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The Role of Theology among Christian Indonesians during COVID-19 Pandemic – A Perspective from Indonesia

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SYNOPSIS

Natural disasters tend to give rise to a stronger sense of solidarity and togetherness. People would come together in the face of a real, sudden and undeserved suffering of others, partly because natural disasters do not last long. But in a pandemic, things are more uncertain over a prolonged period of time, and theology can play an imperative role in bringing people together to overcome the crisis.

COMMENTARY

A pandemic can break societies apart, given its long duration and the uncertainty it creates. The current pandemic has tested the resilience and cohesiveness of societies. However, it could potentially bring people together.

During this pandemic, solidarity has been visible in many instances, but solidarity has also proved to be fickle. Religion and faith have played a crucial role in dealing with the pandemic, especially in plural and modern societies such as Indonesia. During this period, three kinds of theological reasoning were observed in the public sphere (i.e. the Internet) amongst Christians.

Fatalistic Theology

The first kind, fatalistic theology, is when people believe that the dynamics and meaning of the pandemic are solely decided by God. People merely accept God's decrees. Under this approach, prayer means asking God for a special favour,

extraordinary strength, or even miracles. It does not challenge the faithful to undergo the difficult yet necessary process of spiritual discernment. Furthermore, such a way of thinking does not challenge structural problems in societies or religious organisations.

This theological reasoning considers unquestioning faith in God to be the proper response to the pandemic. Hence, the only way to combat the pandemic is to believe that God has power over everything. This framework considers the pandemic largely as a “problem” set against God. Thus, faith becomes a performance in a war envisaged between God and other approaches to the pandemic. It is about asking for God’s “intervention,” rather than searching for and making sense of God’s “intention.”

It does not empower people and society because it takes away the agency and responsibility of people and their societies in the face of the crises. This is especially so in the context of plural and modern societies that need a common platform for action. Furthermore, it tends to create unnecessary tensions with science and modernity, hence also with governmental responses.

Rationalistic Theology

Rationalistic theology explains the pandemic as a problem that modern science, medicine, and epidemiology can solve. Then-Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York famously said in 2020 that: "The number is down because we brought the number down...God did not do that. Faith did not do that. Destiny did not do that. A lot of pain and suffering did that.”

Here, agency lies solely with people. The relationship of God to the pandemic is distant, even irrelevant. Faith plays a role insofar as it allows for a rational approach, but the richness of faith itself is reduced to its rationality. This approach does not serve as an integrating framework for a religious and plural society. It takes the problem of the pandemic on an exclusively practical level, while the more existential and “epochal” dimension and significance of the pandemic are ignored. As a result, the deeper meaning, and lessons of the pandemic for the human race and our planet may be lost.

This approach does not promote cohesion in plural and religious societies, because it does not engage faith seriously and creatively. It also does not generate common trust and fails to help build resilience in society. It only considers the practical dimension, but a pandemic is a highly complex problem in a complex world. Thus, it needs a complex answer.

Integral Theology

There is a third approach, integral theology, which sees faith and science playing a role in an integral framework of mutuality. Faith is integrated into science: God created the world and maintains involvement with care and providence. Since the world is endowed with rational order, people have the responsibility to understand the created order through various means, including knowledge and science. This approach calls for deeper meanings of the pandemic beyond the culpability or capability of people. In contrast to fatalistic theology, it does not look for God’s “intervention”, rather God’s “intention.”

This integral approach encourages cohesion in societies. It takes the common good into account. This approach brings together and moderates the views of civil society, government, and religious communities. As Jurgen Habermas (German philosopher) has argued, post-secular society, including its democracy, has to be able to motivate citizens to actively participate in public life. Mere rationality is not enough to get people to work and make sacrifices for the common good.

Faith and Trust

The pandemic has proven that public health policies, such as social distancing, the mask mandate, vaccination, need conviction and trust in order to work. They are surely connected to other values than just physical health. It requires an atmosphere of trust, which does not come without genuine connection built by diverse means and communities, such as religious communities. As a whole, the Indonesian society has been responsive to the public health policies, partly because of the support from mainstream religious communities. Religious groups need to be open to rational approaches and modern democratic procedures. That is why fatalistic and naive theologies are found wanting.

Moving Forward

These three theological reasonings are found across different religious communities in Indonesia. In general, mainstream religious communities embrace integral theologies of the pandemic, and this has contributed to the cohesiveness and resilience of the Indonesian society during these difficult times. This important lesson on the role of theology during the pandemic may be crucial as we prepare for other crises such as global warming. We will need theologies of the environment that are able to foster trust and unify members of a plural society.

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