



Respecting Adherents of Other Religions: Common Words in Ashoka Vedic and Islamic Teaching

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Abstract: Truth claims between adherents of religion often make it a basis for disrespecting other faiths and not giving their rights somewhat, as the example conflict in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra on 2016, Sri Lanka in 2018, and Rohingya. This article highlights the common word between Buddhism and Islam in respecting adherents of other religions by taking the object of the Ashoka Inscription in Buddha and the verses of the al-Qur'an and Sunnah, which discuss the rights of followers of other religions. This study uses the 'Kalimatun Sawa' theory (a common word). This research shows that Ashoka's life history shows the application of Buddhism in social life, including in respecting adherents of other religions as they respect their religion. Islam teaches that insulting adherents of other religions is a form of insulting Allah. These religious teachings place the same respect for followers of other religions as respecting their religions. This concept is the basis for dialogue between the two religions and is a meeting point for building peace between religious communities.

Keywords: religious community; building peace; religious teaching; Kalimatun Sawa'; tolerance

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a unique country. Here, relations between religious communities in it have many colors. In a series of history, it is found how people from various religions and ethnicities can unite for mutual progress and live together in harmony. In other times, few have found a history of less harmonious relations between religious adherents, individually and communally. Conflicts in Poso, Ambon, Tolikara, and Tanjung Balai are few examples.

The plurality of Indonesian society has two inseparable sides. On the one hand, this is a gift for all people to know each other, understand each other, and strengthen each other to realize a harmonious national and state life. However, on the other hand, these differences are often prone to giving birth to small conflicts, which will later experience conflict escalation resulting in communal conflicts such as in Poso and Ambon (Asry, Hakim, Ruhana, & Khalikin, 2013: v). This can be seen from several regions in Indonesia that have received the titles of "most tolerant city" and "most intolerant city". Research conducted by INFID to 4 provinces in Indonesia shows that cities such as Bojonegoro and Kupang are tolerant cities. Tasikmalaya and Yogyakarta are two examples of intolerant cities (Ahnaf, Takwin, Mudzakkir, Salim, & Hamdi, 2016: 10 - 12).

Therefore, one of the great homework of the Indonesian people is to improve tolerance between religious communities. This inter-religious tolerance can be measured by the community's acceptance of the activities of other religions and ethnic groups in the neighborhood (Aziz et al., 2017: vi). This acceptance often leads to the unhealthy majority and minority relationships, where the majority acts arbitrarily and commits violence against minorities. The violence in question is not limited to physical violence but also verbal violence, such as blasphemy and insulting other people's religious symbols.

This article aims to describe the roots of tolerance in the two major world religions, both are Islam and Buddhism. These two religions are the two largest religions in Southeast Asia. From the 618 million inhabitants, 42% are Muslims and 40% are Buddhists. In another case, 25% of all Muslims in the world and 38% of all Buddhists in the world live side by side in Southeast Asia (Yusuf, 2019: 1). In addition, this article was also triggered by the tensions that occurred in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra in 2016 involving Muslims and Buddhists and it was suspected that there was a twist of hatred that led to mass mobilization in the burning of Buddhist houses of worship (Bagir, 2017: 7). It is hoped that from this article both religious adherents can take lessons in coexistence with other religious people. To analyze it, the researcher uses the theory of *kalimatun sawa'* which comes from the teachings of the Qur'an, namely, QS 3: 64, and this research tries looking at the two commandments in each religion, looking at the history of the implementation of these commands, and offering their application in the present as a resolution of the conflict between the two largest religions in Southeast Asia.

2. Method

This research is comparative qualitative research. In collecting data, the researcher used a library method from various literature related to this theme, both from Buddhist and Islamic literature. The data collected is in the form of the theological basis of each religion and the interpretation of each religion's adherents. The results of these interpretations will be compared with each other through *kalimatun sawa'* perspective to get a meeting point between the two religions and conclude the results of this study.

3. Results and Discussion

Common Words

In the relationship between religious communities, theologically, many attitudes emerge. Some commonly encountered attitudes are exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism (Yahya, 2018: 247). These three attitudes arise because of the truth claim, the basic foundation of religions. But on the other hand, this truth claim is often the trigger for the opinion that the religion adopted is the most correct and other religions are wrong, and one can freely vilify other religions (Yahya, 2018: 240). This mindset often triggers the appearance of the heresy of religion by followers of other religions. This is exacerbated by one's ignorance of the teachings and values held by adherents of other religions so that it seems as if it is legal for them to talk about other religions based on the perspective of their religion (Yahya, 2018: 250).

Common words are the translation of the concept of *'kalimatun sawa'* in the Qur'an, to be precise in Surah Ali Imran: 64. The choice of this concept is because it is the normative foundation in promoting tolerant and harmonious coexistence between religious adherents. In fact, according to Rowi (Rowi, 2003: 10), this verse is an entry point in the ideas of pluralism, multiculturalism, tolerance, and coexistence between religious adherents.

'Kalimatun sawa' literally means "same word", "consensus", "fair sentence", and "meeting point" (Indriana, 2020: 33; Majma' al-Lughah Al-'Arabiyyah, 1989: 614). The word *'kalimatun'* has the meaning of 'word' (Baalbaki, 1987: 899, 2016: 1091). The word *'sawa'* in the Qur'an can refer to 3 meanings, similar or equal, middle, and just (Majma' al-Lughah Al-'Arabiyyah, 1989: 614; Rowi, 2003: 10). These three meanings are taken from other verses that use similar terms found in the Qur'an. From this it can be concluded that the meaning of *'kalimatun sawa'* are 'the same words', 'words in the middle, and 'words that contain the principle of justice'.

The opinion above is reinforced by various views of *mufassir*, even from classical scholars, contemporary scholars, and Indonesian Muslim intellectuals which are summarized in A'yun and Said's research (A'yun & Said, 2019). Classical scholars translate it as equal and fair words between the Messenger of Allah and the Ahl al-Kitab to believe that the universe is the creation of one God, Allah. Contemporary scholars, such as Nasr (in El-Ansary & Linnan, 2010: 22), mentioned that the

phrase is the main point in brotherhood and peace between religious communities, rejection of exclusivism, and an invitation to inclusivism, even pluralism, and multiculturalism.

Rowi (2003: 13-14) also mentioned the opinion of several commentators about the asbab an-nuzul of the verse. From various commentators, he concluded that the verse was not an attempt to generalize all the teachings of religions or justify the faith of adherents of religions other than Islam. Rowi also underlined 2 things related to the verse. First, it is a lesson for Muslims to prioritize common ground and values of equality to provide a sense of security, justice, and grace for all diverse levels of society. This is to facilitate interaction and cooperative relationships in the community. Second, this verse teaches empathy for the beliefs held by other parties, and a Muslim should not impose his beliefs on other parties.

The idea of '*Kalimatun Sawa'* is a teaching that has become a common platform between various human groups. One of the theological foundations of this concept in the Qur'an is the command of Allah SWT to the Prophet Muhammad SAW to invite various religious communities to unite at that point. This concept is a meeting point concept between divine religions (Munawar-Rachman, 2011: 1267). In its development, Muslims are ordered to develop this meeting point as a basis for living together between religious communities (Madjid, 2020: 532). Therefore, the search for common ground is a joint effort between religious communities to achieve mutual peace.

In addition, the term "common words" also appeared when 138 leading scholars worldwide wrote an open letter entitled "A Common Words Between Us and You". This letter is addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and all church leaders around the world. This letter is a response to the speech of the supreme leader of the Catholic community in Regensburg, Germany, on October 13, 2006. Nasr (in El-Ansary & Linnan, 2010: 22) mentioned that the verse of the Qur'an above inspired the use of the term. This term is intended that exclusivity and truth claims owned by every religious believer are natural and cannot be blamed. However, exclusivity that needs to be watched out for is the attitude that leads to blaming the other party (in his term as "demonization of the other"), refusing, and even violence against them.

Dogmatic differences between religions should not penetrate public life. When issues of theological differences are brought into sociological relations in society, it will trigger various conflicts. On the other hand, things that appear in sociological relationships should be things related to human values and their relationship in carrying out God's commands to manage the Earth and everything in it wisely (El-Ansary & Linnan, 2010: 25). All human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, and religion, work hand in hand in realizing human values on this Earth to realize the "Kingdom of God on Earth" (El-Ansary & Linnan, 2010: 25). This view is the basis for writing this article, namely to find common ground between different religions (in this context, Islam and Buddhism) to agree in one word, respecting adherents of other religions.

Respecting Other Religions: Ashoka and Islamic Perspective

One of the foundations in teaching the values of tolerance and respect for followers of other religions is the story of King Ashoka as contained in *Ashokavadana*. *Ashokavadana* is a text that contains *divyavadana* (divine narrative) in Sanskrit and tells of events in the past but is related to life in the future (Strong, 2008: 16). Ashoka was a King who ruled Mauryan around 270 BC (Strong, 2008: 16) or 268 BC (Nelson, 1959: 124).

This king has an important position in the history of the development of Buddhism in the world. Therefore, Ashoka's stories are not only found in Sanskrit literature but also translated into Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, Burmese, Thai, Sinhala, and Buddhist traditions in Asia (Strong, 2008: 16). This is because Ashoka's role was prominent while leading the Maurya kingdom. One is because he can apply the *dasa-raja-dhamma* (10 duties of a king) (Voss, 2016: 8; Widyadharma, 1994: 135). When a leader or king implements the *dasa-raja-dhamma*, the whole community will live happily and prosperously.

Therefore, Ashoka has many nicknames and good titles. He is called the "beloved of the Gods" (Nelson, 1959: 124; Widyadharma, 1994: 139) and the *living Buddha* (Seneviratna, 1994: 9). In fact,

he was dubbed *the model for rulers all over the Buddhist world* (Seneviratna, 1994: 9; Voss, 2016) and also *"the greatest and noblest ruler India as known"* (Voss, 2016: 10). He is also an example of a leader who promotes the "non-violence" movement in treating humans as well as animals (Nelson, 1959: 125; Widyadharma, 1994: 140). Therefore, Ashoka became an example for all leaders, even Buddhists, practicing *dhamma*.

Ashoka's stories and teachings can be traced back through his legacy; both are the Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts. Rock Edicts are stones carved and contain the king's orders or teachings to his people. There are 14 Rock Edicts (Dhammika, 1993; Mookerji, 1928: 128). In addition, other relics can be found in 7 Pillar Edicts and supplemented by Minor Rock Edicts and Minor Pillar Edicts (Dhammika, 1993; Mookerji, 1928: 107).

One of the famous edicts is mentioned in Rock Edicts XII. In the inscription, it is stated that Ashoka respects all followers of religions, both those who have the same or different beliefs (Nikam & Mckee, 1958: 51; Strong, 2008: 4). A Buddhist should help develop their faith while respecting the opinions of others. When a Buddhist respects different faiths, he honors and exalts his religion and beliefs. On the other hand, when he insults, demeans, and even hurts followers of other religions, he is degrading the religion he professes and the beliefs he believes in (Dhammika, 1993; Hultsch, 1925: 21; Mookerji, 1928: 158-159).

This teaching is one of the pillars and foundations of Buddhists in spreading tolerance towards followers of other religions. Respect is vital in treating followers of other religions. This respect does not necessarily make Buddhism low and low in front of them, but instead makes Buddhism more honorable. Those who do it are also honored because they have practiced *dhamma* and spread the teachings of love to their fellow human beings.

When someone thinks that badmouthing other religions can elevate their religion, then that is a mistake. In the same section in Rock Edicts XII, Ashoka also explains that other religions and beliefs have values they sanctify and believe in (Dhammika, 1993; Hultsch, 1925: 21; Mookerji, 1928: 158-159). When followers of other religions despise these values, they will protect them wholeheartedly and, if necessary, fight back, verbally and physically. If so, harmony between religious adherents cannot be realized in society. Most importantly, Buddhism will no longer have a respectable place in society because of the actions of its adherents who are not following the *dhamma*.

The decree written by Ashoka is quite interesting. What is quite noteworthy is that king Ashoka wrote this decree in the 3rd century BC. At that time the Maurya kingdom was a large empire that controlled areas previously controlled by Alexander the Great (Seneviratna, 1994: 119; Strong, 2008: 3). When he was at the peak of his power, instead of doing things arbitrarily and oppressing those who had different opinions, Ashoka actually spread the teachings of love and compassion to all his people. This is another good thing, considering that often the position of majority and power hegemonizes someone to do what he wants and is not based on good values or *dhamma*. This is another reason why Ashoka has an important position in the history of Indian and world civilization.

These teachings are in line with the teachings promoted in Islam. In surah *al-An'am* verses 108-109, it is stated that Allah conveyed the prohibition directly to Muslims. The verse contains a prohibition against cursing the gods worshiped by followers of other religions. This is simply so they do not retaliate blindly and curse Allah without knowledge or limits. In fact, it could be that the response is not only in the form of verbal violence, but escalates to physical violence.

Ibn Kathir in his *tafsir* (Ibn Katsir, 2000: 132) states that this verse is a prohibition on the Messenger of Allah and those who believe rather than insulting the idols of the polytheists. Even though in such an act there is *maslahah*, the *mafsadah* that follows is greater, namely allowing the polytheists to insult Allah, the God who believers worship. Asbab nuzul verse is also because Muslims insult the gods of infidels so that they retaliate with insults and insults that exceed the limit against the God of believers (Az-Zuhaily, 2009: 343; Ibn Katsir, 2000: 133) The same opinion

was also emphasized by Zuhaili in his commentary (Az-Zuhaily, 2009: 344). According to him, obedience or benefit that brings damage or disobedience,

This is, of course, reasonable. Humans have a nature to regard sacred and glorify what they do and believe. When they worship something, they think it is right and good. What they worship and the way they worship and sanctify it is something they believe to be true (Hosen, 2020: 90). Therefore, when someone from a different religion comes and denounces the truth that they believe in, then they will not remain silent, just as a Muslim would do the same.

A similar analogy is used in one of the authentic hadiths. He said that one of the cursed acts is a child insulting his parents. This prohibition does prohibit a child from insulting his parents not only directly but also indirectly. What is meant indirectly is that when a child humiliates his friend's parents and his friend retaliates by insulting his parents, the child indirectly insults his parents (Ibn Katsir, 2000: 133-134). From this, it can be concluded that when someone insults what is believed to be true by others, he is opening up opportunities for the other party to offend what he believes to be true. Even if it is done in the context of preaching,

This is referred to as the sacred and profane concept of religion (Agus, 2007: 80; Eliade, 1959). Things considered sacred to adherents of one religion may be earthly by followers of other religions (Yahya, 2018: 247). This is the essence of the two teachings above. If someone wants to get respect from followers of other religions, he should start by respecting what followers of other religions believe. This respect certainly does not mean believing and believing in it because it is contrary to their religion's principles. Instead, it gives them space to think in the truth according to their principles and carry out their beliefs. This is also known as social worship (Hidayat, 2019: 46). All worship performed by a believer should have implications for his social life and religious life in the public sphere. Mutual respect and mutual help, including not hurting the hearts of adherents of other religions, is a form of *ihsan* in social relations and social life, as the Prophet SAW exemplified by the relationship between the Muslim government and the *dzimmi* based on the principle of *ihsan* (Al-Faruqi & Al-Faruqi, 2003: 231)

The concept of *kalimatun sawa'* is a concept that is called for monotheistic or *samawi* religions. *Tawhid*, or acknowledging God's oneness (monotheism) is a common platform for various social communities. In the Indonesian context, Pancasila, especially the First Precept, implies the agreement of all Indonesian people on one common divine concept, namely, Belief in One God. This concept is in line with *tawhid* as mentioned in QS 3: 64 (Madjid, 2020: 1664-1665). Therefore, this concept has developed into inter-religious relations in Indonesia from these various religious groups.

This ideological foundation is an agreement for all Indonesian people to form a strong and resilient nation. But unfortunately, several events in Indonesia still show symptoms of intolerance among people in Indonesia. Some religious communities still put forward claims to the truth of these groups and carry out acts of intolerance for religious reasons.

In 2016, there was a conflict that resulted in the burning of a house of worship, born of an expression of anxiety by a Buddhist about the sound of the call to prayer being too loud and disturbing. The group considers this protest as a threat or an act of intolerance. Moreover, these causal factors are accumulated in various ways, such as structural conduciveness, growth, and spread of generalized belief, precipitating factors, mobilization of participants for action, and the operation of social control (Hartanta, 2017).

Muslims, who comprise the majority in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra, are supposed to protect minorities there, including Buddhists. As the message conveyed by Nurcholis Madjid (Madjid, 2020: 1667), Muslims, as the majority, also bear a great responsibility, namely being the builder and guardian of the unity of the nation and state and applying universal Islamic values in the context of Indonesian space and time.

The destruction of houses of worship carried out by Muslims at that time became blasphemy for the teachings of Islam itself. As mentioned above, to live together and in harmony, Muslims are ordered not to insult and disturb the rituals and beliefs of other people. When a Muslim does this, he

indirectly injures the teachings of their own religion and shows the wrong side to other religious people.

The same thing can also be seen from conflicts in Buddhist-majority countries, such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar. In Sri Lanka, fundamentalist Buddhist groups have been waging wars and attacks against various minority groups, especially Muslims, since 2014. In 2018, the riots escalated and spawned a backlash from the Muslims. The Muslims retaliated against the destruction of Muslim properties by destroying various Sinhalese-owned monasteries.

In Myanmar, the conflict is an inter-ethnic conflict where the Myanmar government tortures and expels the Muslim community in the Rohingya. In this attack, Buddhist religious figures with fundamentalist and extremist views also heated the situation. The monks at the inter-monk conference stated that Rohingya sympathizers were traitors to the nation (Raharjo, 2015). Various values in their religious teachings about peace and compassion disappeared when they legalized attacks and genocide against the Rohingya ethnic. Monk Virathu, one of the leaders of the fundamentalist monk movement, also often associates Buddhism with nationalism and Islamophobia. Therefore, he earned the nickname "Burmese bin Laden" (Raharjo, 2015: 44).

Both Muslims and Buddhists have the potential to be fundamental and extreme towards followers of other religions, especially when they become the majority and dominant. In fact, these two religions, as mentioned earlier, are the majority religions in Southeast Asia. Their advantages of being the majority do not necessarily legalize them to carry out arbitrary actions against religious minorities or other ethnic minorities. This power should be the main capital in maintaining peace in the region (Yusuf, 2019).

If they refer back to the history of the two religions, Ashoka's teachings and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW to respect and not insult (or hurt) followers of other religions, and their worshipers did not appear when the two religions became weak minorities. Ashoka's teachings emerged when his kingdom reached its peak of glory and became the majority ruler in India. Buddhism was then the official state religion in all of India.

Likewise, what was taught by the Prophet Muhammad SAW, namely when Muslims became the majority and had a formidable power. They could set an example for dominating and repressing religious minorities, as we found in the conflicts in Tanjung Balai, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. However, due to the perfect personalities of both of them, which stems from the correct understanding and practice of their religious teachings, both of them provide legitimacy containing protection for all sovereign communities in one national and state agreement by not hurting and insulting each other for the sake of creating a national life that is harmonious.

4. Conclusion

Islam and Buddhism are two religions that have different traditions. Islam is a Semitic religion, and Buddhism belongs to the Aryan family religions. However, every belief and religion has a meeting point with other religions, which are then referred to as common words or common platforms. Both religions agree that glorifying one's religion must start from respecting other religions. This respect is to foster harmony and harmony in life together. The teachings spread by King Ashoka have similarities with the teachings of Islam, namely that it is enough for a person to insult his religion when he insults other religions. From here, respect for adherents of other religions is an obligation for Muslims and Buddhists before they want respect from followers of other religions.

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