

Dr Sudibyo Markus

**Education and Multiculturalism
A Muhammadiyah Case Study¹**

*O Mankind!
We have created you from a male and female,
And made you into nations and tribes,
That you may know each other.
Verily, the most honourable for you with Allah
Is that (believers) who have At Taqwa.
Al Qur'an 49:13.³*

A CASE STUDY

26 December 2004. Nangroe Aceh Darussalam, the northeast province in the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, was jolted by a strong earthquake of 9,3 Richter scale, and within the next thirty minutes, huge tidal wave devastated the north and western coasts of the province. It caused 110.000 death tolls and 100.000 missing.

Father Chris Riley, CEO of Youths of the Street (YOTS) Sydney, with the overwhelming support of Australian spontaneous contributors, along with Channel Nine groups visited Aceh on 7 January 2005. However, he was shocked to find out a strong rejection from Acehnese Islamic cleric, because his coming was strongly judged for no other purpose except for converting the children of Aceh. The repercussion of the story of an Australian Catholic priest aid worker being rejected by the Muslim fundamentalist in Aceh reverberated around the world.

Totally in despair and ready to depart home bound at the Jakarta airport transit hotel, he was contacted by Tony Stewart, a NSW parliament member's who was along with him for initiating the humanitarian mission to Aceh. Tony Stewart come up with his last minute initiative, and successfully got introductory notes from an Acehnese Indonesian parliament member and the Chairman of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, who introduced Father Chris to Muhammadiyah, an Islamic reformist movement, which is considered by scholars as the biggest Islamic humanitarian movement outside the Christian world.

Father Chris and Tony Stewart met with Muhammadiyah executive on Wednesday night, and the draft of the memorandum of understanding between YOTS and Muhammadiyah was agreed upon in the next morning. The negotiation for partnership between the Catholic priest and Muhammadiyah leaders took place in such a very short and simple way, because mutual trust and understanding was underlying the humanitarian negotiation².

I. INTRODUCTION.

1. Religions had played very important roles in the awakening and in the down and fall of human civilizations. Some religious leaders even agreed, that especially in the former millennium, religions played more roles in creating problems rather than providing solutions in humanitarian affairs³. Bloody wars and conflicts, continuously occurred among the followers of revealed religions. Therefore, efforts

² Sue Williams, *WORLD BEYOND TEARS, The Ongoing story of Father Chris Riley*, HarperCollins Publisher, 2005.

³ David Cordis, *The Role of Religion in History, "The Abraham Connection; A Jew, Christian and Muslim in Dialogues"*, Cross Cultural Publication, Inc. 1994.

have been continuously and considerably made, especially after the Nostra Aetate Declaration from the Second Vatican Council in 1962, in order to transform the roles of religions more meaningful to the human life and human dignity.

2. The population increase, the advancement of information and technology, of global communication and transportation, had created a new sphere of human interaction among people of different ethnics, races and faiths. This unintentional-created natural human communication and dialogues of people with different backgrounds, has gradually minimized the existing stereotypical misunderstanding among them.

Along with the above factors, education plays very strategic roles in giving new visions, new perspectives, and new accesses for the betterment of human dialogues of different faiths and cultural backgrounds. Education, moreover the increasing international educations in the last decades, has been able to make breakthroughs and breaking down all walls of cultural prejudices, especially among the younger generations.

3. More structured and intense dialogues among people of different faiths were than continuously organized in some different regions. The States, religious groups, academicians and universities take part in the organization of the dialogues at local, national, regional and international level. Those dialogues mostly engaged in open-hearted but critical discussions on some religious fundamental issues which were considered sensitive in the past, such as on the different concept of revelation, prophecy, monotheism, life after death. The discussions were than also broadened to “*down to earth*” issues like the different concept of relations between religion and the state, religion and racism, and even come up to daily sustainable livelihood issues.
4. Meanwhile, education, especially at higher levels, is becoming very important in opening up the new horizon of multiculturalism among the students. Some international universities, like what is being initiated by University of West Sydney today, are now becoming a small world of multi religious and ethnicities, where interaction among students with different ethnical and religious backgrounds, just happen and flow like a river of mutual trust and understanding. The students, who someday become influential leaders at their respective countries or localities, will build up broader enabling environment in promoting multiculturalism.

II. EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISM.

1. Muhammadiyah and nationalism

Despite there was strong indications that the establishment of Muhammadiyah in 1912, was first meant for making counter measures against *the Kerstening politic*, the Dutch colonial government policy to convert all Indonesian people, which was adopted by the Governor General Dr. AWF Idenberg⁴ (1906 – 1916), but it could not be denied that Muhammadiyah’s history is but history of respect to different faiths and multiculturalism.

⁴ Alwi Shihab, “*Respons Gerakan Muhammadiyah Terhadap Penetrasi Misi Kristen di Indonesia*”, or “*The Muhammadiyah Movement and Its Controversy with Christian Mission in Indonesia*”, Doctorate Dissertation, Temple University, 1995, Mizan Publication, Bandung, 1998, p. 149

The dialogues which were frequently initiated by Muhammadiyah founder, KHA Dahlan with some Christian priests were not for convert purposes, but much more for promoting the spirit of interfaith dialogues. When the first Muhammadiyah hospital was established in 1923, the doctors were mostly young and non-Muslim Dutch doctors, who enthusiastically supported the first Muhammadiyah hospital operation, even by contributing their personal medical equipments.

In 1928, Aisyiyah, which is Muhammadiyah women movement wing, initiated gender awareness in Indonesia by organizing the first Women Congress. While for the preparation of Indonesian independent in 1945, Muhammadiyah put three out of eight members of the Indonesian Independence Preparatory Committee, namely Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, Professor Abdul Kahar Muzakir, and Sukarno, the Chairman of the Committee, who was the than first President of Indonesia.

Muhammadiyah offers good quality of schools in most parts of the country, including in East Nusa Tenggara province. Therefore many Catholics students enter the Muhammadiyah schools, some continue their studies in local Seminary, and become Catholic priest. Muhammadiyah University of Kupang, the provincial capital of East Nusa Tenggara, which is acronymed as UMK, but than is often misspelled as Universitas Muhammadiyah Kristen or Christian Muhammadiyah University, since 75% of the UMK students are Christians.

2. The largest Islamic humanitarian movement

James L. Peacock, North Carolina University (James L. Peacock, 1986 p. 6) who conducted a research on Muhammadiyah in early 70's indicated, that outside the Christian world, Muhammadiyah with its 500 of health institutions, 15.000 of schools from kindergarten to high school, and nearly 200 higher education institutions, 350 orphanages, is undoubtedly the largest Muslim organization in the world engaged in humanitarian services for the poor and disadvantaged persons. This largest faith-based organization has been able to move forward and expanded its humanitarian services during the colonial era, better than any other organization established for similar mission during the colonial era. Nowadays, people throughout the world recognize Muhammadiyah, as emphasized by James L. Peacock as the largest Islamic humanitarian movement.

3. Education first

Article 2 of the first Muhammadiyah statute in 1912 indicated, that the objective of this movement was the promotion of Islamic education, by combining Islamic teaching into the existing secular Dutch education system. Since than, Muhammadiyah prioritized its program in the establishment of Islamic schools, from Kindergarten to elementary schools.

The prioritizing of Muhammadiyah program approach in education was found as a very strategic instrumental approach, not only in promoting the education during the Dutch colonial era, but also for preparing broad-minded future leaders of Indonesia. The first and second President of Indonesia, Sukarno and Suharto were educated

in Muhammadiyah schools. The founder of the Indonesian Army, Grand General Sudirman was formerly a Muhammadiyah Boy Scout leader. The 1998 reform movement leader in Indonesia, Prof. Dr. Amien Rais, was former Chairman of National Board of Muhammadiyah. Nowadays, most of Muhammadiyah alumni and leaders are the front liners in promoting democratization and multiculturalism in Indonesia.

Muhammadiyah, along with its sister faith-based organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama, who respectively has 30 million and 40 million members and supporters, are now widely known as the moderate movement in the Islamic world, because of their focusing in education the people, to prepare the *ummah* in a fair cultural dialogues in the modern world.

4. Knowledge based development vis-à-vis religion-ethnicities awakening

Knowledge based economy and *knowledge based development* are the most recent education policy commonly adopted in modern countries. While the problem of Islam vis-à-vis pluralism and multiculturalism is the problem of how Muslims have to adapt themselves to the modern age. Moreover, as indicated by Bernard Lewis⁵, tolerance and its corollary, pluralism, also multiculturalism, are new to all religions. While as indicated by Robert Hefner⁶, the new millennium is characterized by the awakening of *democratization* and *religion-ethnicities* awakening. Therefore, the current problem or challenge of Muslim students is how to bring the universal tenets of Islamic teachings into a dialogue with temporal and spatial realities.

Muslim students in international universities could not live in a vacuum. They have to build up their respective *socio-cultural enabling environment*, within and outside the university campus environment. Otherwise they will get lost in the modernization process.

III. FROM EDUCATION TO CIVIL SOCIETY

1. From Charity to Empowerment

However, the Muhammadiyah humanitarian institutional services are not the ultimate goal of Muhammadiyah movement. The health, education and welfare institutions are but stepping stones towards the establishment of a more strategic and longterm objective of Muhammadiyah. Right upon the Declaration of the National independence in 17 August 1945, in its 37 Mukhtamar or Grand National Convention at Yogyakarta 1946, Muhammadiyah revised its objective formulation, which emphasized on the *establishment of an Islamic civil society*, rather than on promoting Islamic education as stipulated in its first objectives formulation in 1912. It was well understood, that formulating the Islamic civil society as its objective would not be granted by the former Dutch authority. The new objective formulation was set forth in Article 2 of the 1946 Muhammadiyah Statuta.

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp 3-4)

⁶ Robert W. Hefner, "Civil Islam, Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia", *The Asia Foundation*, Jakarta, 2001.

The focusing of Muhammadiyah mission on Islamic education and pro-poor humanitarian programs during the colonial era has been very instrumental in building up the basis of a civil society movement.

2. From institutional to grassroots movement

Nobody within Muhammadiyah could deny the success of developing the huge humanitarian institutions in the field of education, health and welfare. However, it is apparent that it is not easy to shift the orientation from the humanitarian institutional services, which provides charity services, towards a civil society empowerment which focus more to community-based and grassroots capacity building.

Moreover today, when Muhammadiyah is approaching to its second century of services, and want to promote its transformation capacity as part of its new Vision 2025, Muhammadiyah has to encounter problem, the fact that it has no strong organizational back up at the grassroots levels. A strong and firm civil society movement required a strong and vibrant community groups at locality levels. The fact that in out of the 80.000 villages in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has been only able to set up 4000 sub-branches or *ranting* or 5% only.

It seemed that it is not easy to shift the Muhammadiyah mind set, from developing and running institutional services towards developing civil society, which requires empowerment measures at the community levels.

The Indonesian Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, established in 1926, and claims to have 40 million members and supporters), which has been so far labeled as the traditionalist Muslim, in fact has been found more phenomenal as compared to Muhammadiyah, in terms of their capacities in promoting the dynamics of Islamic civil society. Therefore, more international scholars like Nakamura, Robert W. Hefner, and very recently was Robin Bush, who were interested more to NU rather than Muhammadiyah for their studies on civil Islami. NU, who firmly keeps and implements many Islamic traditions, and is running thousands of Islamic boarding schools scattered in remote areas, has stronger basis at the grassroots levels.

3. From education to civil society movement

The spirit and awareness on multiculturalism which have been successfully nurtured in the education institution, has to be further consolidated in a community-based environment, through community groups set up for promoting the cohesiveness. These community groups in their vibrant and dynamics interaction with the other community groups, under the auspices or coordination of a community center, will be the strong fundamental for the building up of the civil society.

Norman Uphoff⁷ in his “*ten levels of decision making and social action*” underlines the prime important roles of the (iii) **primary group**, (iv) **community groups** and (v) **locality** in decision making process

⁷ Norman Uphoff, “*Local Institutions and Participation for Sustainable Development*”, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Gatekeeper Series No. 31, Ithaca 1992.

and social action, as compared to (i) *individual*, (ii) *family*, (vi) *subdistrict*, (vii) *district*, (viii) *regional*, (ix) *national* and (x) *international* levels. This formula could be also applied in decision making in multiculturalism-related behavior and action.

IV. EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISM IN AUSTRALIA

1. It is so surprising, that “immediately” Australian emerges and recognized world widely as one of the most multicultural country, not only by Muslim people, but also by most people of the world. Australia has been found and regarded as more culturally friendly. The recognition and appreciation of the Australian strong multiculturalism is becoming much more apparent, especially after the World Trade blast of 11 September. It was true, that there have also been certain degrees of hatred or feeling of dislike toward Muslim community and to any Islamic facilities or symbols. But it has also been well-noted, that the government and people of Australia have the institutional and community mechanism to combat such critical and sensitive issues.
2. Being a big federal country with more than 200 ethnical groups and religious back ground, Australia has been very much aware to the threat of the multi religion-ethnicities. The establishment of community centers at the community levels, and “Community Relations Commission for Multicultural” at the State level, are part of the established mechanism. Likewise, the establishment of Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, as well as the Forum of Australia’s Islamic Relation (FAIR) by the Muslim community, for the purpose of giving public information on how peaceful the real Islamic teachings and tenets are, also part of the serious and continuous efforts in bridging the gap between the Muslim and non-Muslim.
3. Muslim students in Australian universities, while focusing to finalize their study, but should also make their best use of their opportunities in nurturing the spirit of multiculturalism, by developing their actualization of the universal Islamic tenets in cultural spatial dialogue, at the same time also try to build up their respective *enabling cultural environment*, within and outside the campus, in the forms of *primary group*, *community group* and *locality actions*.

University of West Sydney, 3 September 2007.

s.markus@cbn.net.id

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¹ Muhammadiyah, established in 1912, is a modernist Islamic movement. This movement focused its program in education, by adopting new educational approach, to combine the general or “secular” curriculum with Islamic teachings during the Dutch colonial era. This was quite uncommon during the colonial era. Therefore Muhammadiyah was than labelled as “unbelievers” or kafir by the traditionalistic Muslim.

Right after Indonesian independent day in 1945, Muhammadiyah changed its objective toward the establishment of an Islamic civil society, in the pursuant of ummah or Muslim community, within the plural society of Indonesia, rather than establishing of a daulah or Islamic state.

Now Muhammadiyah, run nearly 500 big and small hospitals and clinics, 200 higher education institutions, 15.000 schools from kindergarten to high schools, 350

orphanages, thousands of mosques and community groups, to be supported by around 30 million members and supporters. Politics is a personal concern in Muhammadiyah. Muhammadiyah politicians, are scattered in almost all political parties, and Muhammadiyah keep equal distance to them.

Muhammadiyah was trusted to be the host and focal point for The First Asia Pacific Interfaith Dialogues, jointly organized by The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs & The Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Yogyakarta, December 2004.

¹ Al Qur'an, Surah 49 (Al Hujurat):13. Interpretation of the Meaning of The Noble QUR'AN, Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali, Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Islamic University Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah, Darussalam Publisher, Riyadh, Fifteenth Revised Edition, December, 1996.