

## THE CONCEPT OF MERCY TO PROMOTE TOLERANCE AMONG THE PLURALITY IN INDONESIA

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**Abstract**— Indonesia is widely known for its plurality, including in religion. It is not only an asset but is also a threat. Schism is fragile to happen. It is important to nurture Indonesia's plurality so that tolerance can be flourished. Common values and understandings have been known to be effective to promote tolerance in plurality. Several proposals have been developed by using local wisdoms and technological approaches to decrease tensions among religious groups in Indonesia. This study provided the concept of mercy in six recognized religions in Indonesia as a common value to promote tolerance. By using scientific literature in comparative study as a method, the result revealed that all religions are on the same page in defining mercy as a virtue and kindness attitude toward others, especially to the marginalized and/ or outnumbered groups of people. Islam's theology pictures mercy as the love of a mother to her newborn baby. Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) portrays mercy as God's love toward the poor and ill. Mercy, in both Hinduism and Buddhism, is closely related to their goddesses who do not discriminate against one over the other beings. Lastly, Confucianism categorizes mercy as a virtue of a perfect man toward the disabled and poor. As implications, the concept of mercy has been embodied in politics and socio-culture, education, and economics for tolerance to flourish in Indonesia's society.

**Index Terms** — Indonesia, Mercy, Plurality, Religion, Tolerance

### I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as a multicultural country with diversity in cultures, ethnic groups, and religions. According to the National Statistics Data, Indonesia consists of 270.203.917 populations with 1331 ethnic groups (bps.go.id), and six religions recognized by the government. This diversity exists as a nation's asset as well as a threat. One biggest challenge is the conflict which leads to anarchy. Several riots sadly happened in some parts of Indonesia related to religious groups. In 1999, Moslems and Christians were in conflict in Maluku, Ambon. In 2000, similar friction took place in Poso Sulawesi. In 2016, a conflict between Islam and Buddhism occurred in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra where more than ten Buddhist monasteries were ruined at that time. Jakarta's governor election in 2017 has worsened the atmosphere. Prior to the election, a non-Moslem candidate was imprisoned for allegedly hate speech which escalated the issue. Social conflicts and frictions have been fueled by hatred based on religious differences. Soon, a similar threat should be anticipated as the national presidential election will be held in 2024.

This study comes up with the concept of mercy which is found in six recognized religions in Indonesia. The sense of mercy is considered as a basic human quality in responding to any discrimination, suffering, and disrespectful behaviors to others. It could be deep-rooted in the inner perspective of interreligious society. When a tension among religious groups is high, it is important to uncover a common value among those religions. The distinctiveness of this study is to provide a common ground understanding of a shared belief about mercy from the perspectives of Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Some evidence of religious teachings about the concept of mercy are provided as well as the benefits to promote tolerance in Indonesia which directly impact to education, economic, political, and social culture spheres.

## LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE CONCEPT OF TOLERANCE

Indonesian scholars have been trying to resolve the phenomenon and to promote a shared understanding to interweave communication among religious leaders. Several approaches have been developed by these scholars to propose tolerance in Indonesia. Pajarianto, Pribadi, & Sari (2022) advocate integration between local wisdom and religious values to avoid radicalism. It is believed that the local wisdom benefits to assist one another in understanding religious values. Moreover, rather than speaking out hate speech on others' religious rituals, Harmakaputra & Rahman (2022) urge that tolerance can be enhanced by acknowledging one's religious ceremonies by using social media platforms. For example, social media has been adopted by people around the world to send greetings and courage during Pandemic Covid-19. Lastly, Mulya & Aditomo (2019) recommend school group project to work together to support tolerance among interreligious and intercultural students.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a scientific literature on comparative religion. Since there are found many discrete traditions and competing voices about religious studies, Hedges (2016) recommends a healthy model of comparative study. He proposes a comparison which "challenges our existing categories and perspective to produce an opportunity of learning" (p. 27). Hereby, this current study examines what is good and proper from each tradition to produce a reliable comparative study. Furthermore, Freidenreich also emphasizes on four variations on focus of comparative religious studies: "similarity, differences, genus-species relationship, and the use of comparison to refocus" (Freiberger, 2016, p. 61). By considering to Indonesian context, the authors select the similarity's focus approach of comparative studies as the tolerance paradigm. This paradigm would seek the correspondence of the concept of mercy among six religious' doctrines and reformulate an operative concept to build tolerance spirit among Indonesian people. The common understanding of mercy would encourage dialogue and compassion' perspective as a value of tolerance.

## RESULTS

Tolerance in Indonesia could be improved based on the concept of mercy which has been laid in six recognized religious groups. This part will explore the concept of mercy in Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism which are grouped in Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism that are closely connected, and lastly Confucianism.

### **The concept of Mercy in Islamic perspective**

Theology of Islam has extensive teaching on mercy. In Islam, mercy derives from arabic word rahmah, originated from the root word rahima, means mother's womb. DR. Thamaeem Ushama, in his comprehensive research, explores that the word rahmah can be translated as mildness, gentleness, forgiveness, softness, love, and affection (Ushama, 2021, 10).

This picture of rahmah is connected to who is God in Islam perspective. God is known as The Compassionate, The Merciful God. This picture of God is written in the beginning of every chapter of the Koran. God's mercy is shown by forgiving sin and showing pity to those who are in trouble. God's mercy is enabled man to approach him and to deliver prayer (Reid, 1916, 11). Thus, mercy in Islam means an attitude expressing human understanding, pity, sympathy, kindness, love and compassion toward others (Ushama, 2021, 11). In fact, Shamsieh portrays mercy is similar to mother's attitude toward the newborn baby with compassion, love and care (Kamal Abu Shamsieh, 2020, 99).

The concept of mercy has been applied at least in Islamic law which is known as Shari'ah. Mercy is one of the virtues behind the law, along with justice, benefit, and wisdom. As quoted by Gamal E. Attiya, Ibn al-Qayyim emphasizes that anything that is contrary to justice, mercy, benefit, and wisdom does not arise from Shari'ah (Kamal Abu Shamsieh, 2020, 80).

### **The concept of Mercy in Christianity (Catholicism & Protestantism)**

Although theological schism takes place in Christianity which polarizes Catholicism and Protestantism, the teaching of mercy both in Catholicism and Protestantism is generally similar. Due to limited length of study, this part would only describe the concept of mercy in Christianity, that is both Catholicism and Protestantism included.

Christianity believes that mercy is one of God's attributes and man is created with a similar capacity (Grudem, 1994). Mercy is defined as goodness toward those in misery and distress (Grudem, 1994; Bavinck, 2011). God's mercy is portraying his tenderhearted, his loving compassion for his people, his heart toward the needy (Erickson, 1998). It is pictured as hearing the cry of his people, knowing their sufferings (Exod. 3:7), healing people from physical illness (Mark. 1:41) (Erickson, 1998). As man is created to imitate the Creator, thus God's mercy should have been expressed in man's conduct toward the needy (Matt. 5:7; 2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Mercy is men's moral attribute that is come from God. Mercy is goodness and compassion for those in trouble and distress. Christian who practices merciful attitude is reflecting their merciful God.

### **The concept of Mercy in Hinduism and Buddhism**

Hinduism and Buddhism are born in the land of India. As Hindu emerges on around 30th -15th century BCE (Tharoor, 2018) and that of Buddha on around 6th – 4th century BCE (Robert Bushwell Jr, & Donald Lopez, Jr., 2014), some Hindus believe and receive that Buddha is the reincarnation of Visnu (Jayarim, 2019). The paper will not discuss on the historical dispute of comparison of Hindu and Buddha. However, their similar teaching on mercy is the highlight.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism have interesting teaching of mercy since it related to their gods (the goddess of Devi for Hindus and Mahayana for Buddhis). In Buddhism the term mercy is closely related to “Metta” (Pranata, 2020, 9) which carries a broad meaning from love, friendship, good will, benevolence, kinship, concord, non-illness and non-violence (Buddharakkhita, 2013:3), one of the four sublime emotions (Khema, 2014:15), tenderness, in the sense of full moon, kindness, which is unconditional and universal – love that is pure without expecting anything from others and does not discriminate between living beings (Susilā, 2018:38), love without a sense of belonging. Love without ego, universal, love for all, without distinguishing the welfare of oneself and other beings, without attachment; also, good will for all beings without discrimination of any kind (Jotānkāra, 2013:129).

Therefore, mercy or loving kindness is an act of love for both one-self and all beings. Both goddesses in Hinduism and Buddhism are modelling compassion toward offender.

### **The concept of Mercy in Confucianism**

Confucianism and Buddhism are intertwined in the land of China. While Confucianism offer sacrifice to spirit of the dead, Buddhism does not practice it. There is a long-running dispute involving whether Confucianism is religion or philosophy. However, this paper would not concern to the issue as Indonesia has recognized Confucianism as one of recognized religions legally.

Confucius' argues that mercy is one of benevolence (ren). It is social attitude toward special group of people, such as the poor, the weak and the disabled. Ren is the morality of love which means loving others (Yuexin Zhang, 2018). In fact, Raguin explains that for Confucius, ren means “being a man for another man” (Yves Raguin S.J., 2016). As for Mencius, Jim Behuniak concludes that ren can be translated as compassion; that involves “feelings of commiseration that are typically present in our native motor and autonomic responses” (Jim Behuneak, *The Oxford Handbook of Confucianism*, 2023, 103). This is the main aim of Confucianism, that is to be the man of perfect virtue (ren zhe). Mencius continues Confucius' teaching as he stated whoever didn't have those virtues, was not a human as cited (Yuexin Zhang, 2018),

*“All men have the heart of mercy... Thus, it can be seen that one cannot be counted as a human if he goes without a heart of mercy, if he has no sense of shame or detest, if he has no sense of concession, and if he fails to distinguish wrong and right.”*

In summary, all six recognized religions in Indonesia have been exposed to the concept of mercy within the teaching of its own theology. They agree that mercy is a virtue and kindness toward others. All spiritual leaders of the religions have modelled consistently of how mercy is understood and practiced. Mercy is an expression of love, care, compassion, and pity to the troubled and needy in all forms. Mercy does not allow any discrimination attitude to any group of people.

## **DISCUSSION**

The shared belief of mercy which is compounded by the six religions manifests as tolerance for Indonesian's gotong royong, as their social identity studied by Tajfel. The shared belief is seen as Indonesian's collective philosophy, personal experience, incorporated in their life, values, attitudes and guiding principles (Ashforth, 1989).

### **Implication of mercy in political sphere and social culture sphere**

Indonesia upholds a strong sense of nationalism with 'unity in diversity' emblem, because of their egalitarian culture of gotong royong (mutual and reciprocal assistance) (Sharma, 2013). In the deepest meaning gotong royong is a philosophy of life that takes the collective life as the most important, thus the spirit of mutual assistance grew out the spirit of resistance to domination (Bowen, 1986). Indonesia overcame years of colonialization by living in tolerance and mercy through gotong royong. Followed by the reformation phase in 1998 to demolish the imperious leader. Therefore, gotong royong is ingrained Indonesia ideology that believes in God, just and civilized humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice for everyone. Hence, all eligible citizens can rightfully elect a president and all regulations set by the legislative supposedly uphold social justice for everyone. The local authorities could voice policies and regulations in favor to their people, and all citizens can embrace and express their culture and religions, while living in harmony and respect for each other.

### **Implication of mercy in education**

Merdeka Belajar (MB - Freedom to Learn) is a new curriculum established by education ministry to restructure the education system in Indonesia written in *Permendikbudristek* No. 7, 2022 (regulation of the minister of education, culture, research, and technology). First is MB authorizing schools to contextualize their teaching and learning activities. MB encourages teachers to foster differentiated instruction, collaborative and cooperative strategies into their teaching practice, and embed local's virtues, nourishing students' individual talents and encourage them to embrace their national identity gotong royong. MB embraces Indonesia's slogan 'unity in diversity' which strongly requires mercy to be more explicit in the curriculum and the funding. MB restructures the

education's funding BOS (school's operational fund) stated in *Permendikbudristek* No. 6, 2021. BOS provides relief from all fees for the underprivileged students in both public schools to non-international standard private schools. MB sets flexible regulations for schools to budget their expenses according to students' needs and teachers' improvement.

### **Implication of mercy in economy**

Indonesian economics in Indonesia Constitution Article 33 1945 is *ekonomi kerakyatan* (people's economy) which holds the principal of *gotong royong*. *Ekonomi kerakyatan* in summary: a) centered on economic activities carried out by society; b) all citizens have equal rights on economy, c) government pays great attention on MSMEs (Siwi, 2022). The government launched a public credit scheme known as KUR to support MSEs that are ineligible for credit from commercial banks. MSEs traditionally finance their business by borrowing physical assets and funds from each other to reduce their costs and risks (Lukiyanto & Wijyaningtyas, 2020). Yet, MSEs plays a vital role in Indonesia for unemployment reduction, lowering the poverty level and income inequality. Recently, Indonesia established BUMDes (enterprises owned by villages) a program of SEGORO (gotong royong economic system). BUMDes allows villages to receive grants and to support their MSEs. Economic policies are reserved for every level of income in Indonesian, while capitalist tends to favor from the top-down, *ekonomi kerakyatan* prefers to bottom-up.

## **CONCLUSION**

The concept of mercy is a common value and understanding among six recognized religious in Indonesia. All religion embraces mercy as a virtue and kindness toward others. Islam understands mercy as an expression of love and care of a mother. Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) describes mercy as divine attitude. Jesus Christ is pictured as loving and compassion figure toward the poor and ill. Hinduism and Buddhism place mercy and injustice attitude as contrary. It cannot go together. Confucianism classifies expressing mercy in daily life as a pursuit of a perfect man. Thus, mercy is an expression of love, care, compassion, and pity to certain group of people that is weak, disabled, poor, or ill. It does not give any room for any discrimination attitude toward any group of people.

This concept of mercy is potential basis for tolerance to flourish in Indonesia. The concept drives every religion member to respect other religions member in spite of their theology, their faith, and their numbers. Mercy directs society to embrace others with patience, kindness, love and harmony. It has been embodied in several aspects of life in Indonesia. In fact, its significance for tolerance in Indonesia has been expressed in Indonesia's ideology that believes in God, just and civilized humanity, unity, democracy and social justice for everyone. Therefore, Indonesians fought for reformation against unmerciful leader for equality on exercising their rights on political system and for local authorities to rise and present policies that favor their local people. In the economy, gotong royong in MSMEs implies the ideal example of mercy running through diverse society. The people who are underprivileged may have better opportunities to improve their

education, well beings, and economy. Mercy also implicates the individual rights and collective rights of Indonesians to uphold their religion and preserve their culture. Indonesians are open to building community, celebrating their ceremonial events, and applying their cultural values based on mercy for one another.

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