The Aniconic God in Isaiah 43:10 and the Contemporary Discourse on Monotheism

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On Friday, September 18, 2011, after Friday prayers, hordes of people stormed out of the mosques to destroy four statues placed in a public space in the town of Purwakarta, West Java. They are statues of Semar, Bima, Gatutkaca and Yudisthira, well-known figures from the wayang stories, which are part of the popular culture of both the Javanese and the Sundanese people. The group named itself ‘Masyarakat Peduli Purwakarta’ (the Concerned Community of Purwakarta), and gave six reasons why they destroyed the statues: (1) the statues are of no utilitarian value; (2) they are an economic waste; (3) they are not relevant to the history of Purwakarta, as the figures are not heroes of the region; (4) they are detrimental to the values of Islam and mushriq (creatures are equated with the creator); (5) they are proof of political moves to lead people back to superstition, and (6) they are figures of illusion.

I disagree with all six reasons and condemn the destruction of the statues of these popular folk figures. In the post-reformation era of Indonesia, similar incidents frequently occur. These phenomena seem to repeat what happened in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban, namely the destruction of ancient Buddhist statues from the Gandharan period. They also show some changes in the cultural and religious views of present-day Indonesians. Although the majority of the Indonesian people are Muslims and Christians, followers of monotheistic religions, until now they were tolerant of iconic expressions of faith within the respective communities. But recently there are militant groups that harbor aniconic attitudes and that do not tolerate statues, especially statues that are placed in public spaces. As can be seen from the six reasons above, they make a distinction between statues of the heroes of Indonesia, which can be found in every major city, and the statues of the wayang stories, which are inherited from Hindu religious mythology. This contemporary beeldenstorm (iconoclasm or image-breaking) is therefore an expression of violence against the symbolic existence of other religions that is contained

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in the people’s cultural heritage. Many people regard the statues as cultural objects. They are not worshipped or even venerated. At most, the figures are regarded as exemplary figures, and many have patterned their lives according to the character of one of the figures. But that is not the view of these militant groups, which I think are convinced that a monotheistic religion such as Islam should not tolerate past heritages that contain elements of polytheistic religions.

This brings me to the theme of our subject, which relates to ‘the law of God,’ ‘civilization’ and ‘monotheism.’ I will look at it in the context of the Christians in Indonesia, especially those who come from the Calvinist tradition, which in the past was also known for its iconoclasm (hence the Dutch expression above). What makes people destroy statues? Do we agree with the ideology/theology of these Taliban-like radical groups? What are we to make of biblical references to statues as idols and the ban on graven images? What is the difference between elohim (God) and elohim (the gods)? How do we look at monotheism? Can we as Calvinists in Indonesia live our monotheistic faith without becoming iconoclasts? In this paper I will first look at a biblical passage, Is. 43:10. Then I will use the findings to evaluate the theological discourse concerning monotheism, which recently has been revived by the books of Jan Assmann, the German Egyptologist,3 and which includes discussions on whether the concepts of deity are translatable or not.4 Finally I shall present my conclusions and return to the context of Indonesia.

“Before me no God was formed”: Is. 43:10 in the Context of Is. 40–55

As is well known, Is. 40–55 forms a separate part in the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, and its historical background is that of the Babylonian Exile (586–538 BCE). Its core goes to a poet-prophet, who produces verses of encouragement for the people of Israel exiled in Babylon, in the wake of the victories of Cyrus, the Persian conqueror. He had defeated many rulers, the latest of whom was the Lydian king, Croesos, and finally stood threateningly on the horizon of Babylon. The victories of Cyrus were interpreted as part of God’s plan to liberate His people, and Cyrus was seen as God’s Messiah (Is. 45:1). The

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