

In the Public Interest

Islam in a Different Context: Teaching, Learning, and Dialogue in Indonesia

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LET'S FACE IT. If you are a teacher of Islamic studies, you are constantly faced with having to explain Islamic religion in relation to the image of crisis and conflict (real or imagined) that your audiences bring to the table. What I wish to do here — "in the public interest" — is to give a snapshot of my sabbatical in Indonesia in 2004, which I experienced as both a vacation from the one-sided perceptions of Islam and a call to pay attention to a very hopeful youth population that wants to live at peace with "the West" as well as in the abode of Islam.

I received a Fulbright grant to teach in the new Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, the oldest university in Indonesia, where students from the various islands and religions of Indonesia study religions critically, empathetically, and . . . together. I was delighted to be assigned to teach a master's level course on "Interreligious Dialogue" — as it harkened back to my graduate training at Temple University, one of the early hubs of global dialogue among religions and civilizations. My personal research goal was to learn about current interreligious relations and Islamic education, and I traveled to six of Indonesia's 13,000+ islands to do this: Java, Sumatra, Bali, Lombok, Papua, and Kalimantan (Borneo). My work in both medieval spiritualities and contemporary developments in Islam in the United States, combined with the terrible relationship between the U.S. and the Islamic world, led to many invitations to lecture at universities and pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools). My artist husband, Michael, joined me on this adventure. He took photos of peoples, landscapes, murals, cities, students, mosques, temples, churches, volcanoes,

frogs, lizards, and the Vespa he bought to get around on. We invited our two grown daughters to join us for a time, as it was too difficult to explain through e-mail the graciousness of the people and the complex matrix of historical, political, religious, ethnic, educational, and cultural dynamics we faced and learned from every day!

Learning from my students

I could not have had a better group of students to teach me about Indonesia's history of cultural and religious diversity. Of the 35 students in my class, 28 were Muslim, 5 were Christian, and 2 were Hindu. One-quarter of the students were women (mostly Muslim, two Christians). We had the major islands represented in the class — Java, Sulawesi, Sumatra, Lombok, Bali, Kalimantan (Borneo), Timor, Maluku — so we could get first-hand reports from students (or by cell phone from families) on remembered history and current problems. From the islands where there has been a history of religious or ethnic conflict, we had in class representatives from "both sides." From our Muslim and Christian students from Ambon/Maluku (where the clashes are always reported as Christian-Muslim conflict), we got first-hand, consistent reports from students' families and from open public discussions, organized by students on the topic of the conflict in Ambon. We learned that 1) the situation was much more complicated than typically reported, with various outside parties invested in provoking apparent "religious" conflict, and that 2) there were very strong interfaith Muslim-Christian organizations actively working on peace and conflict resolution issues, as well as on preventing divisive rumors from escalating. From Timor we had Muslim and Christian students report their experiences of the history of conflict in Timor — again, reframing the historical issues with a much more complex reading of colonial and post-colonial legacy than is normally reported in the media or partisan literature. We had a "Muslim Dyak" from Kalimantan who helped us understand the Muslim Mudari vs. Christian Dyak clashes, as well as the work being done to prevent and heal wounds of past conflict. We had both Hindu and Muslim students from Bali who spoke of both interreligious problems and cooperation, especially since the Bali bombings (the latter of which have had a devastating effect on the economy).

As we studied the history of interreligious dialogue, we looked at the early efforts of theologians and philosophers (in the first part of the twentieth century through the 1970s) as they sought a common ontological — "spiritual" — core that all religions share. Students were eager to look at more current discussions on "truth and dialogue" such as Farid Esack and Paul Knitter, who emphasize that in our post-modern era, we may not find a common core, but we can — indeed, must — find



Gisela and student, Amay, in Bali on the 2004 student trip to the Bali Bombing Memorial. Photo courtesy of Gisela Webb.

common ground, a common ethic, in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. This is where the students' hearts and hopes lie, and where their current engagement and enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue come from.

In advising second-year students on their master's theses, I learned still more of the history of interfaith cooperation (which we never hear about in the U.S. press in reference to Indonesia!). For example, as one of our students presented his master's thesis proposal — "A Study of the Reforms in Pesantren Schools after the 1965 Slaughter" — I asked him why he chose this topic. He said his father's generation had participated in this killing field which pit mostly Muslims against "supposed" communists in a "kill or be killed" melee. He added that this experience had left a "psychic shock" on the community — the shock that they *could* participate in this event — and that this "realization" led to the introduction of learning about other religions in the pesantrens, in order to prevent this from happening again. I realized that my students were the first generation to have grown up in this school system, and I believe we are seeing the fruits of the generation that established an approach to building interreligious tolerance and knowledge. A number of the students were/are involved in

NGOs that work across religious lines in such areas as interfaith dialogue, sex education (including HIV/AIDS prevention for sex workers), and women's health issues and advocacy.

Our interreligious dialogue class also raised issues of *intra*-religious conflict (like Protestant-Catholic, or liberal vs. fundamentalist Islam), so I added "special topics" dialogue classes. For example, we had an Intra-Christian Dialogue Group (which was attended by Muslims as well) that discussed the problem of taking back to their religious communities "pluralistic" thinking cultivated at the university when their congregations and leaders at home would probably oppose it. The Christians who participated were Indonesians who were Protestant (from Timor and Ambon), Roman Catholic, Charismatic Christian Chinese, and Greek Orthodox. And everyone wanted to have a "special topics" dialogue to look at recent theological and juridical scholarship on "women and religion," "homosexuality," and "transgendered sexuality." Students wanted to search out how they might approach these issues in ways that integrate new knowledge (medical, philosophical, social science), compassion, and tradition.

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