

Prominent Indonesian says politics, economics create conflict among religious “siblings”

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ADELAIDE: One of Indonesia’s most prominent liberal Muslim intellectuals says politics and economics are major factors in conflicts between Christianity and Islam - and that people of both faiths must work together to heal the wounds.

Azyumardi Azra, who is Rector and Professor of History at Univeritas Islam Negeri in Jakarta, was speaking at the first of an Australian-wide series of public discourses on whether Christianity and Islam can co-exist.

Azra described Islam, Christianity and Judaism as “siblings” because they are all “Abrahamic faiths”. Abraham, Moses, Noah and Jesus are, with Mohammed, Islam’s five Major Prophets, he said.

“So that’s why Islam is the youngest among the three siblings.”

As such, Azra said Muslims believe in the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as in the Quran.

“Of course, all religions preach, teach you, peace,” he said.

“But there are sometimes certain passages of the holy books’ content, statements or doctrines that can be used to justify violence within one single, particular religion or against other religions.”

Azra said this “ambiguous nature of religion” meant such passages led to “extremist or violent acts” when taken “in a very literal way, a very ad hoc way and not in a very comprehensive way”.

“This, of course, becomes complicated when it comes to politics,” he said.

“Most of the so-called violence with religious chaos in our time is mostly related to economy and politics.

“I would argue that economics and politics are very important factors that in the end create a lot of resentment among different religious groups that can explode.”

Azra is considered one of Indonesia’s most prominent and distinguished intellectuals. He was a Fulbright Scholar who studied and taught at New York’s Columbia University, a Visiting Fellow at the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies and in 2010 became the first person outside the Commonwealth to receive the title of Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

Azra said “strong words” from Australia had created criticism and resentment in Indonesia among members of Parliament and political leaders, some of whom used them for their own political purposes.

However he noted that former Indonesian President Yudhoyono and current President Jokowi refrained “from criticising, from responding to statements made by your friend Mr Tony Abbott”.

Despite these controversies Azra believes “there is no problem” among the people of both countries. Indonesian student numbers in Australia are at a record high and there had been no violence against them.

To keep this continuing he said “what we need is mutual sensitivity at the level of political leaders, because this creates a lot of problems”.

“We should strengthen good relations, productive relations, between Indonesia and Australia because what happens in Indonesia affects Australia, that’s for sure.”

Azra mentioned trade, international education and Indonesia’s establishment of a centre to combat terrorism as examples of existing good relations.

Azra said that “Muslims, in general, are against water-tight secularism” but that Indonesia is “very happy” being a secular state which celebrated Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Confucian holidays... even though Confucianism is not regarded as a religion in China.

“We celebrate differences. That’s another principle of the Indonesian State... like the American principle of pluralism,” he said.

Azra believes that for Christianity and Islam to co-exist there needs to be greater dialogue between the two. This was echoed by fellow speaker James Haire, who is professor of theology at Charles Sturt University and director of the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre in Canberra.

With respect to Australian and Indonesian relations, Haire quoted former President Yudhoyono, who once said that “in recent years our relations have been controlled by preposterous caricatures of each other”.

“He said the simple truth is very boring: we are both inhabited by people who want a number of very straightforward things... a decent income, security, and as far as possible, democracy,” Haire said.

On a wider level, Haire said that Christianity and Islam are both guilty of violence.

“There is violent language throughout Christian history and there has also been violence between Christianity and Islam,” he said.

“But in the 1400 years of the existence of both there have been remarkably long periods of peace... throughout the whole of the Fertile Crescent and between India and Pakistan, in South-East Asia and in the northern part of Africa.”

Haire believes that much of today’s conflict between the two religions stems from an unresolved “angst” within Christianity.

“Christianity and Islam are both public and private religions,” he said.

However since the 18th Century Enlightenment, Western Christianity “has been forced into being a largely privatised religion in which its public presence has to be very strongly expressed, and often only indirectly expressed” through involvement in schools, hospitals and welfare agencies.

“Islam hasn’t had to face that issue, really, yet... and I think that there is, deep down, a very great angst and unresolved anger in Christianity in the West that it is no longer able to express itself publicly as it once did,” he said.

Haire said in some cases the West had forced Islamic societies to follow suit.

“After the end of the first World War, Western Governments forced cynical, secular Governments onto Muslim societies in the Middle East, and therefore suppressed an enormous sense of unresolved anger that they could no longer express Islam in public... and that has come home to roost in our time,” he said.

Meanwhile, Western Christianity continues to feel that “it is no longer easy or relaxed to take part in public expression”.

“It is no longer able to express itself publicly as it once did, and that has been unresolved in our society,” he said.

“Nothing actually stops it, apart from what (the German post-Enlightenment) theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher said was a kind of sneering or belittling of any form of public expression of Christianity.

“It wants to take part directly... (but) the fear of being despised... that’s what’s primarily stopping it”.

Haire believes this fear has recently intensified because of “the terrible blight” of child sexual abuse within the Church, which “the media feeds on”.

“I’m not in any way condoning the criminal behaviour of clergy and others in the past over child sexual abuse,” he said.

“Nevertheless, it has to be said, that this has prevented any other discourse taking place in the public media.”

Haire said it’s “perfectly possible to have more than one public discourse at a given time and the two discourses need to take place”.

“The Christian community and the Muslim community need to be more involved in the wider political sphere... and the danger is that often religious groups are so pure in their political views that... they self-marginalise,” he said.

“They align themselves with political groups (in) which they can be safely shoved off the agenda.”

Speaking afterwards to *InDaily*, Azra and Haire both said that they opposed Australia’s proposed involvement in conducting air strikes against Islamic State in Syria because it would result in more bloodshed and Islamic radicalisation.

*A podcast of this discussion will soon be available on the Hawke Centre website under **Relive our Events** at www.hawkecentre.unisa.edu.au.

