

# The concept of religious pluralism in Indonesia: a study of the MUI's fatwa and the debate among Muslim scholars

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## **Abstract**

In 2005 The Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) issued a controversial fatwa. The fatwa states that it is prohibited for Muslims to develop the ideas of religious pluralism. The fatwa had provoked heat debate among Indonesian Muslim scholars. For the opponent of the fatwa, the modern Indonesian state should be supported by the ideas of pluralism. They are disappointed with the fatwa, since it would diminish religious pluralism in Indonesia. On the other hand, the protagonist of the fatwa said that the MUI has done good decision. The ideas of pluralism are seen by them would threaten Islamic faith. They believed that those who campaigned for the idea of pluralism are the agent for "western" interest. The debate regarding the MUI's fatwa banning Muslims to adopt pluralism ideas indicates that the concept of pluralism campaigned by some Muslim scholars is not monolithic. This paper would like to explore various conceptions of religious pluralism among Indonesian Muslim scholars.

Pada 2005, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) mengeluarkan sebuah fatwa kontroversial. Fatwa itu menyatakan haram hukumnya bagi kaum Muslim untuk mengembangkan gagasan-gagasan tentang pluralisme agama. Fatwa telah mengundang perdebatan panas di kalangan sarjana Muslim Indonesia. Bagi para penentang fatwa, Negara Indonesia modern harus didukung dengan gagasan pluralisme. Mereka kecewa atas fatwa karena telah mengurangi pluralisme keagamaan di Indonesia. Di sisi lain, para pendukung fatwa menyatakan bahwa MUI telah mengeluarkan keputusan yang benar. Bagi mereka, gagasan pluralisme akan mengancam keimanan Islam. Mereka yakin bahwa orang-orang yang mengampanyekan gagasan tentang pluralisme merupakan agen kepentingan Barat. Perdebatan mengenai fatwa MUI yang melarang kaum Muslim mengadopsi gagasan pluralisme menunjukkan bahwa konsep pluralisme yang dikampanyekan sebagian sarjana Muslim tidaklah monolitik. Kajian ini akan mengeksplorasi berbagai konsep pluralisme keagamaan di kalangan sarjana Muslim Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *MUI's fatwa; Religious pluralism; Muslim scholars; Islam*

## **Introduction**

The Council of Indonesian Ulama's (MUI) fatwa issued in 2005 prohibiting Muslims to adopt pluralism in Indonesia is controversial. The MUI<sup>1</sup> believed that pluralism is not compatible with Islamic teachings, and is to disturb the Islamic faith. In general, the MUI's fatwa attempted to refute the pluralism idea that spread widely among Indonesian Muslims.

The fatwa is criticized by some Muslim scholars, since it is assumed to disturb religious tolerance in Indonesia. They argued that from the beginning the Republic of Indonesia has been consisted of various religions. Therefore, these scholars insisted on establishing the pluralism concepts. According to them, to reject pluralism is not realistic.

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<sup>1</sup> MUI is Indonesia's top Muslim clerical body. The council comprises all Indonesian Muslim groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam (Persis), and Al Irsyad. It was founded by the Indonesian New Order under the Soeharto administration in 1975 as a body to produce fatwa and to advise the Muslim community on contemporary issues.

Pluralism is a concept required to support religious plurality.

As far as I am concerned, the fatwa had been discussed by many Indonesian Muslim scholars. Unfortunately there is no one of them who wrote about the issue scientifically. A good and scientific article had been written by Piers Gillespie, an Australian researcher and observer of current political development of Indonesia, entitled "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analyzing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No.7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism, and Secularism".<sup>2</sup> Gillespie illustrated the social political background of MUI's conservatism. He stated that the domination of neo-modernist Muslim during the New Order regime in Indonesian Islamic discourse is the factor making MUI took conservative position. Furthermore Gillespie argued that the shift relation between state and the MUI, which made the MUI more autonomous, tend to make them more accommodative to Muslims' demand.<sup>3</sup>

In my view, there is an interesting question which is not elaborated by Gillespie's article. To what extent does the debate between the opponents and proponents of the fatwa describe various conceptions of religious pluralism among Indonesian Muslims? My paper is based on a hypothesis that the debate shows that there are several conceptions of pluralism among Indonesian Muslim scholars. Therefore, this paper will illustrate the discourse among Indonesian Muslim scholars on pluralism, particularly related to their views in refuting the MUI's fatwa banning pluralism, and then analyze the concepts of religious pluralism in the country.

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<sup>2</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analyzing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No.7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism, and Secularism", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Volume 2, Number 18, (2007).

<sup>3</sup> See Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam".

## **Social and political background of the fatwa**

The fall of the Indonesian New Order's (Orde Baru) regime in 1998 has provided an opportunity for many groups in the country to express their views on economic, social, and political issues. It is determined by experts as the beginning of a transitional period of democracy. Since this period, people eagerly realize what they think as the best for society. The increasing political parties and Islamic mass organizations are indications that people started to make use of the opportunity and democracy gradually rose.

As the transitional phase of democracy, this period is fragile.<sup>4</sup> The freedom of expression provided by the regime could be used to propagate various views. That is why the increasing number of fundamentalist Islamic groups was not banned by the government, since democracy requires the government to provide free conditions and public sphere for people.<sup>5</sup> In democratic states it is believed that the more freedom people to express their view, the more responsible the government will be. It was impossible to found such a condition in the New Order government (1970s-1998). The democratic political sphere enables social religious or secular mass organizations to penetrate their influence in Indonesian society. Political and cultural contestation is one of the impacts of this transitional period of democracy.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, this period unintentionally brought back an old sensitive issue which the New Order regime attempted to overcome, namely

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<sup>4</sup> See William R Liddle, "Media Dakwah Scripturalism: One Form of Islamic Political Thought and Action in New Order Indonesia", in Mark R Woodward (ed.), *Toward a New Paradigm: Recent Development in Indonesia Islamic Thought*, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1996, 330-350.

<sup>5</sup> See Saiful Mujani, "Religious Democrats: Democratic Culture and Muslim Political Participation in Post-Suharto Indonesia, unpublished dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See Georg Sorensen, *Democracy and Democratization: Processes and Prospects in a Changing World*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1993.

religious conflict. In general, the conflict did not appear spontaneously. It was an accumulation of several social-political problems that occurred during the Indonesian independence.<sup>7</sup> The issue of Christianization in 1970s, in the beginning of the New Order regime, is one of the sensitive factors that formed a collective memory of some Muslims' groups. They believed that Christian institutions aimed at spreading the Christian religion in Indonesia. During that period as has been noted by historians, there were harsh clashes between Muslims and Christians. The devastation of religious symbols was done by each community. Hence, such religious conflicts in the transitional period represented an old sensitive issue that has not disappeared yet.

Therefore, religious conflicts were part of the transitional phenomena in Indonesia. During 1999 until 2002 there was a civil war based on religion.<sup>8</sup> Muslims and Christians fought against each other, such as in Moluccas. Each group believed that they fought for the right. In fact, economic and political aspects were dominant factors causing the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, religious intolerance also grew in some Muslims circles. On the one side, there were some religious communities, which mostly based themselves on "Islamic identity" and attempted to "reform" Islamic teachings such as the Liberal Islam Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*), the Muhammadiyah Young Intellectual Network (*Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah*), Roy<sup>10</sup>, a village preacher who pro-

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<sup>7</sup> Moeslim Abdurrahman, *Islam Sebagai Kritik Sosial*, Jakarta, Erlangga, 2003, 60-73.

<sup>8</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militancy and Quest for Identity in Post New Order Indonesia*, New York: Ithaca, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "An Islamic Perspective of Religious Pluralism", in *Indonesia: the Impact of Democracy on Conflict Resolution in Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies*, Singapore, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007, 232-236.

<sup>10</sup> Roy is a village preacher who promoted salat in local languages. His teachings were taught in his "pesantren". Roy's ideas was condemned and banned by Muslim leaders.

moted the use local languages in the *salat*, the Ahmadiyah, and the Eden Community.<sup>11</sup> On the other side, some Muslims, particularly from conservative groups, reacted negatively to these communities and demanded the government to ban their activities. They argued that such communities will destroy the Islamic faith from within.<sup>12</sup> Their negative attitude to these communities was sometimes harsher than to non-Muslims, since they assumed that the deviation of Muslims could be more dangerous than from those who are not followers of Islam.

Mainly, the conflict that occurred between Muslims and non-Muslims as related to majority-minority relationship is usually found in plural religious countries. In some cases, the majority tends to defend an imagined threat.<sup>13</sup> Muslims as the majority assumed that the minority, such as Christians, attempted to convert Muslims. The establishment of churches was the most crucial cause provoking the conflict.<sup>14</sup> During the transitional period, there were several cases related to the destruction of the houses of worship.

This situation forced some Muslim scholars to promote the religious pluralism ideas. Basically, the idea of religious pluralism has been promoted and discussed among Indonesian Muslim scholars for several decades, approximately since 1970s. Nurcholish Madjid and

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<sup>11</sup> Eden Community was led by Lia Eden who declared herself as Jibril. The community calls people to join and apply combined rites taken from various religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

<sup>12</sup> See Hartono Ahmad Jaiz, *Ada Pemurtadan di IAIN*, Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 2005, 168-182.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Baumann, "Researching Religious Diversity in Western Europe: the Study of Diaspora Communities, Religious Conflict, and Public Domain in Germany and Switzerland", in K.S. Nathan (ed.), *Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies: Challenges and Prospects for South-east Asia, Europe, and the United States in the New Millennium*, Singapore, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007, 150.

<sup>14</sup> M Hilaly Basya, "Rumah Ibadah dan Kebebasan Beragama", in *Kompas*, 21 April 2006.

Abdurrahman Wahid are determined as the prominent scholars who endorsed this idea.<sup>15</sup> Hence the idea is not truly new. Nevertheless the recent development of the religious and social situation stimulated Muslim scholars to campaign this concept. Younger Muslim scholars affiliated from universities or Islamic organizations (including Non Governmental Organizations), such as the Center for the Study of Religion and Civilization of Muhammadiyah (PSAP), the Ma'arif Institute, the Center for Moderate Muslim (CMM), The Young Intellectual Network of Muhammadiyah (JIMM), the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP), and the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) eagerly promoted pluralism. They believe that pluralism is the best principle to maintain and respect religious diversity.

Inevitably, this movement was countered by fundamentalist scholars. They argued that the idea of pluralism would diminish the Islamic faith, since it urges Muslims to recognize other religions similar to Islam.<sup>16</sup> According to fundamentalists, such an idea calls Muslims to neglect their faith and join with the abstract view<sup>17</sup> coming and combined from all religions.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it is impossible for Muslims in the same time to be Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu. Therefore, they rejected the idea and accused its proponent as the agent of western

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<sup>15</sup> Greg Barton, *Gagasan Islam Liberal di Indonesia: Pemikiran Neo-Modernisme Nurcholish Madjid, Djohan Effendi, Ahmad Wahib, dan Abdurrahman Wahid*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> See Anis Malik Thoha, *Tren Pluralisme Agama: Tinjauan Kritis*, Jakarta: Perspektif, 2005, p.77-90. See also Adian Husaini, *Pluralisme Agama*, Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, 2005, 55-61.

<sup>17</sup> Thoha means the abstract view as philosophical ideas explaining about the unity of God and religion. This idea has been constructed and promoted by western contemporary philosophers such as Huston Smith (*the Forgotten Truth: the Common Vision of the World's Religions*, 1976), John Hick (*God has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism*, 1980), and Hans Kung (*Global Ethics*, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Anis Malik Thoha, *Tren Pluralisme Agama*, 19-24.

countries who attempt to mislead and destroy Islam from within gradually and systematically.<sup>19</sup>

This debate has attracted the MUI to issue the fatwa. The fatwa was released in 2005, and it mentions that the concept of pluralism believing that all religions are alike is forbidden. Various Muslims responded to the fatwa. According to Azra, one of the opponents of the MUI's view, the fatwa would disturb the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, the proponents believed that the fatwa is necessary to protect Muslims' faith. The fatwa has provoked debate among Muslims.

### **MUI's fatwa on pluralism**

The MUI's fatwa on pluralism contained other relevant issues such as liberalism and secularism. Probably, these two points are assumed by the MUI as one entity. The MUI sees pluralism, liberalism, and secularism as the view diminishing the establishment of Islamic faith, because these three "ism" are contrary with the mainstream of Indonesian Muslims' belief. However, my paper will only focus on the issue of pluralism.

In the beginning of the fatwa, the MUI states as follow:

(a) Bahwa pada akhir-akhir ini berkembang paham pluralisme agama, liberalisme dan sekularisme serta paham-paham sejenis lainnya di kalangan masyarakat;

(b) Bahwa berkembangnya paham pluralisme agama, liberalisme dan sekularisme di kalangan masyarakat telah menimbulkan keresahan sehingga sebagian masyarakat meminta MUI untuk menetapkan fatwa tentang masalah tersebut;

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<sup>19</sup> Anis Malik Toha, "Pluralisme Agama: Sebuah Agama Baru", in Adian Husaini, *Pluralisme Agama*, Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, 2005, vii-xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "MUI's Fatwa Encourages the Use of Violence", *The Jakarta Post*, 25 August 2005.

(c) Bahwa karena itu, MUI memandang perlu menetapkan Fatwa tentang paham pluralisme, liberalisme, dan sekularisme agama tersebut untuk dijadikan pedoman oleh umat Islam.<sup>21</sup>

(a) Recently there has been a growth of religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism which has been understood in a variety of ways in the community;

(b) This growth of religious pluralism, liberalism and religious secularism within the society has created an uneasiness and a concern to the extent that part of the community has asked the MUI to give some clarification by means of a fatwa in relation to this problem;

(c) Therefore, the MUI feel that it is necessary to formulate a fatwa about the understanding of pluralism, liberalism and religious secularism in order for it to provide guidance to the Islamic community.<sup>22</sup>

As described by the fatwa, the MUI saw that the concept of religious pluralism spreads massively within Indonesian Muslim society. In addition, many Muslims were afraid of the development of religious pluralism.<sup>23</sup> The situation forced some Muslim figures to request a fatwa from the MUI. This is the social and religious background why the fatwa was issued. As the umbrella of many Muslim groups such as Muhammadiyah, NU, and Persis, the MUI has the responsibility to respond to the situation. It seems that the MUI attempted to overcome the anxiety of the Muslim society. As far as MUI is concerned, the function of fatwa is necessary to guide Muslim society in assessing any problems.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> [www.mui.or.id](http://www.mui.or.id)

<sup>22</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam", 18.

<sup>23</sup> See Adian Husaini, *Pluralisme Agama*.

<sup>24</sup> Mehdi Mozaffari, *Fatwa: Violence and Discourtesy*, Aarhus Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1998, 16. See also Wael Hallaq "From Fatwa to Furu: Growth and Change in Islamic Substantive Law", *Islamic Law and Society*, Number 1(1994), 29-65. See also Syamsul Anwar, "Fatwa, Purification and Dynamisation: A Study of the Tarjih in Muhammadiyah", *Islamic Law and Society*, Volume 12, Number 1 (2005), 32.

According to Gillespie, MUI's fatwa defines pluralism as an idea that sees all religions as the same.<sup>25</sup> Many neo-modernist Muslims such as Azyumardi Azra, Syafii Ma'arif, and Dawam Rahardjo who criticized the fatwa have the same perception as Gillespie. However, the MUI added the explanation, mostly in public discussion, that MUI sees some conceptions of religious pluralism. According to MUI, the fatwa implicitly explains that MUI only bans one of the conceptions of pluralism.<sup>26</sup> The related part of the fatwa mentions:

An understanding that all religions are the same and because of this (truth), that every religion is relative. Because of that, every follower of religion cannot claim that only their religion is true and correct whilst other religions are wrong. Pluralism also stipulates that all followers of religion will enter and live side by side in heaven.<sup>27</sup>

For Gillespie, the fatwa does not define pluralism comprehensively.<sup>28</sup> Various conceptions of religious pluralism as argued by Syamsuddin are not explained in the fatwa. The opponents of the fatwa who are progressive Muslim scholars believed that MUI defines pluralism as a view believing that all religions are alike. They assessed that MUI does not mention other conceptions of pluralism.<sup>29</sup> Hence, the fatwa is meant to prohibit the movement of religious pluralism.<sup>30</sup>

However MUI clarified that the fatwa only bans pluralism testifying that all religions have the same truth. According to MUI, such a con-

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<sup>25</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam", 20.

<sup>26</sup> Din Syamsuddin, cited in "Muhammadiyah Tawarkan Diri Jadi Mediator Dialog Fatwa MUI", *Kompas Cyber Media* (Jakarta): <[www.kompas.com/utama/news/0508/06/200356.htm](http://www.kompas.com/utama/news/0508/06/200356.htm)> 10 February, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> See [www.mui.or.id](http://www.mui.or.id), translated by Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam".

<sup>28</sup> See Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam".

<sup>29</sup> Dawam Rahardjo, "Menyikapi perbedaan pasca fatwa MUI", Radio Berita 68h 89.2 fm, *Transkrip diskusi radio 68h*, 4 August 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "Mutual Existence and Religious Harmony", *The Jakarta Post*, 25 August 2005.

cept of pluralism is contradictory with the principle of the Islamic faith. In the middle of the fatwa, MUI mentions some verses of the Qur'an:

"And whoever desires/seek a religion other than al-Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be among the losers".<sup>31</sup> "Islam is the religion that is blessed by God".<sup>32</sup>

For MUI, to believe in other religions will diminish the Islamic faith. Muslims who believe that other religions are true will be rejected and punished by God. Religious pluralism, according to the fatwa, should not be adopted by Muslims.

It is forbidden (*haram*) for the Islamic community to follow the understanding of pluralism.<sup>33</sup>

In addition the fatwa also mentions:

In regards to matters of *aqida* and *ibada* [creed and worship], it is compulsory for the Islamic community to have an exclusive attitude, meaning that it is forbidden to mix Islamic creed and worship with the creed and worship of the followers of other religious faiths.<sup>34</sup>

It is obvious that MUI bans pluralism. Whether or not the fatwa only prohibits certain pluralism is not explained explicitly.<sup>35</sup> However it is clear that pluralism as explained by MUI is the concept denoting that all religions are the same.

Although MUI's fatwa does not mean to urge people to attack who promote pluralism, violence took place toward the activists of pluralism. A couple months after the fatwa was issued, the Defender Front for Islam (FPI) attempted to attack the office of the Liberal Islam Network (JIL). FPI believed that JIL is the big promoter of religious plural-

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<sup>31</sup> QS Ali Imran, 3:85, translated by Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam".

<sup>32</sup> QS Ali Imran, 3:19, translated by Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam".

<sup>33</sup> www.mui.or.id, translated by Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam".

<sup>34</sup> www.mui.or.id, translated by Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam".

<sup>35</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam", 20-21.

ism in Indonesia. Moreover, some Muslims were intolerant to Qur'anic interpretations emphasizing pluralism. They condemned Muslim scholars who declared that Islamic teachings are compatible with the idea of pluralism.<sup>36</sup>

In general, the fatwa emphasizes that pluralism is not compatible with Islam. Hence MUI prohibits Muslims to follow the idea of pluralism. However there is an interesting question whether MUI defines Pluralism in a wrong way or not. The next part will explore about the theory of pluralism and its movement in Indonesia.

### **Religious pluralism in Indonesia**

In general, religious pluralism in Indonesia is not monolithic. It is defined in various conceptions. The first model is the belief that there is only one correct religion, but Muslims should respect and tolerate other religions.<sup>37</sup> It means that although Muslims are obliged to reject other religions' faith, they are prohibited to force non-Muslims to be Muslim. To believe in the Islamic faith, someone needs time to learn and consider it. That is why Muslims are commanded to protect non-Muslims' right to express their own religion.<sup>38</sup>

The second model is that pluralism requires Muslims to be actively engaged with plurality. Pluralism, therefore, needs the cultivation of public space in which all people, regardless their religion, encounter one another.<sup>39</sup> In addition, followers of all religions are asked to be empathic with each others' faiths.<sup>40</sup> They not only should respect others, but

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<sup>36</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam", 30.

<sup>37</sup> Anis Malik Thoha, *Tren Pluralisme Agama: Tinjauan Kritis*, Jakarta: Perspektif, 2005, 255-260.

<sup>38</sup> See Anis Malik Thoha, *Tren Pluralisme Agama*, 255-260.

<sup>39</sup> See Saiful Mujani, *Religious Democrats*.

<sup>40</sup> See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1962.

also cooperate with them.<sup>41</sup> On the one hand, they follow one particular religion. On the other hand, they must learn and attempt to be emphatic to other religion.<sup>42</sup> This kind of pluralism is the most obvious model developed in a democratic state.

The third is that pluralism means that there is more than one of true religion. This concept deems that the ultimate reality or truth is available in all religions<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, the proponents urge Muslims to break the boundaries of the Islamic religion. According to them, the truth of Islam is not at the surface or extrinsic rituals of Islam, but an intrinsic dimension of Islam. In other words, all religions have the same message. It is valid for everyone to follow any religions, since all religions bring people to the same god. The religious diversity lies in the extrinsic aspects such as rituals, and worships. Hence, this concept of pluralism assesses the religious diversity as varying expressions and conceptions of the Ultimate Reality.

Komarudin Hidayat has different terms for these three categories. The first is called as tolerance, the second is inclusive, and the last is pluralist.<sup>44</sup> Although Hidayat uses different terms, the substance of categorization is the same. Budhy Munawar Rachman also describes different levels of pluralism. He divided it in to two kinds of pluralism, namely inclusive and pluralist.<sup>45</sup> It indicates that in sociological perspective, the idea of pluralism is not monolithic. It is not wondering if Indonesian Muslims have different definitions and perceptions about it.

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<sup>41</sup> See Thomas Banchoff, *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Dawam Rahardjo, "Menyikapi perbedaan pasca fatwa MUI".

<sup>43</sup> Budhy Munawar Rachman, *Islam Pluralis: Wacana Kesetaraan Kaum Beriman*, Jakarta: Grafindo, 2004, 70-100. See also P.D. Bramsen, *One God One Message*, The United State of America, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> See Komarudin Hidayat, *Agama di Tengah Kemelut*, Jakarta: Media Cita, 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Budhy Munawar Rachman, *Islam Pluralis*.

Based on literature studies, the proponents of pluralism in Indonesia have different emphasis in explaining their ideas. However, Nurcholish Madjid is often referred as a model for his pluralism movement in Indonesia. Budhy Munawar Rachman described Madjid as the locomotive of modernization movement in which religious pluralism is one of the significant issues he promoted.<sup>46</sup>

In general, Madjid promoted pluralism within the context of Indonesian modern nation state. As mentioned by Syafii Maarif, after the independence until 1960s Indonesia had faced ideological problems. Most Muslim scholars in that time tend to establish an Islamic state.<sup>47</sup> It impacted the making process of modern nation state requiring the separation between religions and the state. There was ideological contestation between nationalist Muslim leaders and nationalist secular ones. Madjid's ideas emerged in such a political context.<sup>48</sup> He critically reviewed the Islamic thought of his seniors and offered a contextual Islam that is suitable for Indonesia. Pluralism is one of the important ideas that he promoted to build a modern Indonesia. According to Madjid, religious diversity is naturally designed by God (Allah), so that it is not wise to reject and condemn followers of other religions. Moreover, Madjid categorized non-Muslims as *ahl al-kitāb* (religious community who got holy book from God).<sup>49</sup> Therefore Majid advised Muslims to respect others, to build mutual understanding, and to be actively engaged with non-Muslims in establishing Indonesia. In addition, Madjid

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<sup>46</sup> Budhy Munawar Rachman, *Islam dan Pluralisme Nurcholish Madjid*, Jakarta: Pusat Studi Islam dan Kenegaraan Paramadina, 2007, 1-20.

<sup>47</sup> See Ahmad Syafii Maarif, *Islam dan Politik di Indonesia Pada Masa Demokrasi Terpimpin (1959-1965)*, Yogyakarta: Parama Abiwara-The Asia Foundation, 1988, 49-80.

<sup>48</sup> Budhy Munawar Rachman, *Islam dan Pluralisme Nurcholish Madjid*, 15-35.

<sup>49</sup> Budhy Munawar Rachman, *Islam dan Pluralisme Nurcholish Madjid*, 162-169.

developed his pluralism idea with a perennial philosophical approach.<sup>50</sup> He stated that the real Islam is a universal value revealed by God in all religions.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Islam adhered by Muslims is culturally constructed as well as other religions. Hence, according to him, the Ultimate Truth is available in all religions, but it is theologically and culturally described in different ways.

Madjid's ideas on pluralism has influenced many Indonesian scholars and activists in promoting religious pluralism. The socio-religious condition, before the issuance of the MUI's fatwa, was influenced by this pluralism movement campaigned by scholars or Islamic Non Government Organizations (NGO) such as the Liberal Islam Network (JIL), the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), the Indonesian Center for Religion and Peace (ICRP), the Center for Religious and Civilization Studies (PSAP Muhammadiyah), and the Muhammadiyah Young Intellectual Network (JIMM). Their publications, in my view, show that they promoted the second and third meaning of pluralism. It means that they called Muslims to be engaged with non-Muslim to establish democracy and human rights, and they advised Muslims to see religions as relative forms of the Ultimate Truth or God's messages.

In general, some Indonesian Muslims perceived that pluralism is mostly defined as the third conception. It is no wonder if MUI stated that they just prohibited pluralism believing that all religions are the same. The fatwa does not mean eliminating tolerance, mutual understanding among the followers of religions, and cooperation among them. However, the fatwa has provoked many debates among Muslims. In the next part I

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<sup>50</sup> Komarudin Hidayat, *Agama Masa Depan: Perspektif Filsafat Perennial*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1995, xi-xii.

<sup>51</sup> Budhy Munawar Rachman, *Islam dan Pluralisme Nurcholish Madjid*, 42-50.

will provide the debate about the fatwa.

### **The debate on the fatwa**

The opponents of the MUI's fatwa are mostly progressive neo-modernist Muslim scholars. According to them, the fatwa is not based on proper understanding of the conception of religious pluralism. Dawam Rahardjo, a Muhammadiyah intellectual, is one of the scholars who opposed the fatwa. He said that it is impossible to accept religious diversity in Indonesia without pluralism. In addition, Rahardjo stated that the MUI does not understand the concept of pluralism.

In regards to pluralism, the MUI said that it is based on an opinion that all religions are the same. And the consequence of that is that the truth of all religions is relative. Pluralism is not that. Pluralism is the opposite; it respects differences in religion and therefore accepts them. That does not mean that all religions are the same. MUI does not know what is meant by pluralism.<sup>52</sup>

Rahardjo stated that the MUI's definition of pluralism is naive, since they only described one conception. In fact, Rahardjo argued, pluralism developed by Indonesian Muslim scholars is different. For Rahardjo, it is not fair to accuse that the scholars who promote the concept of pluralism attempt to destroy the Muslim's faith.<sup>53</sup> As described by Gillespie, Rahardjo clashed with Din Syamsuddin.<sup>54</sup> Both of them are Muhammadiyah scholars. In that time Syamsuddin was the vice chairman of the MUI and chairman of Muhammadiyah. Rahardjo criticized Syamsuddin because of his involvement in issuing the fatwa. The fatwa on pluralism is not the only one case causing them in conflict. The fatwa about Ahmadiyah is also one of the reasons why the relationship

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<sup>52</sup> Dawam Rahardjo, "Menyikapi perbedaan pasca fatwa MUI".

<sup>53</sup> Dawam Rahardjo, "Menyikapi perbedaan pasca fatwa MUI".

<sup>54</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam", 29.

between Rahardjo and Syamsuddin declined. Gillespie categorized Rahardjo as liberal wing of Muhammadiyah and Syamsuddin as belonging to the conservative ones.<sup>55</sup>

Although Syamsuddin defended the fatwa, it does not mean that all Muhammadiyah scholars agreed with the fatwa. Rahardjo is one of the examples. Moreover, there are some progressive Muhammadiyah scholars who often promoted religious pluralism such as Syafii Ma'arif, Munir Mul Khan, Amin Abdullah, and Moeslim Abdurrahman who were all members of the board of Muhammadiyah.<sup>56</sup> Although they did not comment in mass media, they tend to fight for religious pluralism as shown in their books and articles. Therefore Muhammadiyah has various opinions about the fatwa.

The similar case happened within the circle of Nahdhatul Ulama (NU). Although Hasyim Muzadi, the chairman of NU, declared that he disagreed with the fatwa, the NU's elites have various positions about this issue. KH Sahal Mahfudz, the chief of NU's board and the chairman of MUI, was among the scholars who signed the fatwa. In addition there is also another prominent NU's figure who was intensively engaged in formulating and promoting the fatwa, namely KH Ma'ruf Amin.

Another scholar who criticized the MUI's fatwa was Azyumardi Azra. He argued that the fatwa is based on textual understanding to the Qur'an and Fiqh.<sup>57</sup> The textual interpretation will mislead Muslims to understand the religious texts contextually. For Azra, it is not too surprising, since MUI is dominated by conservative Ulama who tend to

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<sup>55</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam", 29.

<sup>56</sup> See Boy Pradana, "In Defense of Pure Islam: the Conservative-Progressive Debate within Muhammadiyah", unpublished thesis, Canberra: Australian National University, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "MUI's Fatwa Encourages the Use of Violence", *The Jakarta Post*, 25 August 2005.

interpret the Qur'an traditionally.<sup>58</sup> Actually, the basic problem in traditional understanding is not in the tradition itself, but the way the Ulama interpret the tradition. It is proved that some of traditional Ulama such as KH Masdar Mas'udi and KH Said Agil Siradj have progressive opinion about pluralism. They have different views with other traditional Ulama in MUI. It indicates that Islamic tradition is not the factor causing the Ulama become conservative.

In addition, Azra also advised MUI to consult with other Ulama outside their circle. According to him, it is required for MUI to discuss a fatwa before issuing it.<sup>59</sup> Various perspectives will help MUI to know the impact of the fatwa. The fatwa, for Azra, indicates that MUI is lacking understanding of contemporary ideological conceptions. Moreover, Azra adds, to maintain religious diversity within Indonesian society needs pluralism.<sup>60</sup> This pluralism is seen by Azra as the important foundation to establish religious harmony among the followers of various religions.

The important aspect emphasized by these progressive Muslim scholars is about the necessity of pluralism as the foundational part of a modern nation state.<sup>61</sup> It is impossible to maintain the modern Indonesia if the people are segregated in primordial sense of belonging such as religion and ethnicity.<sup>62</sup> They criticized the MUI, because this institution does not properly and carefully respond the issue of pluralism within Muslim society.<sup>63</sup>

The proponents of the fatwa consisted of various Muslim scholars. Anis Malik Toha, chairman of NU in Malaysia, is one of the scholars who

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<sup>58</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "MUIs Fatwa Encourages the Use of Violence".

<sup>59</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "Mutual Existence and Religious Harmony".

<sup>60</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "Mutual Existence and Religious Harmony".

<sup>61</sup> See Thomas Banchoff, *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*.

<sup>62</sup> See Saiful Mujani, *Religious Democrats*.

<sup>63</sup> Piers Gillespie, "Current Issues in Indonesian Islam", 2-29.

support the fatwa. Toha argued that pluralism is supported by a global power. He means global power as western countries, particularly the United States of America and certain European countries.<sup>64</sup> So far, critical views to pluralists are that they are funded by western foundations. In other words, pluralist movements are assumed not to recover Islamic world, but to destroy it. In addition, Toha asserted that pluralism is penetrated by western agents.<sup>65</sup> According to Toha, pluralists are not consistent with their principle. On the one hand they eagerly insist on religious tolerance, on the other hand they do not tolerate the MUI's fatwa. Moreover Toha said that pluralists have created a new religion, and people are forced to accept this new religion.<sup>66</sup>

Another Muslim scholar who responded to the critique is KH Kholil Ridwan, a former member of the MUI. Ridwan commanded pluralists to tolerate and respect the fatwa.<sup>67</sup> According to Ridwan, the fatwa is a legal opinion produced by religious leaders who are concerned with problems of faith. The Ulama of MUI are afraid that Muslims will be misled by the concept of religious pluralism. Furthermore Ridwan said that other religious institutions such as Churches have released a similar decision banning pluralism earlier than Islam.<sup>68</sup> For Ridwan, religious pluralism would negatively affect the Muslims' belief. Based on his interview with Frans Magnis Suseno, Adian Husaini, a former chief of the Council of Islamic Propagation of Indonesia (*Dewan Dakwah Islam Indonesia/DDII*), said that pluralism requesting people to believe that all religions are the same is also rejected by other religions such as

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<sup>64</sup> Anis Malik Toha, "Pluralisme Agama: Sebuah Agama Baru", vii.

<sup>65</sup> Anis Malik Toha, "Pluralisme Agama: Sebuah Agama Baru", vii.

<sup>66</sup> Anis Malik Toha, "Pluralisme Agama: Sebuah Agama Baru", vii.

<sup>67</sup> Adian Husaini, *Pluralisme Agama*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Adian Husaini, *Pluralisme Agama*, 28

Christianity.<sup>69</sup> In addition, Husaini concluded that it is proper that MUI prohibits pluralism.

As mentioned before, the MUI's fatwa implicitly defines that only certain concepts of pluralism are prohibited. Din Syamsuddin emphasized that MUI respects pluralism that attempts to establish tolerance, mutual respect, and harmony.<sup>70</sup> In other words, the fatwa bans pluralism that tends to blur religious faith's boundaries. It means that the fatwa does not prohibit Muslims to adopt the rest concept of pluralism. KH Ma'ruf Amin, one of the members of MUI, held a similar view. Additional explanation given by MUI's members in seminars and public discussion confirmed that MUI only bans certain concept of pluralism.

It seems that the debate between the proponents and opponents of the fatwa focuses on the necessity of pluralism as the foundation for modern nation states, but it contains the dangerous aspects for the Islamic faith. Supported by the government, the debate has become public discussion, so that people can understand the background, necessity, and also the weakness of the fatwa.

## Conclusion

The debate between the opponents and proponents of MUI's fatwa concerning pluralism indicates that Indonesian Muslim scholars have, at least, three conceptions of pluralism. As explained by the MUI, the fatwa does not prohibit all conceptions of pluralism. The MUI asserted that the fatwa only bans the third concept, which indicates that the ultimate truth is available in all religions. This kind of pluralism assesses religions as various ways toward the same God. According to the MUI,

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<sup>69</sup> Adian Husaini, *Pluralisme Agama*, 66-67.

<sup>70</sup> Din Syamsuddin, cited in "Muhammadiyah Tawarkan Diri Jadi Mediator Dialog Fatwa MUI", *Kompas Cyber Media* (Jakarta): <[www.kompas.com/utama/news/0508/06/200356.htm](http://www.kompas.com/utama/news/0508/06/200356.htm)> on 10 February 2006.

such a conception is not compatible with Islamic teachings. In MUI's perspective, Islam is the true religion completing and revising previous religions (religions that are established before the Prophet Muhammad). For MUI, the third concept of pluralism threatened Muslims' faith.

It is probably that the MUI is dominated by "traditional" Ulama who less understand modern ideas. As the guardian of "true Islam", they tend to prevent any corruptions happen in Islamic doctrines. They insist that to establish tolerance and harmonious life among Indonesian religious followers should not erode "the true Islamic faith". Moreover, it is necessary for them to ensure Muslims that Islam is the only one right religion that is blessed by God.

Those who disagreed with the MUI's legal opinion saw that the fatwa would reduce the legitimacy of pluralism movements. Moreover, the fatwa would provoke Muslims to condemn organizations or scholars promoting pluralism as misleading agents. It is proved that after the fatwa was issued, some Islamic radical organizations attacked JIL, JIMM, and scholars who spoke about religious pluralism. They based their violent action on the MUI's fatwa. For them, the fatwa is seen as an absolute Islamic doctrine. It seems that they interpreted the fatwa as to command Indonesian Muslims to condemn and attack any ones who promote pluralism.

In my view, although the MUI realized that there are various conceptions of pluralism, the fatwa simplified these concepts by limiting it to one definition. This simplification makes people misunderstood to the fatwa. MUI's explanation on public discussion and media could not automatically clarify the fatwa. Furthermore, the MUI were not aware of the psychological impact of the fatwa. Indonesian Muslims have been polarized in fundamentalist and liberalist groups. This polarization is represented in particular Islamic institutions such as *Hizbut Tahrir*

*Indonesia, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), the Defender Front for Islam (Forum Pembela Islam) on the one hand, and the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal), the International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), the Muhammadiyah Young Intellectual Network (JIMM), the Indonesian Center for Religion and Peace (ICRP) and the Center for Islam and Civilization Studies (PSAP) Muhammadiyah on the other hand. The MUI's fatwa caused the gap between them sharper than before. As far as the pluralists are concerned, their activities promoting pluralism do not mean to break the Muslims' belief. Therefore the fatwa was failed to understand the situation. The MUI did not realize the social complexity and political consequence of the fatwa.*

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