The Importance of Religion and Ecology in Indonesia

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There are two important reasons to get serious about religion and ecology in Indonesia. First, in the past decade environmental problems in Indonesia, where forests make it one of the most important “lung systems” of the world, have shown the tendency to get worse. Ironically, this trend seems to coincide with the start of the democratization process. The move from authoritarianism to democracy means the weakening of state authorities and law enforcement, including in areas where we expect the state to be bold—environmental protection is an important example here. More specifically, decentralization or the sharing of power by the central state with the local agencies also marked a break with the previous centralized state; but did not automatically bring wealth to the local people and instead resulted in the exploitation of natural resources by certain local powers. As a result, in the past few years Indonesia has been consistently rated as one of the world’s worst emitters of greenhouse gasses, mainly due to deforestation.1 In today’s interdependent world, this fact implies greater significance far beyond the boundaries of this archipelago.

Second, it is undeniable that religion plays a very important public role in Indonesia. In many sectors of life, religion is present. Regardless of any judgment about the implications of this situation, this is a fact to be accepted.

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1 This is not to mention that this trend has also brought another consequence: conflicts over natural resources. Though not much reported in the media, it actually contributed to 10% of all violent conflicts in Indonesia in 2010—compare this with only 1% contributed by religious violence, which has received much wider national and international media coverage. See the report by Peace Building Institute, Violence Increased Dispersedly: Analysis of Variant, Pattern and Structure of Conflict and Violence in Indonesia in 2009–2010. (http://www.titiandamai.or.id; also accessible through http://www.peaceportal.org/documents/125056773/125056804/Analysis+of+Conflict+and+Violence+in+Indonesia+2009--2010+(English).pdf).
Considering the grave problems related to the environment, there seems to be no option for religion in Indonesia to be “neutral”: it either becomes part of the problem or the solution. While the main players in environmental degradation have been big companies—national and trans-national—and the state, religion as a source of moral and political authority has its role both positively and negatively. Many religious leaders have been involved in protecting the environment, in some cases with great consequences. However, the effectiveness of religion may also mean that it can be used to legitimate the degradation of the environment, as there have been many such cases.\(^2\) Corporations as well as governments tap into the potent source of religions for many reasons which are not always in the interest of natural sustainability or the people.

Indeed, it is not surprising to say that on many issues religion has been ambivalent. It may be a progressive source that works for justice, but it may also hinder it—and it can play these two roles with equal effectiveness. Justifying the importance of religion in overcoming environmental crisis, Gary Gardner says: “To the extent that religion acts as a conservative social force, it may be correctly perceived as an obstacle to sustainability, since a sustainable world will not be built without major changes to the world’s economies.”\(^3\) Further, “some would argue that religions and religious people today too seldom wear the radical mantle of the prophet, in the sense of being a critic to the established order.”\(^4\)

This is indeed a tall order for religion, especially considering the main actors of today’s environmental degradation. However, religion has indeed been asked to do and promise things which many consider difficult or even impossible. Religions may engage in different ways. First, the very presence of religious organizations and leaders as a moral community on this issue may make a difference. Second, religious teachings may be a source of inspiration for how to treat the world. Third, in Indonesia, a pluralistic country with a Muslim majority, religious leaders have also been prominent in their progressive statements and development of, for example, “environmental fiqh.”\(^5\) Aspirations to imple-


