politics also involved competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions, formal and informal, that produce, reproduce, and sustain them. By focusing on Christianity, this article will balance previous studies that have tended to overemphasize the central role of the Muslim jihadists (e.g. Sidel 2006; Schulze 2002; Noorhaidi 2006) in initiating and intensifying the Maluku bloodshed.

3) This focus certainly differs from studies of the Maluku conflict, which stress the central role of Jakarta-based civilian and military elites, Suharto's cronies, "foreign provocateurs," or Java-based Laskar Jihad and other paramilitary groups, with a few notable exceptions such as the fine studies of Gerry van Klinken (2001; 2007) or those of Jeroen Adam (2009; 2010).

4) It is interesting to note that despite the fact that local actors, masses, and unions have participated actively in the post-Suharto collective conflicts, including the Maluku warfare, their role has been largely neglected in analyses and studies on the communal violence.

Christianity, Militancy, and Radicalism

To begin this section, let me quote a statement from Rev. John Sahalessy, one of the respected pastors of the Protestant Moluccan Church and one of the Christian delegates during the signing of the Malino Peace Agreement in Sulawesi. John Sahalessy was the initiator of the “Tim 20 of Wayame,” a group consisting of Christian and Muslim leaders in the village of Wayame on the island of Ambon, whose main objective was to establish peace and social stability in the region and to create mutual trust and understanding between the two religious communities. Wayame was one of the small areas in Ambon that was safe during the communal violence (Sumanto 2013; Pariela 2008). This group later inspired political elites in Jakarta, most notably the late President Abdurrahman Wahid and M. Jusuf Kalla, to initiate a peace pact for Maluku known as the Malino II Peace Accord.

In my interview with him, Rev. Sahalessy said:

All [Protestant] pastors on Moluccan Islands, directly or indirectly, were involved in the Maluku wars, except me. You can note this [statement]. Thus it is wrong if they declare in public that they were not involved in the fighting. Before going to war, the pastors brought their followers to the church for praying and blessing. They said: “God will accompany you.” This is a little example of how pastors were engaged in the fighting. Going to war [against Muslims] was an initiative of the local churches, from the pastors, and not from the Synod [i.e. the Moluccan Protestant Church Synod]. They convinced followers that the “Ambon War” was a “religious war” to defend God. In fact, God does not need our defense; God will defend us. They also believed that if Christians prayed faithfully and went to the battlefield, they would get victory. They went into the combat zone while singing the “Onward Christian Soldiers” song.⁵⁾

This statement by Sahalessy is a hard slap in the face for Christian apologists who have denied the engagement of Ambonese Christian leaders and institutions in the Maluku violence. It is also a strong critique of academics who have neglected the religious nature of the conflict. Sahalessy himself may not have believed that the Ambon conflict was a religious war, but his comment indicates that most Christian leaders and lay adherents of Christianity in Ambon and other areas of Maluku province were convinced that the war was religious and sacred. An ex-Christian fighter of Rumahtiga in Ambon city told me eagerly, “The role of religion during the Maluku wars was not only important but very important. Christians and Muslims fought and killed each other due to their religion being humiliated by other religious communities. Because of religion, Christians and Muslims in Ambon were involved in the wars for about five years

5) Interview with Rev. John Sahalessy, Ambon, August 14, 2010.

since 1999.”⁶⁾

Indeed, many Moluccan Christian fighters (and Muslim jihadists too) have considered the conflict as a sacred war and a means of purifying previous sins, misconduct, and bad deeds committed before the wars. PM, an ex-field commander of the Christian militia group revealed, “For me, the Ambon war was a sacred war so that whoever killed (Muslims) will be rewarded a place in paradise by God.”⁷⁾ PM also believed that the war was a medium for self-purification. For him, self-purification includes not only unworldly matters (e.g. repenting from sins) but also worldly matters such as changing from negative behavior to a positive one.

The findings of a survey I distributed to 50 ex-Ambonese Christian fighters also confirm Sahalessy’s comment. During my field research in Ambon and surrounding areas from 2010 to 2011, I administered a questionnaire to 100 former members of Moluccan/Ambonese militia groups: 50 ex-Christian fighters and 50 ex-Muslim jihadists. Christian respondents I surveyed were residents of Rumahtiga, Wailela (Ambon Island), Kudamati (Ambon city), Kariu, and Aboru (Haruku Island in the Central Maluku regency), all of which are the stronghold of Christians. I deliberately selected former combatants as my respondents partly because I wanted to hear from those directly engaged in the warfare. The questions were categorized into three main parts: (1) respondents’ educational, religious, political, and social backgrounds; (2) respondents’ motivations in getting involved in the wars and their perception of the Maluku carnage; and (3) respondents’ responses toward the future of Christian-Muslim relations in Maluku.

It is startling to discover that the majority (76 percent) of the respondents of the survey believed that the Ambon war was a religious war. As reflected in the survey findings, their primary motivations for engaging in the warfare were as follows: (1) to defend religion/Christianity and the Christian community (90.2 percent); (2) Jesus Christ had been humiliated (80.4 percent); (3) churches were destroyed (80.2 percent); (4) the Bible was burnt (70.5 percent); (5) Christian pastors/ministers had been murdered (64.7 percent); and (6) to guard Christian territory (82.4 percent). Moreover, about 98 percent of respondents rejected the war as an opportunity to gain new belongings and other Muslim properties. Interestingly, 94.1 percent of respondents admitted that

6) Interview with ML in Ambon, September 2, 2010. Since there was a plurality of actors and motives during the conflict, it is hard to arrive at a generalization whether religious identity had played a central role in the conflict or did it only provide the symbolism and ideological conviction for those involved in the campaign to achieve more worldly goals. It is vital to recognize that just as there were some who were motivated by “worldly orientations” in their involvement in the conflict (cf. Adam 2009; 2010), there were also others who were driven by “religious passion” and “unworldly goals” in their engagement.

7) Interview with PM, Ambon, August 10, 2010.

prior to leaving for the battlefields, they had been “blessed” by local pastors or ministers, 86.3 percent sang the “Christ Soldier” song during the riots, and 80.4 percent brought along “Christian symbols” including a small Bible in their pockets, the crucifix, and the “Jewish flag” (Star of David) as an amulet on the battleground. It should be noted that for most Moluccan Christians, Jewish/Israelite identity is equivalent to Christian identity, thus it should not be surprising if they adopted Jewish symbols during the war.

My conversations and interviews with most ordinary ex-Christian fighters also confirm the survey findings, namely, that most of them portrayed the Maluku mayhem as a holy war. Indeed, throughout the communal conflict, they represented themselves as Abel while Muslims were portrayed as Cain. Moreover, even if Sahalessy’s remark that all Protestant leaders except him were involved in the conflict were an exaggeration—since there were in fact some Christian religious leaders who advocated peace from the outbreak of the violence—it is hard to deny the fact that most Protestant ministers were directly or indirectly involved in the warfare.

Hartford Seminary-trained Ambonese Protestant reverend and activist, Jacky Manuputty, whom I interviewed, also recognized the participation of Ambonese Christian leaders, either in the form of administering blessings and motivating combatants before they left for the battlefield, or by directly participating in the fighting. Jacky Manuputty admitted that, prior to his involvement in the peace and reconciliation process with the Baku Bae Movement and later with the interfaith group called “Peace Provocateurs,” he participated in the war as Christian communities were being attacked and their properties devastated. He even added, “Today’s Ambonese Protestant pastors might be ashamed to recognize their involvement in the previous wars. In fact, there were no Christian warriors who moved forward to the battleground without prayers and blessing from the priests and Church ministries. Indeed, they used to consider the Ambon conflict as a sacred war. The attacks of the Gambus Market in the first stage of conflict, for instance, were released with worship rituals in the Maranatha Church led by Rev. No Pattinaya. During the conflict, whoever acted as Moses would be respected by the Christians. They preferred to choose Moses as an ideal figure to Jesus.”⁸⁾

Indeed, there is no doubt that since the beginning of the conflict, Christian leaders and institutions were directly or indirectly involved in the warfare. One of the main Ambonese Protestant centers was in the fiercely religious Kudamati suburb, on a hill a few kilometers west of the Maranatha Church. Hundreds of Christian fighters were stationed at the home of Agus Wattimena, former civil servant, devout church activist,

8) Online chats with Rev. Jacky Manuputty, September 1, 2010.

and supporter of a secular nationalist political party PDIP (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan). They could be instantly deployed to any trouble spot in Ambon and to neighborhoods where local fighters risked being overwhelmed. In addition to these main centers, the Protestants also built *posko* (centers for communication and gathering) at the village level under the auspices of local churches, *jemaat* (the smallest unit of Protestant congregation), *majelis gereja* (church ministries), and *klasis* (the unit of Protestant churches at the district level).

The Bankom (Bantuan Komunikasi, Communication Assistance), an Ambonese Protestant communication office at the Maranatha Church, and the *posko* at Kudamati were created to gather information about the conflict, identify victims of the wars, collect funds, and mobilize Christian fighters, especially youths and men. Kirsten Schulze (2002) estimates that over the three years of mass violence from 1999 to 2002, there existed about 25 Christian militia groups with roughly 100 to 200 members operating all over the island of Ambon. About 60 percent of these militia fighters were youths between 12 and 25 years old; a few were women. The young Christian fighters were referred to as Agas, a small mosquito with a nasty bite. Agas also stands for *Anak Gereja Allah Sayang* (Child Church God Love).⁹⁾ Explicit in its name is the notion that the formation of Agas was regarded as a blessing from God. Agas was vital during the collective conflict and militia members were very often in the frontline during the attacks. Ronald Regang, an ex-Agas militia member who had fought since he was 10 years old, related at the Unicef Asia-Pacific meeting held in Yogyakarta, his brutal experiences of killing people (Muslims) and destroying their places of worship (mosques) and houses. When asked by a Unicef staff member why he committed violence and murdered Muslims, Regang replied, "Because that was a holy war, and I had already submitted myself to Jesus of the Christ."¹⁰⁾

Boy warriors were an integral part of the Christian military force in Ambon. The Agas formed disciplined fighting units that were headed by adults and they were given specific assignments in battle. Herry Penturi, a 16-year-old Christian, was known as a small commander in the Agas due to his regular involvement in the fighting. Herry and his family were affiliated with the Bethabara Church community in Ambon. Although he was only 16, Herry was clever enough to make and detonate bombs. He claimed that his

9) Muslims also used young fighters or child militias known as *linggis* ("crowbar") because in every riot, these child soldiers would use a crowbar to uproot and destroy targeted buildings—houses, shops, churches, etc.—before plundering and burning them.

10) Online chats with Rev. Jacky Manuputty, September 5, 2010. Jacky later adopted Ronald Regang and transformed him into a peace-maker and a peace ambassador for Maluku in international forums.

participation in the battle was to save the Christian community. His mother, Maria Penturi, always allowed him to leave for the battlefield because she believed that God had a plan for him. She explained, “If I do not permit him to go to the battlefield, then I am opposing God’s plan.” It is obvious that for Maria Penturi, God had given permission to commit acts of violence against Muslims.

In his study on Ambon’s child militias (*pasukan cilik*), both Christians and Muslims, Rizard Jemmy Talakua (2008) argues that religion was the strongest reason and motive for their involvement in the warfare. An ex-Agas member from Kudamati said, “Since the first days of the communal riots, my friends and I were involved in the combat zone to defend Christian communities, help Christian brethren, in the name of Jesus” (*ibid.*, 37). Agas members, aged between 8 and 16 years old, mostly came from the crowded troubled areas of Kudamati, Batugantung, and Benteng. Talakua discussed not only Christian child soldiers but also Muslim child militias group called Linggis (“crowbar”). Interestingly, their engagement in the battlefield was also driven by “religious passion.” An ex-Linggis member from Air Kuning in Ambon town said, “We [Muslim child militias] were involved in the violence because of *ukhuwah Islamiah* [Muslim brotherhood], to aid and protect Muslim communities from Christian infidel attackers. We were not afraid of death since we defended God’s religion” (*ibid.*, 37–38).

In addition to Agas, there were two famous Christian fighter groups linked to the Moluccan Protestant Church, based in Kudamati in the uplands of Ambon city. These were (1) the Kudaputih (“white horse”) under the leadership of Agus Wattimena, a member of the Rehoboth Church, who was depicted by *The Economist* (2001) as “a latter-day Jesus with his wiry frame and long flowing locks” and (2) the Coker, under the direction of Berty Loupatty (a member of the Emanuel Church at OSM in Ambon town). Agus Wattimena was a renowned Ambonese war commander who claimed to be the leader of approximately 20,000 Christian fighters across the Moluccas. Although the numbers could be exaggerated, he nevertheless played a primary role during the war. In an interview with *The Age*, Agus Wattimena stated, “Ambonese are traditionally strong fighters. If we are attacked, and the enemy is not strong, we counterattack. This is a real war. We have to protect ourselves” (cited in Murdoch 2000, 1). After the death of Agus Wattimena on March 22, 2001, the Kudaputih came under the headship of Emang Nikijuluw, Femmy Souissa, and Melkianus Tuhumury, in addition to Hendrik Wattimena, the son of Agus Wattimena.

The Coker originally stood for *cowok keren* (the handsome boys), a name given by its leader Berty Loupatty, a leader among Jakarta-based Ambonese street hoodlums. This group existed even before the communal conflict erupted. At first, the group consisted of dozens of unemployed youths, but they were soon joined by many Ambonese

Christian young men. Coker members stood out during the conflict due to their fighting capacity and their bravery in the face of Muslim fighters. An Ambonese Protestant priest described the Coker as “a group of Christian fighters who were willing to die (*pasukan berani mati*) in the battlefield against Muslim jihadists and rioters, and were always in the forefront in each act of violence.”¹¹⁾ The Coker gained fame as the vanguard of Christian communities and territories. Headquartered in Kudamati, members of the Coker fought in many areas in Ambon and surrounding areas where Christian-Muslim communal violence took place. My Christian informants told me that whenever and wherever Christians needed help to fend off attacks from Muslim jihadists, the Coker would send its fighters. For this reason, Ambonese Muslims called the *Coker cowok Kristen* (the Christian boys) and not *cowok keren* (the handsome ones).

It is imperative to note that the Kudamati Christian militia groups were also supported by local churches (such as Gereja Sinar, Gereja Paulus, Gereja Rehoboth, Gereja Christy, and Gereja Natalia), *jemaat* (the smallest unit of Protestant group), and *klasis*, the Protestant congregation of Ambon city. Protestant ministers who were in charge at Kudamati during the conflict included Rev. Simon Maskikit, Rev. O.J. Tetelepta, Rev. N. Pattinaja, and Rev. N. Latuihamallo. During the period of conflict, their jobs included first, leading ritual ceremonies for the Christian militias before they left for the combat zone and second, delivering religious sermons and motivating the militias by quoting verses from the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, that justified their actions. Verses from the Old Testament about David’s struggle against Goliath were applied, in particular, to provide a theological explanation of the war. Christian militias associated themselves with David as a symbol of truth and goodness, while Muslims were portrayed as Goliath, symbolizing wickedness and immorality.

The third role of the Protestant ministers during the conflict was blessing the weapons to be used in the wars. These included *tombak* (spear), *parang* (blade), *panah* (arrow), *senapan* (guns), *senjata rakitan* (homemade guns), *peluru* (bullets), *granat* (grenades), and *bom ikan* (dynamite). The ammunition was placed in a particular spot or altar in a church, and the ministers would anoint it by using blessed water. After anointing the weapons, the church ministers, wearing clerical suites, prayed to God and asked Him to protect “His sons” in the battlefield and give them triumph over “God’s enemies,” that is, Muslim jihadists. After the ritual ceremonies were over, the Christian warriors then took the weapons and left for the combat zone.

Besides these groups, each Christian village across Moluccan Islands also had the Laskar Kristus (“Army of Christ”) or Laskar Kristen (Christian militias), which were

11) Interview with AL, Ambon, April 26, 2010.

responsible for protecting their regions and attacking Muslim rioters.¹²⁾ The Laskar Kristus, which was primarily if not entirely Protestant, was mainly coordinated by local churches and the *klasis* (the Protestant Church unit at the district level). Officially and institutionally, *sinode* (a Protestant congregation at the provincial level named the Protestant Moluccan Church Synod or the GPM Synod for short) did not give a direct command to Christian communities to take part in the warfare, but the Synod did not prohibit Ambonese Christians from engaging in the wars either. The Synod was unable to ban Christian fighters since many pastors, ministries, and church officials were also involved in the fighting.¹³⁾

The Laskar Kristus or Laskar Kristen existed before the arrival of the Laskar Jihad in May 2000. University of Indonesia sociologist Thamrin Amal Tomagola, a native of North Maluku, even argued that the Laskar Kristus existed before the January 19, 1999 incident. But the group gained its fame after the arrival of Java-based Islamist paramilitary groups. The village-based Christian fighter groups were also called *akar rumput* (the grassroots). It is unclear who named the Christian militias Laskar Kristus, but it indicates that the Maluku conflict was seen as a holy war. The above Christian fighter groups were formed at the beginning of the conflict and gained momentum with the destruction of Ambon's old Silo church by Muslims.

On November 22, 2001, a Jakarta-based national newspaper *Tabloid Adil* reported on the Laskar Kristus from the Ambon-based Petra Church. After witnessing a series of bloody religious communal conflicts in Ambon, the Petra Church organized the Maluku Prayer Movement (*Gerakan Maluku Berdoa* or GMB) as part of the Church community's response to guarantee the safety of people in Maluku. On Friday, November 9, 2001, religious services of GMB included the baptizing of a Laskar Kristus member. The minister delivered a sermon entitled "To Become a Model of Faith, You Should Be Loyal Unto Death" (*Menjadi Pahlawan Iman, Hendaklah Engkau Setia Sampai Mati*). One of the self-acknowledged members of the Laskar Kristus warriors was 15-year-old Roy Pontoh (see Sukidi 2003). When he died in the village of Hila in Leihitu Peninsula, Ambon Island on January 20, 1999, just a day after the initial outbreak in Ambon City, his last statement was "I am Laskar Kristus." It is believed that Pontoh's death made him a martyr of Christ. On August 13, 2000, clergyman Timotius Arifin delivered a similar

12) Information on the Laskar Kristus can be found, for instance, in the Presidential Decree (*Keputusan Presiden* No. 38/2002) in the section *Pembentukan Tim Penyelidik Independen Nasional untuk Konflik Maluku* (Establishment of the National Independent Investigation Team for the Maluku Conflict). Headed by I Wayan Karya, the team was mandated to investigate (1) the incident of January 19, 1999, (2) Republik Maluku Selatan (RMS), the South Moluccan Republic, (3) the Christian RMS, (4) Laskar Jihad, (5) Laskar Kristus, and (6) coercive religious conversion and human rights violations.

13) Online chats with Rev. Jacky Manuputty, September 1, 2010.

story at the church's founding anniversary, recounting how a martyr of Christ in Ambon also proclaimed: "*Beta Laskar Kristus* (I am Laskar Kristus)!"

However, it should be noted that, unlike the Laskar Jihad, the Laskar Kristus did not receive special training. In the words of Ongky Siahaya, a grassroots field commander in the region of Talake, near UKIM (Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku, the Protestant Church's main university in Ambon city), "we prayed first and then there were only two options—kill or to be killed."¹⁴ Whereas Muslims had access to modern guns from Pindad (Perusahaan Industri Angkatan Darat, the army's industrial arm), as well as support from Java-based holy war militias, particularly the Laskar Jihad, and some elements in TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, the Indonesian military forces) (Schulze 2002, 63), the Christian militias mainly used traditional arms such as knives, machetes, poisoned arrows, homemade guns, and a few automatic weapons, either acquired from deserted police stations or smuggled in from Kupang, Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). Some Ambonese Christians were experts in the making of guns. They included Thom Pelmelay, who was widely known as the "professor" due to his expertise in making bombs. The bombs were then distributed to Christian fighters across Ambon and Maluku. In general, however, Ambonese Christians were painfully aware that they were technologically disadvantaged, with limited finances and difficulties in obtaining arms and ammunition. As a result, many Christian fighters were killed during the wars of 1999–2002.

Christian fighters did not receive financial support from the GPM Synod to purchase guns and ammunitions. As a result, Christian individuals voluntarily conducted fundraisings through Christian networks and communal ties, not only throughout Ambon and Maluku but also in Java. Some funds were collected through family ties of Ambonese Christians who had settled in the Netherlands since the time of KNIL (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army) in the 1950s, while other funds were distributed through FKKM (Forum Komunikasi Kristen Maluku, Forum for Communications of Moluccan Christians), chaired by Jan Nanere, the former rector of Pattimura University, and Yunus Tipka, a member of the regional parliament from PDKB (Partai Demokrasi Kasih Bangsa, a Protestant-affiliated political party) and his secretary.¹⁵ The grassroots (the Laskar Kristus) agenda, some ex-Christian fighters have claimed, was defending Christian faith, territories, and communities, and was never a voice for separatism as Muslims or the

14) Interview with Yongky Siahaya, Ambon, June 12, 2010.

15) Founded in 2000, FKKM was part of the networks of FKKJ (Forum Komunikasi Kristen Jakarta, a Jakarta-based Christian forum) and FKKS (Forum Komunikasi Kristen Surabaya, a Surabaya-based Christian forum led by Paul Tahalele), which had existed long before the Ambon conflict. The FKKM's goals, Yunus Tipka said, were (1) to help Christians who had become victims of the Maluku conflict by providing medical assistance or food supplies; (2) to help Christian fighters find guns and ammunitions; and (3) to link Moluccan Christians with non-Maluku Christian communities.

central government widely assumed.

Since Ambonese Christian warriors saw the Maluku conflict as a sacred war, performing religious songs was a feature of the battleground. On January 20, 1999, a large group of Christian warriors left the Rehoboth Church in Ambon City, repeatedly singing the following:

We don't want to go back (three times)
We had won with the Blood of Christ
We had won with His blood.

Furthermore, the Christian fighters—both the ordinary flock and church elites—moved forward while the church choir solemnly sang “*Maju Laskar Kristus*” (*Onward Christian Soldiers*) to the accompaniment of trumpets. The song was taken from the *Dua Sahabat Lama* No. 339, a book, written in Ambonese-Malay language, containing a collection of religious songs authored by C. Ch. J. Schreuder and I. J. M. Tupamahu. This book was translated into Bahasa Indonesia and had spread throughout Ambon and surrounding islands. Ambonese Christians, particularly the warriors, used this song as a march of war. During the conflict, the song was used to galvanize troops. A Christian woman in Waai in Ambon Island told me, “When we were attacked or engaged in the war, we, along with other Christian women, sang that song [*Onward, Christian Soldier*] while beating dustpans to awaken enthusiasm for fighting. By singing this song, we felt we were getting a ‘new spirit’ and courage in the face of enemies [Muslim jihadists]” (Patty 2006, 33).

Early one morning at around 4:30 a.m. in December 2000, a group of about 40 Christian young men from the neighborhood of Batumeja Dalam in Ambon city walked down Pattimura Street in town, brandishing long knives (*parang*) and spears, and singing the Indonesian version of *Onward, Christian Soldiers*. In front of them walked a young female, a then unemployed Protestant minister in the official black vestment, carrying a “Moses’ stick” that “she had found in the woods.” She claimed to have been inspired by a dream that she had. The procession walked up to the A. J. Patty Street, just inside the Muslim quarters, then marched down Ambon’s business center toward the Al-Fatah Mosque. The military had no choice but to shoot at them (Bohm 2005, 113). In addition to the song *Onward, Christian Soldiers*, slogans such as “I Love Jesus” (*Beta Cinta Yesus*) or “Jesus is Victorious” (*Yesus Raya*) were also used by the Christian warriors to boost the war mentality.

Protestant priests and church ministries played a central role during the communal conflict. They served not only as a channel to distribute information about the development of the violence received from other Christian centers to the local Christian com-

munities and fighters, but also led ritual ceremonies before the fighters went to the combat zone, blessed combatants, and conducted Sunday sermons to motivate the Laskar Kristus and Christians attending the church. Sermons (*khotbah Minggu*) delivered often revolved around the theme of Israel's struggle to occupy the Land of Canaan in the times of King David and Solomon, as stated in the Old Testament. Ambonese Christians depicted themselves as part of the tribes of Israel and portrayed the Land of Ambon as the Land of Canaan, whereas Muslims were represented as Goliath conquering and taking over Ambon, which they saw as belonging to their ancestors.

Verses in the Bible about the Israelites who entered the Land of Canaan and were ordered by God to drive out the Amalek (later known as the "Theology of Amalek") were used by some pastors and church leaders to justify the wars against the Muslims (e.g. Joshua 1, 1–10). This "religious duty" is set forth in the verse, "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17, 16). Thus, if any people seek to destroy us, declared some Christian leaders, we are commanded to do battle against them, and this battle of ours, on the basis of that verse, is an obligatory war. For Christian fighters, in the context of Maluku, the Muslims were considered as the destroyers of their land. Amalek, a descendent of Esau, was not only the ancestor of those who attacked Israel in the wilderness but also, by rabbinic reckoning based on I Samuel 15: 8 and Esther 3: I, the ancestor of Hamman in the Esther story. In Rabbinic literature, Amalek thus becomes a cipher for evil in the world, the arch enemy of Israel and, by implication, of God. Some Christian informants told me that certain priests justified going to war by citing the following verse from the Old Testament: "We are obliged to defend and preserve the life which God has given to us, and if there are people who want to destroy the life, we need to guard it, even through the wars."

Over the course of the conflict, local pastors, church ministries, and officials were responsible for choosing certain Biblical verses and religious texts for the Sunday sermons and other religious services, based on the socio-political context and adapting to developments. Generally pastors and church ministries selected popular Biblical verses in the Old Testament revolving around violence and the struggle of the Israelites against their enemies, from the Books of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Samuel (I, II), Kings (I, II), and Psalm. During the conflict, ordinary Protestants also recited these verses. Whenever they went to other places or to the battleground, they carried a small Bible in their pocket for self-protection, making it easier to recite selected verses and stoke the spirit of war (see Patty 2006).

Common verses in the Bible which the Christian fighters "ritualized" during the war included (1) tales of the Jews freed from the Egyptian nation (Exodus 1–19); (2) stories of war between the Jewish tribes and other peoples, and stories related to the rules of

war (e.g. Deuteronomy 3, 7–9, 11, and 20); (3) accounts of how the Israelites fought with other peoples before entering the Land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua (Joshua 1: 1–11); (4) Jewish narratives of fighting against the people of Moab, Amori, Midian, Edom, Amon, and Amalek under the leadership of Israeli Judges (Judges 1–15); and (5) accounts of Israeli tribes against the nation of the Philistines under the command of Israeli kings, especially Saul and David (e.g. I Sam 7; 17, 40–54; I Kings 18, 20–46).

Regardless which verses were cited by the pastors and church elites (*majelis jemaat*), one thing is clear: they used the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, to seek a theological foundation or to legitimize acts of violence or, in their terms, wars of “self-defense.” Many Ambonese Christians, as Rev. I. J. W. Hendriks has remarked, associated themselves with the suffering Israelites (the *Bangsa Israel Alkitab*); consequently they needed to fight against Muslims to gain victory and freedom from suffering. What is more, Ambonese Christians imagined themselves as the Israelites, so if the Israelites had fought against the people of the Philistines, Amalek, Egypt, and so forth, Ambonese Christians had to battle against Muslims whom they saw, at the time, as a representation of the foes of the Israeli people. Ambonese Christians believed that God would be on their side during these difficult times and would let them triumph as He had led the Israelis to victory.

In addition, they were convinced that God would protect them from the Muslim enemies as He had helped and protected the Israelis (e.g. Deuteronomy 20, 1–4; Psalm 3, 11, 23, 27). In other words, God was portrayed as the hero, helper, and guardian of the Ambonese Christians. Ambonese Christians claimed, furthermore, that they were part of the *umat perjanjian* (“the covenant people”), that is, present-day Israeli tribes, the chosen people and God’s heroes, and that the Land of Maluku was the Land of Canaan granted by God to their forerunners—the Alifuruese. Just as God had made a covenant with the Israelis, the same God had “made a contract” with the Ambonese since they became the followers of Jesus and received the Gospel. Since the Ambonese Christians believed that the Ambon war was a sacred duty granted by God, throughout the conflict, they—especially the Christian fighters—purified themselves by actively conducting ritual practices, religious sermons and services, reading the Bible, following the rules of war, and avoiding wrongdoings as instructed by the Holy Book (e.g. Deuteronomy 20, 1–20).

According to the Christian fighters, as confirmed by my survey findings, the rules of war they practiced during the conflict included: a ban on initiating attack, plundering, mocking or ridiculing the other, torturing the enemy, and so on. In addition, the Christian fighters were prohibited from conflict with their wives or parents before going to battle, from mentioning the name of Jesus in improper places, from insulting other religions,

and from transgressing the Ten Commandments of the Torah. All these were considered “taboos of war” that would contaminate the mission of holy war against the Muslims.

Why did Ambonese Christians use the Old Testament and not the New Testament as Biblical justification? Why did they prefer David to Jesus in the time of conflict? The answer is because the New Testament, my Christian Ambonese informants said, teaches peace not violence, love not hate, and brotherhood not conflict, while the Old Testament contains heroic stories of warfare. Whereas Jesus taught his followers and pupils to “love their enemies,” David went to the battlefield against Goliath. An ex-Ambonese Christian fighter told me that during the time of conflict, the verses he recited every Sunday were those of the Old Testament, particularly the gloomy and heroic stories of the Israeli people and kings of the Israelites (Saul, David, and Solomon), which were regarded as fitting for the Ambon socio-political setting.

Concluding Remarks: Bringing Religion Back In

The analysis above suggests that religion did matter during the Maluku conflict. Christian leaders and the masses (and their Muslim counterparts) who were involved in the fighting used religion as a source and legitimation of violence, and they considered the war as a sacred one, rewarded by a place in paradise for those who joined the battle. While Muslims considered death on the battlefield as *mati syahid* (martyrdom) and an honorable act, Christians believed that death in war is a symbol of sinfulness and dishonor on the part of the deceased. They were convinced that Christian fighters who died in the combat zone were killed mainly because they had committed bad deeds or had transgressed the rules of (holy) war such as the ban on theft, mocking, or adultery, which they considered to be taboos. For Ambonese Christians, salvation is equal to living. Survivors of the battlefield were deemed as not having committed any wrongdoings nor transgression of any taboos.

Moreover, in the concept of Charismatic Christian theology, the war was perceived as a process of selection for Christians, a sort of “survival of the fittest.” Those who survived the war were regarded as the “chosen people,” while death was a natural consequence for those who had engaged in unlawful activity during wartime. This conception differs significantly from the Moluccan Muslims, who consider both death and survival as part of the holy jihad, as long as they followed the “Islamic rules of war.”

It is interesting to note that during the war, some Christian Charismatic groups in Ambon city built a minaret of prayer (*menara doa*) on the highest floors of hotels or other buildings, on the assumption that prayers from the highest spot would be heard and

answered by God. The founding of the minaret of prayer was in part a reaction to Muslim attacks. They attributed their defeat to (1) the lack of prayer on the part of Christians, and (2) their Christianity being not pristine enough such that they needed purification. In order to be victorious over Muslims, Ambonese Christians should become “true Christians” by practicing norms and values taught by the Bible. This is, among other reasons, the root causes of the growth of Charismatic Christianity in Maluku, which came to challenge the mainstream Moluccan Protestant Church congregation.

Although I do not agree entirely with statements put forth by one of the Christian militia commanders Agus Watimena (as well as by the main ideologue of Laskar Jihad Rustam Kastor), purporting that the Maluku violence was a “truly religious war” (Rustam 2000; ICG 2000a; 2000b), neither should we dismiss the religious justifications of violence by those involved in the conflict as evidence of “false consciousness” or “public falsehood” (Goss 2004). In brief, violence in God’s name is not simply a spurious cover for grievance or greed (see e.g. McTernan 2003).

Religion plays an important role in communal conflict because, as Scott Appleby (2000, 4; cf. Gaylin 2003) has noted, “its confessional loyalty translates into clearly defined and durable community and its model of faith counters rational calculation and enlightened self-interest, cultivates a righteous sense of persecution, and provokes passion against evil that fuels the excesses of group hatred.” Although religions are indeed manufactured or invented within particular historical and political contexts, Appleby (2000, 57–61) has argued, “[religions] are represented as fundamental truths, providing some security in times of uncertainty, and countering the challenges of relativism and secularism of late modernity.”

This is precisely what religious radical groups (both Christian and Muslim) had presented in Maluku. Moluccan and Ambonese societies have for centuries been defined in terms of religious adherence (see, for instance, Aritonang and Steenbrink 2008; Chauvel 1980; 1990). Even in urban Ambon, the geographical and social inter-mixing of populations is limited such that the religious “other” is easily discriminated against. The historical origins and experiences of religious communities are distinct, and a contemporary and current conflict could be presented as continuous with an older conflict, as well as with a modern struggle on a global scale (see Goss 2004).

World religions, particularly Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), as well as other faiths, also possess a stock of material metaphors and military imagery, and promise reward for violent sacrifice. The concept of some transcendent authority—the will of God—translates into the absolute authority of church officials and religious myths of election (e.g. the concept of the “chosen and blessed people” for the Christians or the “best religious community of believers” for the Muslims). This provides a power-

ful alternative to the delusional formation of paranoia, transforming victimhood into vengeful action (Gaylin 2003, 115; Smith 1999). This is among the reasons why doers of violence, the “religious extremists,” rarely or never regret their violent acts.

Religion has the potential to translate secular differences between an “us and them,” the known and the unfamiliar, to the cosmic plane and thus into a moral struggle between amorphous forces of order versus chaos, good versus evil, for which the ultimate sacrifice—murder or martyrdom—is possible (Juergensmeyer 1992, 114; cf. 2003). If public statements by top leaders of Christian communities were more tolerant on the whole, the churches distributed exaggerated images of their victimization, as evidenced in their sophisticated web presence through sites such as *Ambon Berdarah Online* (Bloody Ambon Online), Masariku Networks, and Crisis Center of the Diocese of Ambon (Brauchler 2003). Lay leaders, moreover, promoted increasingly fundamentalist radical interpretations of the conflict, especially after the arrival of the Laskar Jihad and an increase in Christian losses.

Furthermore, religion did matter during the Maluku conflict since it provided a more powerful and effective force for mobilization than other forms of collective identity. This is because religion is “not only strongly linked to a sense of self, but also provides a far-reaching and uplifting ideology, powerful institutional structures and an enduring and clear-cut definition of an ‘other’” (Wilson 2008, 148). Militias that take part in religious violence, unsurprisingly, often emerge to be driven by religious zeal. As described above, the mobilization of the militias in Maluku’s sectarian conflict was full of religious symbolism. Religious institutions became a main conduit for mobilizing people to commit violence in the name of faith and God. These institutions, moreover, exercised vast emotional influence over adherents of Christianity (also Islam), and provided social meeting places, communication networks, and pools of resources.

Last but not least, religion provides the concept of a “sacred territory” and a set of ready material and symbolic targets whose desecralization provokes intense feelings. Accordingly, during the Maluku turmoil, mosques and churches were desecrated and destroyed, sacred texts and beliefs were ridiculed, prophets were slandered, and other symbols of faiths violated. For instance, the Laskar Kristus gained significant momentum after the destruction of the old Silo church in 1999, while Muslim villagers from Leihitu Peninsula turned on their Christian neighbors early in the conflict in Ambon, in retaliation for rumors of the violation of the great Al-Fatah mosque. To conclude, while religion was never an autonomous cause of conflict, ignoring its role completely would preclude a proper understanding of much of the violence in Ambon city and Maluku more generally.

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