

Response to the paper:

*“ Mission as reconciliation amidst religious extremism.
An Indonesia Christian perspective.”*

By Paulus S. Widjaja

at the Consultation of the Edinburgh 2010 Study Process for ASEAN and Sri Lanka, at STM, Seremban, 10th June 2009.

Respondent: Hermen Shastri

1) GREETINGS!

St the outset, allow me to express our appreciation to Paulus S. Widjaja for his paper presented at this Consultation.

It was informative and exhaustive. His style of presentation allowed us an entry into the life experiences of the author and his insightful theological reflections of bridge-building initiatives between Christian and Muslim communities in Indonesia.

2) His paper dealt with a subject which has become a matter of great importance in current mission discourse at the global level. Religious extremism, or, fundamentalism has become an issue of great concern within nations with a religiously diverse population, as much as it affects international relations between nations.

3) In his paper he has attempted to show how religious extremism, with its co-related violence manifestations, stem from the experience of alienation by certain sectors of society, either politically, socially, economically or religio-culturally.

Religious extremism strives in the breeding ground of domination by the powerful over the powerless, within a nation state.

The driving force of religious extremism is the feeling of alienation and marginalisation.

4) He has pointed out that in dealing with the experience of oppression, religious convictions serve as a driving force in helping powerless people find strength and inspiration to stand up against forces out to destroy them, either perceived or real.

Those who associate themselves with extremists groups find justification in their struggle by the selective reading of their scriptures.

By transforming human political struggles onto the cosmic level, they include God in their battle plan. By selecting certain texts in their scriptures they seek

to substantiate the spiritual validity of their struggle. So, religion can provide extremists the metaphor of cosmic war, of God's engagement in the battle between good and evil.

In the history of all religious traditions, there have been times when sacred scriptures have been used to justify violent acts upon others, and portrayed it as God's battle plan for the final consumption of human history. Karen Armstrong's book "The Battle for God" has shown us the validity of such a thesis. The author of the paper pointed out that extremists groups seek to reclaim and reestablish a glorious past back into the present.

- 5) By drawing from experiences of reconciliation in the context of Indonesia, he concludes his paper by offering a missional response to religious extremism. He emphasizes three approaches in missions that relate to the ministry of reconciliation among peoples of different cultures and religions. He highlights 3 aspects- vulnerability, humility and hope as positive peace-building initiatives that can help diffuse tensions between religious communities, and as in the case of Indonesia, between Christians and Muslims.

There is a spirituality related to the 3 aspects which helps to reroute Christian missions and lay foundations for bridge-building experiences between the two communities. In his presentation, he offered us many of such experiences and insights. Allow me now to move beyond the presentation and make a couple of points to stimulate our thinking over the subject matter.

- 6) I revisited the section studies of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference. I discovered that dealing with religiously extremism or religious fundamentalism was not a topic of deliberation.

It is clear that religious extremism is an issue of the 21st century.

So I hope that Asians participating in the anticipated Edinburgh Conference of 2010 would assert their presence by ensuring that such a matter is deliberated upon, as it is global concern characteristic of the 21st century.

- 7) **Religious terror: why is it religious and why it is happening now?**

The point that needs to be made is that the reality of globalization has affected all nations around the world.

Part of the reason why the resurgence of religions have taken the form and emphasis it has today is a result of globalization. No society is unaffected by the effects of globalization, politically, economically, culturally and religiously.

Societies which were once largely mono-religious have now become plural and have to grapple with problems of diversity and its attendant challenges.

As Dr. Widjaja points out the experience of alienation is a strong driving force that fans the resurgence of religion with political goals.

8) It is crucial at this juncture to clarify some foundational issues.
Allow me to make a couple of points.

8.1 We know that in Asia, religions have existed side by side for centuries. That must impress upon us the religious doctrines dogmas and practices, however different they may be, are seldom the source of conflict. Differences in doctrine and ritual may create a certain social distance, or, even impede social interaction. But they do not in themselves cause conflict.
For those who hold the view that different religions living side by side will invariably clash, must look at Asia and observe how different religions have co-existed and enriched each other's cultures.

8.2 Yet there are eruptions of religious enmity between rival groups manifesting itself in different places in Asia every now and then.

What this implies is that religious conflict is often the work of religious leaders who for a variety of reasons stoke the flames of hatred and incite their people to clash with others.

Studies of conflict situations have shown that invariably there are other religious leaders and groups on both sides of the divide, who, oppose to the hatred by contending forces, and seek to build peace.

8.3 One of the situations that allow religious leaders to play to the fears of people, is when there exist growing disparities between the majority and minority communities in a country.

8.4 Religious conflicts take a national dimension when political leaders seek to maximise their popularity by exploiting the fears and hopes of groups that may feel "alienated" from the mainstream.
Electoral politics and political manipulation of mass sentiments have had an adverse impact upon inter-religious relations, because national leaders are judged by their religious affiliation rather than their democratic performance.

What makes it worse is when the nation state clothes itself in the cultural or religious garbs of one community, and glorify symbols or ethnicity and religion as pre-eminent in defining national identity.

8.5 In a situation where there is avert measures by national leaders to promote the supremacy of one particular faith (usually in the majority), there is a converse tendency of other minorities developing certain social and

cultural attitudes which become antithetical to a good relationship with the majority community.

9) Checking Religious Conflict

As many studies have shown religious conflicts exist because of political economic and social factors, the effective measure to deal with them such issues is to work for national transformation by paying attention to the following:

9.1 Working with well- intentioned people, NGOs and civil society to call for political reforms to ensure equal rights for all are safeguarded and promoted.

9.2 Devolution of centralised power and authority.
Enlarging spaces for inter-action between ethnic groups and religions on the basis of participatory democracy.

9.3 All groups should be committed to the equitable distribution of the national wealth, thereby eradicating disparities between different communities .

9.4 Common ground between religions should be strengthen as far as human rights are concerned.

10) Conclusion

The presenter emphasised that a missionary approach based on vulnerability, humility and hope are crucial in strengthening the reconciliation process between religious communities

I propose that the three aspects he highlights been view as missional spirituality that should undergird our relationship to others.

Our mission must be one where we are cooperating with Holy Spirit as we share our lives with others.

We should be totally identified with the struggles of the people at the following levels; sharing life in community ; common action for justice and integral development and sharing in the dialogue of how religious people can be a blessing to the nation, by sharing common faith convictions to build a harmonious society.

One mission therefore also involves a kenotic spirituality on sharing lives with others without erecting religious barriers. Our communion in Christ should help us do mission the way Christ did mission as potrayed in the gospels.

Finally our mission is driven a spirituality of reconciliation hope. Because we believe in the Kingdom of God, any solidarity action to create a more just world strengthens our resolve that we can only do that together with people of other faiths.

To summarise I would describe reconciliatory mission as this.

The mission of the Church is a participation in the mission of God that goes from creation to new creation. God's saving act has always been present in history.

We have experienced it already now and yet we are still hoping for its eschatological fulfillment, that is, the ultimate salvation in the Lord.

If I may decipher the signs of God's salvation within the signs of our time, then I would like to indicate two great signs, namely the process of liberation and of communion in various realms of human life.