

# IN HOW FAR IS VIOLENCE IN INDONESIA RELIGIOUS REFLECTIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

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## Abstrak

Dalam artikel ini penulis meninjau beberapa teori yang merefleksikan hubungan antara agama dan kekerasan. Jelaslah bahwa agama sebagai sistem simbol secara sangat kuat dapat membenarkan dan meradikalkan kekerasan. Hal itu terjadi dengan menghubungkan gejala-gejala ekonomis, politis, sosial dan atau kultural dengan simbol-simbol religius otoritatif. Simbol-simbol itu mengungkapkan norma-norma, nilai-nilai dan kebiasaan-kebiasaan yang tidak dipertanyakan dan ditempatkan di bawah kuasa ilahi. Dapat dikatakan bahwa kekerasan mendapat inspirasi religius apabila ada kooptasi otoritas religius dan kepentingan-kepentingan sekular. Tetapi agama sendiri juga dapat menimbulkan kekerasan, sebab agama mempengaruhi dan membentuk identitas serta perilaku individual dan kelompok-kelompok sosial. Teori identitas sosial memberikan perspektif yang menyeluruh dan jelas untuk memahami bagaimana agama dapat secara intrinsik berhubungan dengan kekerasan.

**Key words:** Social identity theory, system of symbols, religion and violence.

## Introduction

What does religion have to do with violent conflicts? Are they closely linked because violence has a sacred dimension, inasmuch as it is hallowed as a power beyond human control? Or can an act of violence never be a religious practice, since God can only be seen as a source of love and religion exclusively as a force to promote the good? In this article we will defend an intermediate position. Although a 'religious' explanations of violence certainly has its limits, violence is inherent in the process of religious identity construction through social categorization, social identity and social comparison.

### 1. Examples of religion and violence in Indonesia

Let us start with some examples of so-called religious violence in the recent history of Indonesia. These examples show however that religious issues are often interwoven with economical, political and socio-cultural issues.

First of all, religious violence may have an economical dimension when religiously legitimated violence is addressed to economical successful groups in society, or when powerful groups in society suppress the poor and socioeconomic disadvantaged groups. This is especially the case where members of the majority religion are less successful economically than members of the minority religion. In Indonesia, this is for example the case with regard to the violence towards the Chinese communities of merchants in the major cities and provincial capitals. While those who are involved in violence are sometimes using religious symbols, it is often an ethnic conflict with deeper economic dimensions.

Secondly, religious violence can have a political dimension. In 1965-1966 the so-called new regime lead by Suharto killed hundreds of thousands of communists which were pictured by provocateurs as deeply anti-religious. More recent examples are the riots in Situbondo (East Java) and Tasikmalaya (West Java) in 1996. Initially the riot was not

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connected with religious issues, but became an explicitly anti-Christian movement later on. Rioters used Islamic symbols while burning churches and Christian schools. Following Hefner's (2000, 58 and 190-193) explanation, the roots of these riots can rather be found in a political conflict between the government (with Suharto as president) and *Nahdlatul Ulama* (the association of Muslim scholars with its leader Abdurachman Wahid). Wahid always campaigned that *Nahdlatul Ulama* supported pluralism and tolerance, and at the same time expressed his political ambitions (in opposition to Suharto) in joining Megawati's nationalist party. The riots gave the impression that Wahid could not control his supporters and that his statements about *NU* as an agent of pluralism was a fraud. The riot could have been orchestrated by anti-Wahid agents to compromise him. Even more recent examples of religiously inspired political violence are the conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Ambon (1999) and Halmahera (2000) related to the political movements who strive for the foundation of an independent Republic of South Maluku.

Thirdly, religious violence can have a socio-cultural dimension when it there is an association between religion and ethnic and/or national identity. The Sudanese identity is for instance inextricably bound up with the religious (Islamic) identity. Conflicts with other ethnic groups (belonging to other religious traditions) consequently become religious conflicts. Religion can also function as a vehicle of nationalism in a society, or can reinforce the attitude of superiority and dominance of certain groups in society. An illustration is the frequently heard self-description of the Indonesian government as being the representative of the biggest Muslim country in the world. Through this statement the government seems to establish the national identity on a religious tradition, although the constitution of the Republic does not define itself as a Muslim country. Finally, religion can expressly rebel against a dominant socio-cultural context. Extremist groups are opposed to the modern liberal state because it refrains from exercising specific moral direction or guidance over its citizens. In the eyes of certain religious trends this creates a moral vacuum or even moral decadence (Almond et. al. 2003).

## **2. Theological and religious explanations of violence**

These examples bring us back to the fundamental question about contested relationship between religion and violence. To what extent can we speak of *religious* violence? Do these examples prove that there is no 'pure' religious violence? Of course not. It would be an error to interpret 'religious violence' as always and necessarily underpinned by other concerns (e.g. economic, political, ethnic, etc). It is certainly a mistake to say that religion merely provides the motivation or the justification for the violence that would have been there for non-religious reasons anyway. Such a statement would underestimate the power of religion. Religion in itself is, at least for some people, valuable enough to lead to intolerance, bloodshed and self sacrifice. Therefore one should try to understand religious violence on its own terms. But what does that mean, to understand religious violence 'on its own terms'? Is there a theological explanation for religiously inspired violence? Does the discipline of religious studies shed some light on this complicated phenomenon? In answering these questions authors take different directions.

Some scholars frame religious violence within the dialectical experience of the sacred that contains both overpowering presence (*tremendum*) and fascination (*fascinans*). While religion is the response to the ambiguous sacred, it contains within itself the potential to heal and to destroy, to love and to hate. A detailed analyses of the phenomenology of the sacred or a theory of religion helps in other words to understand why there are traces of violence within the core of religion (Appleby 2000; Wils 2004; cf. Otto 1917; Girard 1995). Other authors find inspiration in the Freudian tradition that explains two fundamental elements of the sacred with the help of the example of the totem: the establishment of fundamental limits (i.e. against patricide and incest) and the handling of ambivalent feelings. Here too, religion deals with the insolvable ambiguities of vulnerability and power, safety and oppression, peace and violence. These theories state that religious symbols evoke violent impulses in general, although it is recognized that religion is able to channel instincts

of aggression at the same time. Religious imagination can be both cause and cure for violence (Sagan 1972; Girard & Anspach 2004). A third approach will focus on the truth claims one can find in different religious traditions, often strongly supported or even prescribed by the religious establishment and representatives of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. These truth claims have two variations, one exclusive and the other inclusive. In terms of the exclusive truth claim other religions are evaluated positively only insofar they show similarities with the own tradition that claims universality and absolutism. In terms of the inclusive truth claim other religions are evaluated positively inasmuch they display – according to the concerning tradition – signs of divine revelation.

<sup>1</sup> These truth claims can nourish intolerance because they contradict the conditions for a genuine recognition of other traditions. Although not everybody would agree, I think this genuine recognition entails necessarily the willingness and the skills to understand other traditions in terms of their own premises and a decrease of religiocentrism. According to this theory, religion potentially fosters violence in so far exclusive or inclusive truth claims contribute to intolerance between different religious groups (Sterkens 2001). A fourth approach looks for explanations at the level of specific topics of religious imagination. Analysis of apocalyptic texts makes for instance clear that the radical opposition between chosen and pagans, and dualistic ideas about good and bad – without leaving any room for grey tones – feed the willingness to exclude people with other opinions; while attractive images of life after death make gory acts of self-sacrifice more plausible (Barkun 1996; Setio 2006).

Aforementioned theories discuss certain aspects of violence from a (more or less) ‘religious’ perspective. To a certain extent they understand religious violence ‘on its own terms’ because they start from a substantial definition of religion, a functional theory of religion or a theological frame of reference. They rightly refute the argument that religion ‘as such’ can not be violent. They point at symptoms that indicate a relation between religion and violence and offer a frame of reference to interpret violent acts for ‘religious’ reasons. That is an important contribution to the debate. But on the other hand, they do not prove that religion ‘as such’ is necessarily violent. Even fundamentalist, anti-modern or isolated religious groups are not necessarily violent. That only happens under certain conditions. Neither would these ‘religious’ and ‘theological’ theories on violence deny that religion is also able to contribute to generalized trust among people that permits individuals to cooperate, irrespective of their cultural and/or religious identity. Here too, by the way, the contribution of religion to the civil society is provisional (Gutmann 1994; Casanova 1994; Herbert 2003).

I am afraid it is virtually impossible to offer a comprehensive theory that *explains* violence from a pure religious perspective, if one would demand of an explanation that it includes the aspects of general application, universal validity and prediction. The reason why is simple and complicated at the same time. Religion – as a social construction – changes continuously in relations to its environment. It can not be separated from its societal context. Religion and religious ideologies on the one hand, and political, economical and cultural ideologies on the other hand are intertwined. This is all the more true in so far religion seems to play an increasingly important role as an ideology of the public order in various parts of the world, both in western and non-western countries. It is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate and identify religious origins and motives for violence. Therefore: if one is interested in reliable explanations, there is no alternative for detailed case studies of ‘religious violence’ within specific cultural contexts and within the framework of distinctive economical, political and social changes.<sup>2</sup>

In the limits of this publication it is impossible to offer such a detailed analysis. Nevertheless there is one more angle, too often neglected, that contributes to the explanation of the causes and effects of religious violence without it has to deal with the specific contexts in which this violence appears. Social psychology helps us to explain that (the construction of) an individual’s religious identity can lead to violence, simply because identity construction is tied up with processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

### 3. Social Identity Theory

Social psychology considers both individual-level and contextual-level explanations and their interrelationships. Such a combination is a matter of concern, since empirical personality psychology has failed to find specific personality traits for fundamentalists, unless you define fundamentalism in terms of specific personality traits like for instance authoritarianism (Robins & Post 1997; Hood et. al. 2005). Even conversion to fundamentalist faiths fails to produce basic personality changes (Paloutzian, Richardson & Rambo 1999). For this reason, there is probably more future in an approach that relates the ideas and behaviour of individual fanatics with the ideas of the communities they relate to (social psychology), or an approach that relates individuals with groups in terms of religious identity construction (psychology of religion).

From the perspective of social psychology violence is inherent to religion because religion establishes an identity for both individuals and groups. Violence, of course, is here defined in the broadest sense of the word as any kind of behaviour that harms the violent person him/herself or those who are victimized, either physically or mentally. It entails physical violence (or the threat of it), verbal violence (e.g. insulting) and social exclusion. One can still doubt whether violence that finds its source in religious identity construction can be called *religious* violence (as a quality of the violence), but simply because religion establishes an identity it already has the potential to lead to violence. With this statement, social identity theories differ in their interpretation on conflicts from the so called realistic group conflict theories. The latter presume that conflicts are rational: hostility towards outgroups aims at obtaining the means to realise the goals of the in-group. Intergroup conflicts arise from competition over scarce resources and values. Conflicts find their origin in certain reasons and are therefore 'rational' and 'realistic' (Sherif 1967; Austin & Worgel 1979). Social identity theories on the other hand doubt, in general, that competitive intergroup relations are a necessary condition for intergroup conflicts. Tajfel (1982) proved with his 'minimal group experiments' (called 'minimal' because there was neither a conflict of interest nor a history of hostility between the groups) that mere group identification is sufficient to lead to ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination. Violence is then only a small next step. Tajfel (1982, 2 and 21) defined a group on the basis of both internal and external criteria. Internal criteria refer to an individual's identification with the group, while external criteria refer to the fact that others perceive individuals as members of a common group on the basis of characteristics they do not possess themselves. Both internal and external criteria are necessary for group identification. Social identity theories try to explain intergroup attitudes like ethnocentrism and religiocentrism through the psychological processes of cognitive perception underlying group identification.

In unfolding social identity theories Coenders, Gijsberts, Hagendoorn and Scheepers (2004, 9ff) describe several linked concepts which can be helpful to explain why the development and maintenance of an individual's identity in relation to group identity has the potential to lead to violence. Here, we distinguish three concepts: social categorization, social identity and social comparison. Coenders et al. (2004) develop their theory in the context of ethnic and national identities, but it is also applicable to the formation of religious identity of individuals and groups. In other words: social identity theory is about processes of individuals who relate to groups of what kind so ever. For this reason, the theory is applicable to the construction of national, ethnic and religious identities, and consequently useful to explain national, ethnic and also 'pure' religious violence.

In *social categorization* differences between members of the same groups are seen as peripheral, while similarities between members of the same group become more central. In addition, similarities between members of the outgroup become more important as similarities in the own group. To say it bluntly: especially the outgroup is seen as a group where the members have shared conceptions and feelings, while the characteristics of the ingroup are seen as more diversified and nuanced. Tajfel labels it as the 'depersonalisation' or

‘dehumanisation’ of the outgroup. Because of the tendency to generalize, education aimed at the decrease of religious prejudice should avoid presenting religious traditions as fixed entities, but also point at the contingency, the internal dynamics and internal plurality of unknown religious traditions and worldviews. If it is not made clear that one finds a diversity of notions and beliefs among members of each tradition, education about different religious traditions could have the opposite effect of its intention, namely a decline in negative prejudice (cf. Stenhouse 1982; Duckit 1992; Sterkens 2001).

*Social identity* has to do with the fact that every individual owns his self-image from “his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981, 255). Individuals will always strive for a positive self-image by attempting to join the groups they evaluate positively, and reduce the identification with group(s) they evaluate negatively, even when they belong to these group(s). In social identification the positive stereotypes are applied to oneself, while social contra-identification is the resistance against the generalized negative characteristics of the groups one does not (want to) belong to (Brown 1995; Billiet 1995). ‘Social identity’ refers to the fact that the identity formation of an individual goes hand in hand with processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

Thirdly, a positive self-esteem can also be reached by favourable *social comparisons* between the characteristics of the ingroup and relevant outgroups. Individuals describe the features of the ingroup as ‘more valuable’ or ‘better’ than the one of the outgroups. The positive stereotypes will be applied to oneself and the ingroup(s), while negative stereotypes are related to members of outgroups. Thus prejudice is first of all a matter of relationship between groups, while individuals think of themselves as belonging to a social group. Whether prejudice or conflict is the cause or the result of group formation is from the perspective of social comparison only a theoretical question. They go hand in hand. While some conflicts are the result of sharp distinguished identities between groups, at the same time the distinction between groups is established within and through conflict. In the first case the different social constructions of needs and satisfiers in the distinguished groups compete and frustrate the relationship. In the second case, conflicts are means to make social comparison and social identity construction possible, and strengthen the internal cohesion of the distinguished groups (cf. Coser 1956; Blumer 1958).

Although social identity theory starts from a critique to realistic group conflict theories, it does not throw the realistic group conflict theories overboard, but rather incorporates them. Competitive conditions strengthen or weaken intergroup relations (e.g. Turner 1999). Social identity theory should therefore not be misunderstood as an unconditional theory that explains ethnocentric or religiocentric reactions independent of the intergroup competition. It is important to study the context as well, mainly in terms of the kind of scarce resources at stake and the societal conditions under which competition arise. And this brings us back to our statement: the relation between religion, religious prejudice and violence needs an interdisciplinary approach. Social identity theory can contribute to it in describing the concept of religiocentrism by analogy with the concept of ethnocentrism<sup>3</sup> (cf. Eisinga & Scheepers 1989), and by indicating the causes and consequences of religious prejudice and violence from the process of religious identity construction.

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- <sup>1</sup> The Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000) writes in its declaration *Dominus Iesus* (no 8) for instance: “Therefore, the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain”.
- <sup>2</sup> It is getting even more complicated if one realizes that the predicate ‘religious’ in religious violence does not refer to a quality of the violence itself, but sometimes to the origins, sometimes to the motives, sometimes to the object of the violence and sometimes to the theory that offers a frame of reference to interpret and clarify the violence.
- <sup>3</sup> Sumner (1906, 12) already indicated the two-dimensional structure – positive attitude towards ingroup combined with negative attitude towards outgroup — of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is “the technical name for this view in which one’s own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it”.