Sumanto Al Qurtuby

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Besides wreaking havoc on an unprecedented scale, the violence that took place in the Moluccas (comprising the provinces of Maluku and Maluku Utara) from 1999 until 2002 has given birth to an ever growing body of scholarship. The roots, development, and the involvement of various parties in the violence have been studied by researchers from various disciplines, providing any reader who is interested in what occurred with a broad range of perspectives and explanations.

Sumanto Al Qurtuby sets out to bring back the attention to the role and function of religion in the conflict as he feels that this has been neglected and underplayed by other scholars who see religion either as an excuse or as a propaganda and mobilizing tool to disguise other motives and purposes (p. 8). According to Sumanto Al Qurtuby this perspective falls short in understanding the importance of religion for the people who were directly affected by and who directly participated in the conflict.

Focusing on Ambon, where Sumanto Al Qurtuby did most of his fieldwork for his PhD research, the second and the third chapter, aptly called Perang Sabil (Holy War) and Perang Salib (Crusade), are mirroring descriptions of how rigid interpretations of Islam and Christianity as well as government policies weakened the bridging capacity of local culture and traditions. As the author conducted interviews and sent out queries to former combatants from both sides, these are two of the richest chapters in the book. The reader is left asking for more detail and more stories. His argument that for those involved in the fighting, it was most of all a religious conflict, is convincing and a valuable reminder for researchers to take seriously the perspectives of those who were there. It does not contradict research that has focused on the instrumentalization of religion during the conflict.

When it comes to the role of culture and traditions the author tends to follow a discourse that emphasizes these themes, but a closer look at the history of the Moluccas might have provided a more nuanced view. Even though the concepts of pela (the traditional alliances between villages that can also involve villages with different religious background) and gandong (the concept of shared heritage) are often mentioned in constructing an image of a pre-conflict, pre-Orde Baru or even pre-colonial Moluccas as a peaceful place, the operative word is constructing. Sumanto Al Qurtuby not only studied the role of religion in conflict, but also looks at the way religious leaders and organizations...
attempted to end the violence and to reach peace. By following the process he shows that sometimes people make a difference, as through the election of a moderate minister over a hardliner as head of the synod of the largest Protestant church.

According to Sumanto, various scholars have underestimated the role of the government in finding a solution. Bringing out the role of then coordinating minister of Welfare Jusuf Kalla in the success of the Malino II-agreement in February 2002 in which two delegations of Muslims and Christians were able to reach a compromise, he wants to underline the importance of the intervention by the central government. The fact that houses of three of the delegation members were destroyed by radical and discontent factions within their own communities reminds us that engaging in conflict resolution can be a dangerous business. In the chapter on conflicts that took place after the Malino II-agreement, Sumanto Al Qurtuby identifies various fault lines in present-day Ambon society that are very apparent despite attempts of the local, regional, and national government to depict the Moluccas as a smooth social and political landscape where peace has been restored. These fault lines include rifts between local elites, the unresolved position of migrants, and the high level of distrust between communities. Here the author describes the continuing work of religious and societal leaders who work in the field of conflict resolution.

As Sumanto Al Qurtuby deliberately uses the concept of ‘religious violence’, a more elaborate discussion of the concept of what constitutes religious violence, separating it from other forms of violence would have been welcome. But it is clear that Sumanto Al Qurtuby has made a valuable contribution to the scholarship on the conflict in the Moluccas, even though it is first of all a contribution and an addition rather than a deconstruction of the existing body of knowledge.

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