

Inter-religious Studies in Indonesia, With Reference to ICRS

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Abstract: This article discusses how inter-religious studies is conducted in Indonesia. A case in point is Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS). As one of the founders, Duta Wacana Christian University (UKDW), has its own contributions for ICRS. The Faculty of Theology that plays the actual role as UKDW's representation in ICRS has made ICRS a continuation of its existence as theological education. The method used is a qualitative library research method and observation by the author, who is also involved in interfaith studies. In this article, I will describe the link between theology and inter-religious studies as far as the Faculty of Theology UKDW is concerned. Rather than hindering the progress of inter-religious studies as some might worry, theology is in fact can be a significant part of inter-religious studies.

Keywords: inter-religious studies, theology, ICRS, multi-disciplinary, interfaith dialogue

Abstrak: Tulisan ini akan membahas bagaimana studi lintas agama dilakukan di Indonesia. Sebagai contohnya adalah Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS). Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW) sebagai salah satu pendirinya telah memberikan banyak sumbangan bagi keberadaan ICRS. Fakultas Teologi UKDW yang lebih banyak berperan secara nyata sebagai wakil UKDW melihat ICRS sebagai kepanjangan dari dirinya. Metode yang digunakan adalah metode kualitatif *library research* dan observasi oleh penulis yang juga bergabung dalam studi lintas agama. Tulisan ini akan memperlihatkan hubungan antara teologi dengan studi lintas agama sejauh yang dipahami oleh Fakultas Teologi UKDW. Bukannya menghambat kemajuan studi lintas agama seperti yang dikhawatirkan beberapa orang, kehadiran teologi dalam studi lintas agama justru memberikan penguatan yang berarti.

Kata kunci: studi lintas agama, teologi, ICRS, multi disiplin, dialog antar iman.

Introduction

I have been teaching at the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) for years, but, since the first semester of 2020-2021 academic year the course that I co-teach with Dr. Zainal Abidin Bagir is different. The course is called Approaches to Interreligious Studies. To many who know ICRS well when they find the course is only offered now may sound odd. ICRS is known as an inter-religious consortium which conducts inter-religious studies in several forms: research, coaching, policy making, and teaching. Why only now that it offers a course that speaks about inter-religious studies? The answer is simple, inter-religious studies is a new thing that is still looking for its form. This article will highlight some issues concerning the studies which may depict its tenderness. I will start with discussing some views about inter-religious studies. Then, I will proceed to describe how inter-religious studies is offered in and understood by ICRS. For this matter I do not pretend that I represent everybody's view of ICRS. Surely, my understanding of ICRS comes more from my own experience, being one of its long-time lecturers as well as representation of Duta Wacana Christian University (UKDW), one of the founding institutions of ICRS. Next to the discussion about ICRS, I will share some thoughts that as far as I know

are the reasons why the Faculty of Theology of UKDW (FT) grants a full support to ICRS. This relates to the position of theology itself in the discourse of inter-religious studies. I will show inter-religious studies is an important development of theology. This is of course a point of view of someone whose base is theology like me. Others may have a different consideration. Again, inter-religious studies are still new, people can have different opinions about it.

ICRS

ICRS was founded in 2006 with the intention to promote inter-religious studies (Banawiratma and Bagir, 2010, p. 207). It is a consortium of 3 universities that come from different backgrounds: Christian (Duta Wacana Christian University - UKDW), Islam (Sunan Kalijaga Islamic State University - UIN), and another non-religious affiliated state university (Gajah Mada University - UGM). By looking at the backgrounds of the 3 universities one can already sense an inter-religious atmosphere. Probably nowhere else in the world can one find that kind of inter-religious collaboration. There are of course inter-religious studies programs offered by some higher education institutions elsewhere, but there is none offered by a consortium of Christian-Muslim, state-private universities except ICRS. The collaboration is successful not only in the sense that it can maintain the Consortium to date despite the differences, but also in doing so they are already performing inter-religious studies. Adeney-Risakotta (2020, p. 4), one of “the mid-wives” of ICRS, recently states blatantly that “the primary characteristic of inter-religious studies should be that they are done inter-religiously rather than mono-religiously” Indeed, the instructors, or, lecturers of ICRS come from the 3 universities. Each course is delivered by a Muslim in tandem with a Christian lecturer. Some of the lecturers are from Christian and Islamic theology departments, some others are from sociology, anthropology and political science departments. The students are also no less mixed, they are Christians, Muslims, Indonesians, overseas, who have graduated from various academic disciplines. Even though the “I” in ICRS stands for Indonesia, but content wisely it can also be understood as international.

In fact, every course is delivered in English which gives an access to international students. The inter-religious atmosphere is also apparent in research area. The researchers of ICRS are of mixed religious backgrounds too. Besides Muslim and Christian researchers, there is also a Buddhist researcher. Of course, the fact that the lecturers and researchers of ICRS come from different religious backgrounds does not automatically mean that it is inter-religious already. The inter-religiosity should be made materialized in their real works and the way they work. In fact, just like in the courses I mentioned, the researches at ICRS are also handled collaboratively. Each of the researchers can bring in his/her own religious perspective and experiences in the process which in turn would enrich the works as well as their personal experiences. Exchange of ideas among the researchers become a form of inter-religious dialogue. The object of research at ICRS is of course something related to religion. In Indonesia, speaking about religion in a forum that consists of people from different religious backgrounds is not that easy. People are used to talk about religion with their community members. When they are invited to speak about their believes in front of people from other religions, there is a worry that those people may not understand, or, even misunderstand them, or worse, would feel irritated. Therefore, it needs some courage to discuss own religion with other people. More than a courage, inter-religious discussions also require those who are involved to trust one another. So, by providing a chance for inter-religious discussions, ICRS has made people dare to open themselves and trust other people.

Even though as an academic institution its focus is on the study, ICRS has also involved in promoting the practice of inter-religious dialogue.

Now, I want to reflect on how FT (abbreviation for the Faculty of Theology of UKDW) consented to form ICRS as an inter-religious studies program. For FT to be able to form ICRS is not just a matter of a night. The followings are possible roots from which the idea of forming ICRS may arise in the mind of FT colleagues when they started ICRS. But I am sure it does not happen just in the beginning of ICRS as until now when FT is still committed in supporting ICRS the ideas are still much alive.

Contextual Theology

For FT the decision to take part in ICRS cannot be separated from the theological character it has developed. FT is known among theological schools in Indonesia as the most serious school that promotes contextualization of theology. The most prominent scholar of contextual theology in Indonesia is E.G. Singgih, who is professor at the FT and ICRS. He has written a lot on the topic of contextual theology since 1980s. To mention just a few, *Berteologi dalam Konteks* (2000), *Dua Konteks* (2009), *Dari Israel ke Asia* (reprinted 2012). In many occasions Singgih affirms that Islam is one of a few contexts Christian theologians have to take into account seriously.

Contextual theology is born from the awareness of the importance of a theology that is rooted in context. As we know, the history of the arrival of Christianity in Indonesia and in many places in Asia, Africa and South America is through European missionaries. The Christianity brought by European missionaries is choked with European culture. The European missionaries of the past saw no difference between Christianity and their European culture. They taught the people of Asia, Africa and Latin America to embrace Christian faith while changing their culture with European culture. Even though European evangelization of the past has long ended, its legacy is still felt today. Christians in countries outside of Europe still tend to continue the European style in their life both in church and society. Ironically, their own ancestral culture was abandoned and even treated with hostility. Attitudes and perspectives like these are criticized in contextual theology. The hegemony of European culture over against local culture should end. Christians in Indonesia should appreciate their own cultural heritage. Christianity is no longer positioned as an enemy to local culture but as an integral part of that culture. Being Christian does not deprive people of their context, on the contrary it makes people appreciate their own culture. It is important to note that contextualization of theology does not mean to dissect European elements from the life of Christians in Indonesia or many parts of non-Western world. It is rather like what Kang (2010, p. 33), says from a postcolonial perspective, “the postcolonial discourse that I adopt is, however, not about “nativism” that desires to go back to the “indigenous,” “unpolluted” tradition and culture of the “non-West.” Furthermore, it is neither about “binarism” of the West versus the Rest, nor about claims for “authenticity” of and “loyalty” to the non-West, the “indigenous.” Instead, the postcolonial perspective that I employ is about dismantling any type of domination and subjugation between and among different cultures, races and ethnicities, genders, geographies, sexualities, or religions, both on the interpersonal and institutional level.”

Awareness of the importance of context has led FT to realize that Christianity cannot live in isolation from its Islamic environment. It is important to recall that UKDW evolves from a theological college. Before the establishment of the University in 1985, Duta Wacana was a theological college that started in 1962. Long before that there was already a theological educational institution in the same place. This theological education had been started since 1905 or 1902 when considering its existence in

Purworejo before moving to Yogyakarta. It means the tradition of theological education at Duta Wacana has been going on for more than 100 years. This long history has always been filled with good relations with Islamic people and organizations. It is noted in the history that Dirk Bakker, the missionary who was assigned to start theological education in 1905 had a good relationship with K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, founder of Muhammadiyah. It is also noted that the selection of Yogyakarta as a place of theological education for natives in the early 20th century was due to the reason that Yogyakarta was the center of Javanese culture. So, since the beginning, the theological education at Duta Wacana has engaged closely with its context, namely Javanese culture and Islam (Bakker, 2020).

When Mukti Ali introduced interfaith dialogue, UKDW (still a theological college at that time) was also involved in it. Mukti Ali was former Indonesian Religious Affairs Minister. He is recognized as the initiator of the study of religions and dialogue of religions (Bagir dan Abdullah, 2011, p. 58). The late Djaka Soetapa, a senior lecturer and founder of the Centre for the Study of Religions, UKDW participated in serial meetings of the dialogue. Soetapa himself is an Islamologist who studied at Al-Azhar Egypt. During his times, a good relationship began between UKDW and IAIN (later became UIN) Sunan Kalijaga which has continued until now. The establishment of ICRS cannot be separated from the good relationship between UKDW and UIN Sunan Kalijaga. For UKDW, ICRS is a continuation of efforts to dialogue with Islam. This dialogue is a necessity because of the context in which UKDW is located.

Moreover, the purpose of education held by UKDW is to serve the community. For UKDW, the understanding of the community is not limited to Christians only. In the context of Java and Indonesia in general, the people in question are predominantly Muslim. So UKDW cannot possibly serve the Muslim majority community without dialogue with Islam. But dialogue with Islam cannot be carried out casually or in one or two events only, dialogue with Islam must be carried out continuously. The existence of the ICRS shows a determination to preserve this dialogue with Islam. Therefore, the relationship between UKDW and ICRS is not limited to formalities and institutions. ICRS is a part of UKDW's soul.

Theology of Religions

Duta Wacana has a Center for the Study of Religions (PSAA) which is very active in disseminating a balance understanding of Islam to churches. For a long time, PSAA has been organizing an intensive study program on Islam for pastors and other church workers. One time, this program was extended to the study of Christianity as well. So, the participants who are Muslim can learn about Christianity and, vice versa, Christians learn about Islam. PSAA is also active in producing publications on basic teachings in Islam and Christianity which often lead to misunderstandings such as *dakwah*, *jihad* in Islam, and evangelization, trinity in Christianity (Setiawan & Soetapa, 2010, 2014). These books really help people to get a correct understanding of Islam and Christianity in the midst of provocative speeches from popular radical preachers. These programs are more or less related to the theology of religions which are intensively studied and developed in FT.

Theology of religions, in my case, may be better understood as Christian theology of other religions. The existence of other religions is really placed as a challenge in doing theology. There are similarities between theology of religions and the study of religions, or comparative religions. But if the study of religions, or comparative religions looks at religions "from outside," the theology of religions engages itself within the struggles of those religions. Such involvement is not sufficiently done by

observation, but requires involvement, even commitment. So, theology of religions should reconstruct basic theological elements inherited from the past and held firmly to date in order to include the belief and existence of other religions. As the name suggests, theology of religions connects the reality of religions with the interpretation of God. In the case of FT, the reconstruction means a reconstruction of Protestant theology.

Even though Protestantism is a religious tradition, it actually contains many strands. Protestantism is not a monolithic tradition. As part of the Christian tradition, Protestantism itself is already a tradition among many other traditions. In short, Christianity is a many-faces religion. It is impossible to put Christianity in one basket as far as theological concepts and aspirations are concerned. In Christianity there is an ecumenical movement that seeks to unite the various views, denominations and streams that exist. But the movement is very dynamic. In certain cases, at a certain time and in a certain area there can be good relations between various groups or views. At other times, places or events the opposite happens: debates and even splits. Therefore, when theology of religions emerged, the experience of managing differences in Christianity gives a meaningful contribution. The experience provides valuable insights as to how to understand and appreciate others, who are different from oneself. Ecumenism, which was originally an internal Christian movement, was expanded to become ecumenism with other religions.

Theology of religions is not in itself one. There are differences in it. There is a universalist-essentialist style where the divine is ultimately seen as a single entity. But there are also those who emphasize differences and stop at the dialogue stage. The latter does not pretend to seek common ground. The relationship between religions remains something important. But the relationship is not reduced to something that is ultimately the same. The value of this relationship is in the relationship that contributes or criticizes each other. In this way, religious diversity is maintained and even strengthened. This kind of idea has become increasingly accepted these days. However, essentialist ideas also remain. This essentialist model of theology of religions also has a significant contribution to the relationship between religions. In Indonesia, relations between religions still tend to be coloured by suspicion and even hostility towards others. People are not used to dealing with others in a fluid atmosphere. This does not mean that there are no communities whose members embrace different religions but can still live together in harmony. There are quite a number of such communities, especially in the past. However, it must be admitted that the atmosphere of relations between religions, especially Islam and Christianity since the fall of the New Order regime has been rather unfavourable. Of course, not entirely. The emergence of groups or preachers with extreme views has created intolerant attitudes. So, society needs a view that can balance those extreme views. A universalist-essentialist theology of religions model can be the right choice. This choice can be made keeping in mind that this is a model theology religion only.

Apart from the existing diversity, theology of religions still needs to be seen as a continuation of the study of religions or comparative religions. The study of religions is needed to enrich understanding of other religions. In Indonesia, formally there are 6 religions recognized by the state. But the fact is there is much more to religion. Studies conducted by CRCS-ICRS in recent years have shown indigenous religions still living in this country. Its adherents are often treated unfairly. It must be honestly admitted that the churches have often been involved in unfair treatment of indigenous religions. In general, the Christian view of indigenous religions is negative. Indigenous religions are stigmatized as religions that teach superstition and other nonsense. These teachings are considered to hinder the progress of society. Indigenous religions are also considered to be against Christianity. Such an

atmosphere of hostility should not be allowed. Therefore, it is necessary to make efforts to understand what indigenous religion really is. This understanding should be based on listening and non-judgmental attitudes. In the academic world, this attitude is cultivated through research and academic freedom. So, the role of educational institutions in presenting a correct understanding of religions is enormous. The UKDW Theology Faculty has been doing such efforts for a long time. The critical culture developed at the UKDW Theology Faculty enables understanding of other religions as they are. But the better the recognition of other religions, the greater the demand for re-examining existing theological thinking.

Historical criticism

As a Protestant theological school, Duta Wacana places great emphasis on biblical studies. At first glance, biblical studies seem to have nothing to do with religious studies and interreligious studies. But actually, there is a link and it is quite strong. The biblical study model introduced in Duta Wacana is a study that is based on critical thinking. Such a model is often regarded as a feature of modern biblical study. As with modern biblical studies in many places in the world, the biblical study at Duta Discourse has been coloured by historical criticism. In this study, the Bible is understood in its historical context. Since its appearance in the 17th century, historical criticism has experienced rapid development. One of the developments that occurred is the use of archaeological evidence to understand the reality of religion in the past. For Old Testament studies, for example, these efforts point to how the religion of ancient Israel grew up among other religions in Palestine. Whereas in the past such comparisons always ended in proving the uniqueness of Israel's religion, it is now increasingly evident that Israel's religion has many similarities with other religions in the same area. The distinction between Israel and the other nations can no longer be maintained. At least there are not strong differences between the religions in Palestine. Such conclusions are reached through an in-depth comparative study of religions. In other words, comparative religious studies have been in the Bible for a long time. Such studies also bring a stronger awareness of the relationships that shape the development of a religion. Religion does not grow alone.

It is also important to remember the critical attitude that is so prevalent in Bible study. Even though as a theological education, Duta Wacana's relationship with churches is very close, but this does not prevent a critical study of something that the church highly honours, namely the Bible. Of course, the objective of this critical study is not destructive. On the other hand, with this critical study, understanding of the Bible will be better and more complete. Uncritical understanding of the Bible will actually lead to misunderstandings that are not good for the reader and can also have an impact on the reader's attitude toward others. As is often the case, scripture is very easy to use to justify intolerant attitudes towards others. Therefore, reading the holy book really requires a critical attitude.

Dialogue with Islam

As I have mentioned above, Duta Wacana has made efforts to conduct dialogue between religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Activeness in interreligious dialogue occurs in various layers. The role of Dr. Djaka Soetapa as an expert on Islam is an important historical record. Likewise, with the role of the Center for the Study of Religions which is almost attached to the name Dr. Djaka Soetapa. Apart from being in the academic area, the dialogue with Islam was also carried out by Duta Wacana at the grassroots. Both alone and together with partner institutions such as DIAN-Interfidei, Duta Wacana lecturers and theology students are heavily involved in grassroots dialogue forums. Duta Wacana has

also succeeded in getting churches to engage in dialogue with Islam. Thus, Duta Wacana has contributed to developing a dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

The results of these dialogues in society are also carried over to lectures. Duta Wacana students are used to having interfaith dialogue. They are also used to thinking that dialogue is a way and a strategy that needs to be taken in meeting with other religions. This means that a closed attitude towards other religions is unacceptable. The reason for opening oneself to other religions is in order to obtain a complete understanding of other religions. As a pluralistic society, actually meetings between followers of different religions have become a daily sight. But the meeting had little to do with religion. The people on the street hardly ever talk about their religious differences. There is a fear that if you talk about religion the situation will get heated. In order to prevent unwanted things, religious differences are often kept alone. But incidents of conflict between followers of different religions, especially Muslims and Christians, make people think that the silence on religious differences is misleading. The views of other religions if they were not good at first, will remain so forever if they are not confronted with the views of followers of other religions themselves. During the New Order era (1966-1998), people were not encouraged to talk about religion openly. But at that time the government was still very dominant, so even though there were no discussions among community members, everything was still fine. After the fall of the New Order, the public had the freedom to talk about issues that were previously prohibited from being discussed openly (Mojau, 2017). This freedom is not automatically welcomed. The shadow of fear when talking about other religions will cause anger has not really disappeared. Dialogue between religions is something that people have not really done. Moreover, it is coupled with the emergence of religious extremism which casts grim shadows. So, there is still much need for encouragement and providing opportunities for dialogue. Duta Wacana is one of the institutions that is active in encouraging and providing opportunities for dialogue.

Peace and Reconciliation

Duta Wacana is also active in efforts to bring peace. For a long time, Duta Wacana has had a center for peace studies and conflict reconciliation. When conflicts occurred between followers of different religions in several areas, Duta Wacana sent people who were experts in the field of peace to help restore the situation. Now the center is under the management of the Theology Faculty and forms the basis of a master's study program in peace. Duta Wacana is an institution that believes, "there is no peace without peace among religions."

Peace is a multidimensional problem. Religious conflicts that occur do not only originate from religious issues. Reconciliation between conflicting groups requires dealing with problems of economic inequality, differences in ethnic groups, the struggle for leadership positions in addition to negative views of other religions. The community is already living with various unresolved problems. One time for a simple reason anger erupted and there was care. So, when social conflicts occur, it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of the problems that occur. This understanding also concerns issues in the past that may have happened a long time ago.

The peace study that is part of Duta Wacana has strengthened efforts to establish good relations between followers of different religions. This study provides a broad scope of understanding on religious issues that occur in society. Speaking from North American context, Heidi Hadsell (2010, p. 216), affirms the need for inter-religious learnings in theological schools for the sake of peaceful relationship among different religious groups in a society,

There are solid and important theological reasons to teach interfaith relations in our Christian seminaries. People of other faiths are literally our neighbours and developing good relationships with them is a form of Christian love. Christians are called to be peacemakers. Surely the development of respectful, dialogical relationships with others is an important form of peace making. In addition, scripture cautions Christians to be humble in the claims they make about knowing God.

Hadsell is right in that the source for openness to people with different religious traditions for Christians is the teachings of the Bible. In another word, it lies in the most fundamental teaching of Christianity. Although peace-making processes should include many aspects that live in the society – religion is one, not the sole, of the many aspects – genuine inspirations that drive people to join the processes should derive from the most basic teaching of each religion, in the case of Christianity, it is the Bible.

Relationship with UIN (IAIN)

The impetus to form ICRS does not only come from the ideal sides as above, but also from the relationships between individuals. A number of lecturers at FT are good friends with lecturers at (formerly IAIN) UIN Sunan Kalijaga and UGM. This good relationship occurred either when they continued their studies together in a university or started from an invitation to become speakers in a seminar together. These meetings continued with discussions which made them more familiar. The trust built from these good relationships is a key factor which led to the decision to build ICRS.

Apart from that, there is also a similarity in the history of UKDW and UIN. Both universities originated from a clerical, or pastoral education. When they evolved into universities the study program for religious workers, or leaders is still retained. In UKDW, the program is put under an organization of faculty (FT). Together with FT, there are other faculties which sometime recognized separately and dubbed as secular. Not everybody would agree to the differentiation between secular and religion, but it may reflect the feeling when a school intended for educating clerics changes into a normal university. The common history of UKDW and UIN has somehow created a feeling of being in the same boat of destiny. The boat is sometime imagined as floating in a calm water, but another time it is imagined as like being in a stormy sea. The latter arises when the market seems to drive the universities away from their root as a religiously bound school, meaning, the popularity of the religious programs fades away. There is always a worry that by becoming a university, the religious programs will eventually sink. So far this worry still looks unfounded, but whatever the future will be, it is something that has bound UKDW and UIN. The establishment of UIN from IAIN came a few decades later than UKDW. Therefore, there were times when UKDW was asked to share its experiences with UIN. In any case, it is not just a matter of how to manage a university from an experience of managing a theological education. It is more than managerial know-hows. It really hits the very basic issue of existence, that is, whether the development into the university can be seen as coming from the belly of religious school. In another word, what is the importance of the development into university for the study programs of religion. Also, whether the relationship between other faculties and FT can give a mutual benefit. These questions remain open until now. I think there is no need to answer them once and for all. It is good if the questions are always kept in mind at any time. With that, people are always alert of their situation. In my opinion, the question about the relevance of religious programs in the university set up, or if you see it from the perspective of the religious programs, it is then the question of the relevance of other (secular?) programs for religious programs, is not just a reminder of the past, but also the present. Of course, one should not forget their history. So much lessons can one learn from history, and that history

often leaves its imprint to the current situations. Besides valuing history, the presence of religious programs amidst the (secular?) programs should also be taken as a challenge for what in the academic discourse is known as a dialogue between religion and science. I think the religion and science dialogue would even strengthen the conduct of inter-religious studies.

So far, I have shown how the inter-religious studies has been given birth and nourished by UKDW dan UIN. I believe with the participation of UGM the inter-religious studies at ICRS, and ICRS itself as a manifestation of inter-religious studies could be even better. As a non-religiously affiliated state university, UGM has many programs which when are used for ICRS they would create further multi-disciplinary flavour. Inter-religious studies as explained by Adeney-Risakotta is multi-discipline, therefore it needs involvement of many disciplines. The structure of ICRS under UGM which puts it in the postgraduate department (the inter or multi discipline department) gives another benefit for the interaction with other more disciplines. But space does not allow to talk more about it now. Next, I will discuss what I deliberately leave since the beginning, that is, what is inter-religious studies itself.

Inter-religious Studies (IS)

At the 2014 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting a group of scholars organized a meeting to discuss about inter-faith, or inter-religious studies. The purpose of the discussion is “to explore several theoretical questions raised by the emergence of this area of study as well as the practical implications of these questions.” Each of the individual scholar shared their experiences having involved in inter-faith/inter-religious dialogues. At some point the words of Eboo Patel who also participated in that meeting was quoted in which he says that inter-religious/inter-faith studies is “an interdisciplinary field that examines the multiple dimensions of how individuals and groups who orient around religion differently interact with one another, and the implications of these interactions for communities, civil society and global politics,” (Diller et al., 2015; Pilario, 2020). This definition obviously puts the studies (whether you call it inter-religious, or inter-faith studies) in the realm of people’s experience when they are confronted with religious ideas different from theirs. No wonder if in that discussion each of the participants is given a chance to share their respective experiences. In another word, inter-religious studies for them is a reflection on field experiences. I think this view matches with what I have described above concerning ICRS as a continuation of inter-religious dialogues, particularly Islam-Christianity dialogues conducted by UKDW and UIN. Furthermore, Kate McCarthy describes the context of inter-religious studies as “three overlapping contexts” which are academic, civic, and religious (McCarthy, 2018, p. 34). These contexts are also always present in IS discussions in Indonesia.

In the meantime, Leirvik (2014, p. 11) who also recognized the newness of inter-religious studies and lives out the three contexts gives the following features of inter-religious studies:

1. Interreligious studies are something essentially *relational*, in that it focuses on what takes place between religious traditions and their living representatives, on a scale from acute conflict to trustful dialogue....
2. Interreligious studies recognize the researcher’s, the teacher’s and the student’s role as *agents* in the spaces between. Agency means being implicated in negotiations of power, both within the religious traditions and between them....
3. Recognizing one’s role as an agent means also to tackle the issue of *normativity* in a transparent way. The normative aspect of the study of religion has to do with the contemporary relevance of religious traditions and how they can be meaningfully translated into new contexts. What makes

this work of translation an inter- or trans religious exercise, is the search for meaning and obligation across traditions, through what we conventionally call interreligious dialogue.

For Leirvik, the relationality of inter-religious studies has an implication that those who involve in it should open to the possibility that they can change their mind, even life as a result of intense dialogues. Leirvik shares his own experience as a scholar and interfaith dialogue activist in dealing with Muslim communities in his predominantly Christian country (Norway). He deliberately opens up himself for the Muslims who voice their difficulties being minority in the society. After some times he finds out that his life has been changed by those encounters with the Muslims. This is not just a change on the level of knowledge in which his understanding of Islam is getting better, or more complete. It is also and more importantly an existential change that brings him to be a person with deeper understanding of life. Just like the testimony of many people who are active in inter-religious dialogues that inter-religious dialogue does not convert them from their original faith as worried by some. The other way around, through dialogue their knowledge about their own religion is deepened.

Frans Wijsen who also actively promotes inter-religious studies goes further with saying that “it is in the interaction with the ‘other’ religions that one’s ‘own’ religion and religious identity is constructed, negotiated and manipulated.” In my opinion what Wijsen is trying to say is that to understand religions, or a religion one should go to the real life where adherents of various religions meet and do their daily business. Religion should not be understood by definition, but, by actualization. Wijsen has long been interacted with different peoples in Africa and Indonesia. His knowledge and judgment are formed by his experience having lived in a few of multi-culture societies. On the philosophical side, Wijsen seems to side with postmodern thinkers who prefer to see things as a discourse, an overlapping of many factors that interact one another. Therefore, Wijsen (2020) it is not surprising when he proposes five shifts from the study of religions which lead to inter-religious studies:

First, I move from a “world religions” approach to the study of “interreligious relations,” which emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of religions as its material object (research object) and not the religions as they are “in themselves.” Second, I define interreligious studies not as a new discipline, but as an interdisciplinary field of study, which studies inter-religious relations in a multi-perspective and poly-methodical way (formal object, research perspective). This approach overcomes the classic distinction between insider and outsider perspectives, and thus defuses the controversy about ‘religionist’ versus ‘reductionist’ research methods. Third, I move from a “comparative” to a “conversational” epistemology. This approach does away with essentialist or reified notions of religion.... Methodologically speaking, I opt for “dialogical research.” Fourth, I move from ‘disengaged’ to ‘engaged’ research.... Fifth, I advocate methodological conversion, in addition to methodological agnosticism.... In my view, methodological agnosticism does not make sense in non-Western contexts anyway.

Obviously, Wijsen directs his thoughts to European/Western scholarship who for studying religions one has to show their objectivity by proving that they are disinterested scholars. This is strange for Indonesian scholars though. Above, I explained how inter-religious studies in Indonesia is approached with subjectivity. I believe it has made the study even better. Whatever the result is, the universities and the scholars who are involved in inter-religious studies openly admit that they are believers.

Closing remarks

Werner (2012), representing Ecumenical Theological Education desk of *World Council of Churches* has studied the struggles of theological education in Asia. He writes his findings in an article “Memorandum

on the Future of Theological Education in Asia.” Among other points he mentions, there is one pertinent to our present discussion. Quoting Wilson, Werner says, “The task of theological education in contemporary Asia is to prepare candidates for transformation of Christian communities for the sake of the transformation of the whole society where they find themselves.” This statement about the aim of theological education goes along well with the efforts of FT. Indeed, theological education should not be dedicated for selfish purposes. Being a minority in Indonesia, the Christians should not forget that they are here for serving the whole nation, including the Muslim majority. Theological education has to realize that kind of vision (Setio, 2012). However, Werner also mourns, “yet only some theological schools offer substantial courses and programmes on non-Christian religions, on Asian spiritualities and on interfaith dialogue,” (Warner, 2020, p.11). I hope Werner has FT in mind when he refers to “some theological schools”. Never mind him, as long as the readers of this article can agree that FT is one of the schools who has a long tradition in learning and sharing understandings of other religions.

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