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Learning about Religions: An Indonesian Religious Literacy Program as a Multifaith Site for Mutual Learning

Dicky Sofjan

Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS), Graduate School, Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia; dickysofjan@ugm.ac.id; Tel.: +62-812-109-5544

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Abstract: The term “literacy” has been mostly applied in the context of language, mathematical and cultural abilities as a basic competency in life and social interaction. Thus, competence in reading, writing and math subjects as well as cultural training are perceived to be the definition of literacy found in many societies around the world. This article examines the concept and application of Indonesia’s “religious literacy” program as a multifaith site for mutual learning among religious communities. This program is expected to offer a mechanism to moderate the religious fervour that is currently engulfing the nation and become a buffer against radicalism. Based on collaboration between university-based academics and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the program strives to promote social justice, religious harmony and multiculturalism. The religious literacy program mainly targets the Ministry’s religious extension officers, religion teachers and representatives of various so-called “strategic groups” in six provinces in Indonesia. Findings suggest that the religious literacy program has helped the frontliners to get to know each other, share their tacit knowledge, insights and experiences, making the program into a multifaith site for mutual learning.

Keywords: religious literacy; extension officers; multifaith; mutual learning; Indonesia; Ministry of Religious Affairs

1. Background

Just before the turn of the century, the Indonesian state and society experienced *reformasi*, which ushered in democracy, media liberalization, decentralization, regional autonomy and many more significant reforms. Various presidents since *reformasi* have tried to distance themselves from the previous president Suharto’s style of governance, which for the most part had primarily relied on the military to secure his autocratic rule over the country from 1966 to 1998.

Despite these positive changes, it is almost now a truism to argue that the bulk of the religious community seems to be heading toward conservatism and exclusivism. This is marked by a number of indicators such as rising trends in public pietism, religious-based identity politics and a push toward the implementation of faith-based laws, which are often pursued at the expense of the country’s religious minorities and long-held tradition of cultural pluralism. Although the now democratized political system—which places emphasis on regularized direct election cycles at the national, provincial and district levels—has clearly contributed to the wide and rapid spread of conservatism, the problem is perhaps much more fundamental than previously thought. It is related to the country’s educational system and management of religious diversity.

In Indonesia, religion is a compulsory subject for all students in primary, secondary and high schools up to university. However, while religion is embedded in the national curriculum and is compulsory to be taught at all schools, the content of the subject is far from suitable for a multicultural

country such as Indonesia, which prides itself on being a plural society. The subject of religion thus merely allows for learning about one's own religious tradition, but hardly touches on other religions. In other words, Muslims are only taught about Islam, Protestants about Protestantism, Catholics about Catholicism, Hindus about Hinduism and so on.

Interestingly, even in university, the subject of religion is similarly delivered in the same way as in primary, secondary and high schools, except that it is taught in a more sophisticated manner. The substance, however, remains focused on tradition, rituals and religious laws, without regard for critical thinking or progressive thought. What is more, when it comes to the subject of religion, students at university are also divided and segregated based on their official religious affiliation. This means that Muslim students are separated from their Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucianist and other religiously affiliated friends each time the subject of religion is taught. The same goes for the non-Muslims. Thus, from primary school to university, Indonesian students of different faiths are never in the same site when learning religion, except in some religious universities, where students of other religions are sometimes present. A contradiction, therefore, exists between religious diversity as a fact of life in Indonesia and the national educational system.

This predictably raises a number of problems in multicultural Indonesia. People are effectively religiously illiterate about the faiths of their neighbors and friends. The system also creates a dilemma, as Indonesians are taught and reminded on a daily basis that their country is based on the state ideology of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution (Articles 28 and 29), which recognizes and guarantees human rights and religious freedom.¹ Yet, beyond their own religion and faith tradition, Indonesians know very little about the religious others, except that they are taught to appreciate and respect them.

This is rather ironic, as an old Indonesian proverb goes "*Tak kenal, maka tak sayang*" (To not know is to not love). The essence of the proverb perfectly encapsulates the problem, where education serves as a divider and not a unifier of the nation, which in itself is against the third principle of Pancasila on the "Unity of Indonesia". Furthermore, with the deliberate policy of systematic segregation, it is not surprising how religious conservatism and exclusivism are gaining ground in Indonesia, resulting in deep social polarization.

This article, therefore, attempts to examine the role of an Indonesian religious literacy program as a multifaith site for mutual learning among affiliated groups, and to assess how it could effectively serve as a platform for a healthy religious interaction and engagement between and among religious extension officers and their faith communities. The program in question is formally entitled "Religious Literacy for Promoting Social Justice, Religious Harmony and Multiculturalism" (abbreviated hereon as the Program), initiated by the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) in collaboration with the British Council (BC) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (abbreviated hereon as the Ministry).²

Here, the author would like to emphasize that multifaith spaces and sites are often contested and are observed and experienced differently, depending on the context and the agenda at play. [Kong and Woods \(2016\)](#) suggest a useful analytical framework with a typology in which different actors operate. [Hedges \(2019, p. 2\)](#) argues that "interfaith dialogues" are as much a primary site for "contention and consensus", particularly in the context of "multicultural nation-states". Such observation is probably most relevant to countries such as India and Indonesia. [Prideaux's \(2019\)](#) work also delves into the notion of "multifaith spaces" such as religiously diverse neighborhoods, workplaces or classrooms. Drawing on one neighborhood in Leeds, England, she points to it as "a distinct zone of multifaith activities", although not all the residents could easily identify it as such. Meanwhile, [Smith and](#)

¹ Pancasila comprises five main principles: (1) belief in the unity of deities; (2) civilized humanity; (3) unity of Indonesia; (4) democracy based on deliberation and consensus; and (5) social justice for all Indonesians.

² ICRS is a consortium of three universities, namely Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga (UIN Suka) and Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW). The three universities have collaborated since 2006 to offer a Ph.D. program on Inter-Religious Studies, which is formally based in the UGM Graduate School. Throughout its existence since 2006, ICRS has managed a number of collaborative research programs with numerous partners, including the one on religious literacy.

[Halafoff \(2020\)](#) focus their study on online multifaith sites, where religious digital activism takes place to counter the risks of climate change.

2. The Program

The Program was implemented for three years, comprising Phase 1 (2017–2018), Phase 2 (2018–2019) and Phase 3 (2019–2020). The Program produced a module entitled *Modul Pengayaan Wacana Keagamaan Bagi Penyuluh Agama* (Module on the Enrichment of Religious Discourse for Religious Extension Officers).³ The finalized module consists of four main themes: “Religion and the State”, “Religion and Human Dignity”, “Religion and the Internet” and “Religion and Ecology”. Additional chapters on “Introduction” and “Closing” were added to the module to contextualize the need for a capacity development program for the vast number of religious extension officers.

In the previous draft module, “*Rencana Tindak Lanjut*” (Follow Up Plans) were also developed for the purposes of the cascade training programs conducted by graduates of the Program’s Training of Trainers (ToT). In addition to the module, a set of accompanying *Buku Saku* (Handbooks) were also published to aid any graduate of the ToT in conducting similar religious literacy programs at the grassroots level.

The target of the religious literacy Program primarily focuses on the Ministry’s religious extension officers or *Penyuluh Agama* (literally, Religious Counsellors), religion teachers and representatives of various so-called “strategic groups”, which include religious mass-based organizations as well as women and youth groups. The Program involves these targeted groups in six provinces in Indonesia i.e., Medan and Tebing Tinggi (North Sumatra), Pontianak (West Kalimantan), Manado (North Sulawesi), Ambon (Moluccas), Ruteng (East Nusa Tenggara) and Bandung (West Java). In the finalization Phase, the Program included two additional themes i.e., “Religion and Human Dignity” and “Religion and Ecology”. In addition to implementing the Program with the Ministry, validity testing was conducted in four other provinces i.e., Malang (East Java), Makassar (South Sulawesi), Banjarmasin (South Kalimantan) and Denpasar (Bali) with cofunding from the Ministry’s Agency for Research, Development, Education and Training based in Jakarta. The validity testing of the module involved religious extension officers, senior training officers in the Ministry and local religious authorities.

3. Learning about Religions

The notion of “literacy” is predominantly used in the context of language acquisition, mathematical abilities and cultural skills that are required and essential in one’s competency in life. As a basic competency in life, literacy is therefore necessary to become a well-functioning and good citizen in society. In the 1970s, literacy was transformed into “conscientization”, which connects the mind with social awareness and critical enquiry ([Freire 1970](#)). The basic idea relates literacy with the liberation of human beings from ignorance.

Scholars maintain that literacy refers to “the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness of the contradictions of society” ([Bataille 1976](#), p. 273); “prominent measures of progress” ([Pandian 2001](#), p. 45); “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” ([Montoya 2018](#), p. 2).

International development agencies have their own definitions on literacy. According to [UNESCO’s \(2004\)](#) Position Paper entitled *The Plurality of Literacy and Its Implication for Policies and Programmes*, literacy is defined as “the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating . . . Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society”.

³ The module was officially inaugurated by the Ministry in early March 2020, after undergoing several formal procedures, such as *uji shahih* (validity testing), which is required before any module is to be formally utilized by the Ministry. Yet, due to pressing needs, the draft module had already been utilized by the Ministry’s Agency for Education and Training in the province of West Java in 2019. For more reading, (see [Sofjan et al. 2017a, 2017b](#)).

Meanwhile, “religious literacy” is a relatively new concept. Historically, it is meant as “an acquaintance with and understanding of religious history and literature” (Grafflin 1946, p. 176); “to have knowledge and understanding of the basic religious principles which are inherent in the major denominations” (De Lissovoy 1954, p. 419). Religious literacy is defined as “the ability to understand the languages, meanings, and beliefs of the world’s major and minor religions” (Bishop and Nash 2007, p. 20); “entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (Moore 2007, p. 29); and generates “a more civil and informed citizenry” (Skerrett 2014, p. 237). It should also be noted that religious literacy is attached to “environmental factors” and “must be fashioned” (Waggoner 2003). For instance, in the more secular context of “practice”, religious literacy can be conceived as “the carrying out of a goal-directed sequence of activities, using particular technologies and applying particular systems of knowledge” (Scribner and Cole 1978, p. 457). Particularly in the European context, it is argued that “a broad education about religions was a desirable activity for all school students, regardless of religious or nonreligious background, to combat prejudice or intolerance and to promote mutual understanding and democratic citizenship” (Jackson 2014, p. 15).

The argument here is that religious literacy is not so much about teaching or learning religion. Rather, it is teaching and learning about religion and its interconnections with other social, political, cultural and economic phenomena. This way, the Program does not necessarily refer to the orthodox teachings and doctrines of any religion. Rather, it places emphasis on the diverse nature of religious manifestations and multidimensional expressions. It also highlights the importance of religion in relation to many other social, political and cultural phenomena.

Through the four main themes of the module and additional topics supplied by the local facilitators, the Program also examined the limits of how religious expressions and manifestations take place in Indonesia. The main objective of the Program was, therefore, “to promote awareness, understanding and interaction among religious communities, while enhancing capacity of local stakeholders to build social justice agenda and advocate for policy reform to ensure harmonious living and human flourishing” (Sofjan et al. 2017a, 2017b).

In Phase 1, the team conducted at least five procedures in running the Program. They included an inception workshop, module development, stakeholders’ meetings and engagement, the religious literacy training in six cities, evaluation with Program proponents and assessment with the targeted participants (see Figure 1). In Phase 2, the procedure started with a strategy workshop, module development to include the additional publication of handbooks, ToT, cascade training in four cities by graduates, and subsequently, evaluation and assessment. Lastly, in Phase 3, once the module development was over and two new themes were introduced, the validity testing ensued, which involved a laborious series of presentations in different regions of Indonesia. The testing involved presentations by each contributor of the theme, and subsequently followed by listing comments, criticisms and feedback on the module by the participants that included religious extension officers, trainers from the Ministry’s educational and research division as well as some local religious authorities.

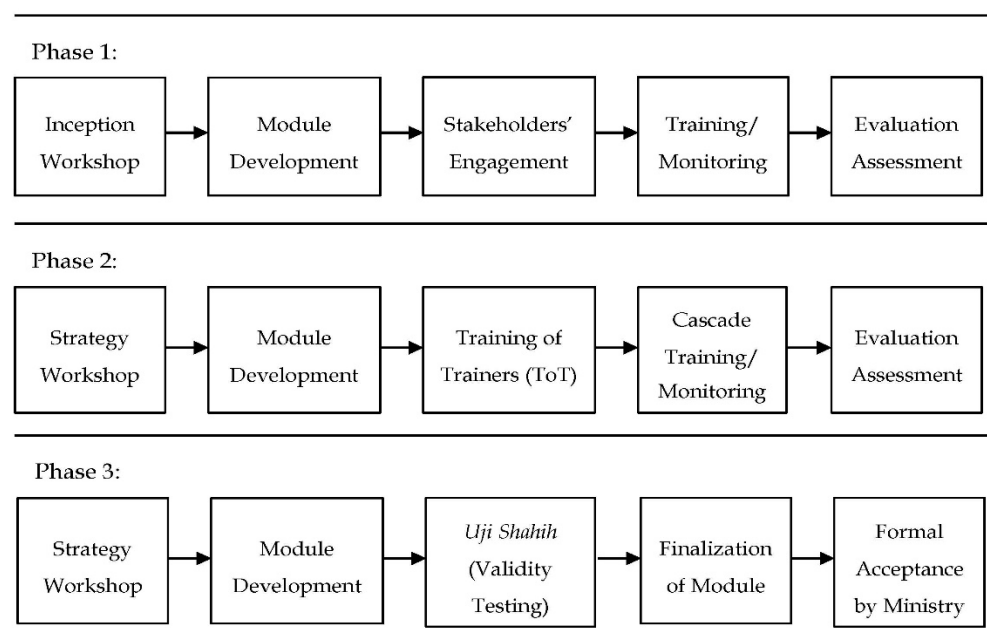


Figure 1. Religious Literacy Program Procedure.

In its initial phase during the Inception Workshop, the team of experts from ICRS, which brought together scholars from three Yogyakarta-based universities, along with Ministry officials brainstormed about how to develop the capacity of those who are working on the frontlines of religion in six provinces in Indonesia. After much deliberation and consideration, the Program was developed to target the Ministry's extension officers, teachers and lecturers teaching the subject of religion in schools and universities, local religious group leaders and prominent members of women and youth groups.

However, the team also strategically decided on allocating more opportunities for extension officers under the Ministry than other categories of participants. Thus, out of the more than 600 participants who took part in Phase 1, 42% comprised extension officers and religion teachers. In terms of participants' religious affiliations, the team made an extra effort to involve followers of all the major six religions in the Program, although in one or two instances, this was not possible due to the unavailability of time for the targeted participants.

In Phase 2, the four-day ToT comprised 30 participants, five from each of the six provinces, to be trained. The appointment was based on various considerations such as religious affiliation, gender and leadership skills. The last qualification was necessary as the ToT graduates are expected to facilitate training in four cities that were identified as the venues for the cascade training. Out of the 30 ToT participants, 22 were the Ministry's extension officers, with 12 being civil servants and 10 being honorary staff. Two were religion teachers and six were socio-religious activists. In terms of faith affiliation, the ToT comprised a good representation of different religions in Indonesia: Islam (6 people), Protestantism (6), Catholicism (5), Confucianism (2), Hinduism (1) and Buddhism (1).⁴ Examining the demography of the participants of the cascade training conducted by the ToT graduates, more than 50% out of the 230 participants were Muslims (see Tables 1 and 2).

⁴ Unfortunately, no representatives from the indigenous belief were invited to the ToT, as the team wanted to deal only with the six religions that were under the purview of the Ministry.

Table 1. Religious Affiliation of Cascade Training Participants.

Affiliation	Number
Islam	131
Protestantism	58
Catholicism	27
Hinduism	6
Confucianism	5
Buddhism	3
Total	230

Table 2. Occupation of Cascade Training Participants.

Occupation	Percentage
Extension Officers (CS)	30%
Extension Officers (NSC)	24%
Religion Teachers	9%
Others ⁵	37%
Total	100%

Notes: CS: Civil Servant; NCS: Noncivil Servant.

Program wise, the training was not to teach and learn religion, but to create awareness about religions and how they affect the social, political and cultural life of citizens. The distinction is clear and unambiguous. Religious literacy emphasizes how religion impacts or is impacted by society and the dynamics associated with modern, contemporary developments. Hence, a curriculum was designed and developed by a team of experts from ICRS and the Ministry to include initially four main themes: “*Agama dan Kita*” (Religion and Us), “*Agama dan Masyarakat*” (Religion and Society), “*Agama dan Negara*” (Religion and the State) and “*Agama dan Mayantara*” (Religion and the Internet). The first two themes were later fused with others, and two new themes emerged i.e., “Religion and Human Dignity” and “Religion and Ecology”.

Formally called “*Lokakarya Pengayaan*” (Enrichment Workshop), the training was led and conducted by a combination of ICRS academics, experts and Ministry officials. The module itself is fairly brief, and the facilitators were given the liberty to expand on the given themes or to bring in relevant examples and anecdotes based on their own observation or research.

4. Religious Extension Officers

The role of the Ministry’s extension officers is based on a Ministerial Decree No. 79/1985 and a Decree of the Coordinating Minister of Empowerment of State Apparatus No. 54/1999, which defines them as “state apparatus that deals with religious affairs at the community level”. There are an estimated 115,000 religious extension officers across the Indonesian archipelago.⁶ From that colossal number, a mere five per cent of them are civil servants. The rest hold “honorary” status as noncivil servant extension officers, earning around USD 35 per month, which is far from sufficient in view of

⁵ Others here represent a broad category of people in different categories of occupation such as civil servants, university lecturers and students, school teachers (of various subjects), small business owners, etc.

⁶ Accurate datasets from the region on the number of the Ministry’s religious extension officers are hard to come by, as listings are derived from below and updating of the list is not done as frequently as it should be.

the rising standard of living in Indonesia.⁷ While the majority of them applied to become extension officers of the state, some, notably the noncivil servant officers, were selected on the basis of their good work in society or leadership in their respective communities. In practice, most of the extension officers work as informal religious teachers, counsellors and spiritual guides for their congregation or community, hence the term “*Penyuluh Agama*” in Bahasa Indonesia.

From the point of view of the government, religious extension officers are on the frontline in the struggle for the religious soul of the Indonesian people. As the country’s identity politics and social polarization continue to grow steadily, it is conceivable that they could potentially become instrumental for the state to struggle against conservatism and exclusivism, even radicalism. After all, they are the ones who are at the forefront in their respective communities and society at large.

Unfortunately, for the majority of these extension officers, little opportunity is provided by the Ministry for the development of capacity, skills and competency training. When asked about the religious literacy training, one participant from Manado said, “This is the first time for us to be involved in such training. Normally, we would just be invited to sit and listen to a lecture or directive from an official from the Ministry for two hours, and then asked to return home. Never have we been trained and engaged interactively like this ever before.”⁸

In addition to the inspiring and motivating training program, the religious literacy training allows extension officers to meet their coworkers from other faith traditions and affiliations, whom they had never met before. Religious extension officers typically undergo training, workshops and other learning platforms held by the Ministry in religiously segregated environments. Ironically, they are all under one umbrella, and receiving monthly salaries and honoraria from the same Ministry.

Such segregation is mainly due to the Ministry’s vast bureaucratic structure and budget allocation of over USD 4 billion per annum that caters to each individual religious community.⁹ There are six mainstream religions, which are mostly managed and supervised by a Directorate General called *Bimbingan Masyarakat* (Community Guidance) at the Ministry’s top Echelon 1 level. Only Confucianism is supervised in the Ministry under a Directorate, at the Echelon 2 level due to the minimum number of adherents. Each Directorate General and Directorate offer exclusive programs for their respective religious extension officers who operate at the grassroots levels. One religious extension officer once told the author, “This [religious literacy program] is the only platform, where I could actually get to know other extension officers from the other religions. So, although we are in the same city, we do not know each other, much less the work that other extension officers are doing.”¹⁰

This has resulted in the siloization of the work by the religious extension officers at the grassroots level, which surely has its negative impacts. For one, no communication and coordination can ever take place among the extension officers at the local level, although for the most part, they are confronting similar issues and challenges. The other problem relates to the nature of the issues and challenges that religious extension officers face on a daily basis. At the grassroots level, friction, clashes and conflicts often occur between and among religious communities of different faiths or denominations. The best early response and strategy should therefore take an inter-religious approach, creating multifaith sites in which to defuse conflict before it becomes unmanageable.

However, not knowing their coworkers, and not being able to communicate and share insights and experiences with one another, makes the work of the religious extension officers much more unnerving than it should be. As a result, the system within the Ministry has created a silo mentality among the religious extension officers across the country, creating unnecessary hindrances for them.

⁷ The term “*honorar*” (literally meaning honorary) in Indonesian parlance is an euphemism to represent people who work for the state, but are not salaried civil servants, hence the modest amount of “*honoraria*”.

⁸ Statement made by a female, Christian religious extension officer based in Manado, North Sulawesi, upon completing her training on 21 August 2017.

⁹ The Ministry of Religious Affairs is the fourth largest in the Indonesian government structure, after defense, public works and the police.

¹⁰ Statement made by a Muslim religious extension officer in Ambon in the Moluccas on 25 September 2017.

Furthermore, the siloization has diminished any prospect for the Ministry to effectively deploy the religious extension officers to serve as frontliners in the defense against religious conservatism and exclusivism. The fragmentation of the work by the religious extension officers has consequently made them take a partial, short sighted and narrow approach to their pertinent work. It is for this reason that mutual learning platforms need to be created and developed for the religious extension officers and other strategic groups.

5. Mutual Learning Platform

The main agenda of the previous Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, who began his ministerial job in 2014,¹¹ was to promote what he calls “*moderasi beragama*” or religious moderation.¹² Originally instructed by President Joko Widodo, ex-Minister Saifuddin called for moderation, as it is “the main characteristic of the Indonesian religious community”.¹³ Furthermore, he said, “Religious diversity is currently being tested in Indonesia, where many groups are expressing their religiosity in an extreme manner, not just in social media, but also on the streets”.¹⁴

In light of the ex-Minister’s inclination and agenda, the religious literacy Program and its module have come at an appropriate time.¹⁵ The idea is to get the targeted participants to understand contemporary discourses relating to religion and religious diversity in Indonesia. Developed largely by the ICRS team of experts from the three consortium-member universities and the Ministry, the module revolves around the need to instil the values of social justice, religious harmony and multiculturalism.

More specifically, the finalized module contains the following themes: “Religion and the State”, which examines the relations between faith communities, their leaders and state, government and public officials; “Religion and the Internet” which delves into the problems of cyber space and the many religious phenomena attached to it. And then in Phase 3, as noted above, two new themes were introduced to coincide with the discussion among the team members and the Ministry officials and trainers. The first one was on “Religion and Human Dignity”, and the other was entitled “Religion and Ecology”. While the former primarily highlights the principles of equality and equity, and how they relate to human rights, the latter brings a relatively new insight for the religious extension officers in terms of how to integrate awareness on the environment, climate change and sustainability.

Again, in the actual training programs, it was indeed expected that the four themes in the module would be supplemented with local contents delivered by regional-based facilitators to either instil local wisdom or address specific and unique provincial issues and challenges. As in the case of our workshops in Phases 1 and 2, the team appointed religious experts and opinion leaders, who have been closely engaging faith communities in their respective localities.

Learning from American public education, religious literacy could also be influenced by “environmental factors” (Waggoner 2003). In other words, religious literacy is much needed in sites where an overwhelming influence of a certain religious tradition is prevalent to the extent that it “drowns” the diversity or multicultural feature of a given society and makes way for special “privileges” for the predominant community. On this note, Waggoner (2003, p. 45) argues the following:

¹¹ Minister Saifuddin is a politician from the Muslim-based United Development Party, and served as a member of parliament in 1999–2004, 2004–2009 and 2009–2014, representing Central Java province. Saifuddin is also part of the Nahdlatul Ulama movement, and is the son of the 9th Minister of Religious Affairs, Saifuddin Zuhri. Saifuddin has now been replaced by a former retired military general, Fahrul Razi, as the Minister of Religious Affairs.

¹² Recently, the Ministry published a book entitled “*Moderasi Beragama*” to serve as a guideline for all government ministries and agencies in engaging religious issues and actors. The book was written by Muhammad Adlin Sila, one of the young intellectual rising stars in the Ministry’s Research, Development, Education and Training Agency.

¹³ See: <https://kemenag.go.id/berita/read/511485/lhs-dan-moderasi-beragama> (accessed on 10 September 2019).

¹⁴ See: <https://kemenag.go.id/berita/read/511485/lhs-dan-moderasi-beragama> (accessed on 10 September 2019).

¹⁵ The endorsement of the Minister to the religious literacy program was proven by the fact that he officially opened and attended the training in Bandung, West Java, on 28 November 2018 together with the British Ambassador H.E. Moazzam Malik and BC Country Representative Paul Smith.

Religious parochialism in the United States stems in part from pervasive Christian privilege: that is, an evolved system of cultural references derived from Christian assumptions. The referents influence order, however subtly or directly, toward a normative Christian view. Christian privilege results in an environment permeated by Christian assumptions that, at a minimum, fail to acknowledge diverse perspectives from different ideological or religious traditions when full blown, create a social power hierarchy that favors Christianity. So pervasive is Christian privilege in the United States that many citizens seem oblivious to the growing religious diversity.

In the case of the religious literacy Program in Indonesia, the above reflection could well be relevant in places such as the predominantly Muslim West Java and North Sulawesi, where Protestantism is visibly pervasive and privileged.

In that sense, the religious literacy Program here becomes a multifaith site for mutual learning for diverse religious communities. The Program provides at least three levels of mutual learning for the participants. First, the mutual learning between and among the religious officers from the various faith communities. The intense interaction and group learning gave a perfect platform for the religious extension officers to share their knowledge, insights and experiences with those from other faith communities and other cities. As mentioned, for many of these religious extension officers, it was their first encounter with colleagues of other religions.¹⁶

Second, the mutual learning between the extension officers and other religious elements in society. At this level, the extension officers learned together with religion teachers, lecturers and socio-religious activists from an array of faith communities, including minority groups. In some cities, the religious literacy training and the ToT involved individuals from the Shia and Ahmadiyah communities. For many of the Muslim extension officers, that was the first encounter and meaningful interaction with those from the nonmainstream schools of thought within Islam in Indonesia.¹⁷

The third level of mutual learning involves how the inter-religious team from ICRS engages the Ministry, its extension officers and all other participating religious groups in society. Such deep interaction and engagement with the Ministry and participants, both in the training and ToT, have not only created collegiality but also a sense of interdependence that we are in this together. Thus, strong religious bonds and friendships have been built across faiths, provinces and even time zones. Intense communication among Program proponents and participants remain high until today on multifaith virtual sites through the use of social media i.e., Facebook and WhatsApp Groups.

6. Conclusions

Religious literacy remains elusive and controversial today, at a time when religion seems to be in your face. Calls for a more relaxed and less restrictive form of religion in Indonesia have often put religious literacy in question. However, its strategic usefulness in government and society is less contentious and debated, as religious literacy gives way for mutual learning among the strategic religious actors in the frontline of society. As a result, religious literacy builds stronger democratic citizenship, which could help mitigate the problem of religious conservatism and exclusivism that has caused deep social polarization and disintegration.

In the struggle against religious conservatism and exclusivism, it is imperative that extension officers and all other frontline religious actors experience, at least once, the process of mutual learning in a multifaith site, and do not succumb to segregation based on religious affiliation. As Moore states, religious literacy should “include exposure to ‘sacred’ texts from a variety of traditions that are studied

¹⁶ During the four-day ToT, participants were made to share a room with those from other religious affiliations and provinces. This way, inter-religious interaction and engagement did not occur only in the classroom, but throughout the entirety of the ToT.

¹⁷ One positive impact of this encounter resulted in the ToT graduates visiting the headquarters of the Shia community in Bandung, West Java, while learning the basic differences between the Sunni orthodoxy and the Shia strand of Islam.

from a nonsectarian perspective” (Moore 2007, p. 29). This is also in line with the latest theoretical underpinnings of how spaces and sites are intertwined and often influenced by multifaith actors engaging in religious activism (again, see Kong and Woods 2016; Hedges 2019; Prideaux 2019; as well as Smith and Halafoff 2020).

The mutual learning process that the Program facilitates has thus provided a good opportunity for the extension officers, teachers, lecturers and religious social activists to transcend their usual comfort zone, defined by their own respective religious tradition. In other words, religious literacy programs can and do provide a good platform for religious diversity experience. What is more, the inter-religious exchanges that the Program facilitates with other extension officers and religious actors in society would surely transform their own mode of thinking and operation.

With ICRS’ religious literacy Program clearly making headway into the national system, the Ministry’s existing siloization is slowly but surely being deconstructed. Through the intense interaction and engagement with the Ministry officials in developing, testing and applying the module in the training program, the trust and confidence afforded to ICRS will no doubt provide a strong basis for meaningful collaboration and further reforms in the system.

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