

## SALVATION AND RECONCILIATION AS COMMON HORIZONS IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY\*

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### Abstrak

*Tulisan ini bertolak dari penemuan Karel Steenbrink, bahwa studi mengenai Adam di dalam kitab suci Al Qur'an dapat menjadi titik tolak untuk menyoroti pendapat umum bahwa Islam adalah sebuah agama rekonsiliasi yang bersifat horisontal daripada sebuah agama keselamatan yang bersifat vertikal. Menurut Steenbrink dan Kautsar Ashari Noer, di dalam teks Al Qur'an sendiri sudah terdapat tekanan bahwa Islam adalah juga sebuah agama keselamatan. Di pihak lain dengan mengacu pada penafsiran kembali Marcus Borg dan Roger Haight terhadap makna keselamatan di dalam agama Kristen, maka antitesa umum bahwa agama Kristen adalah sebuah agama keselamatan daripada agama rekonsiliasipun dapat dipertanyakan kembali. Dapat dikatakan bahwa di dalam baik agama Islam maupun agama Kristen terdapat pemahaman mengenai keselamatan dan rekonsiliasi. Penulis berpendapat bahwa dalam agama Islam dan agama Kristen, keselamatan dan rekonsiliasi merupakan cakrawala bersama, yang dapat dimanfaatkan oleh umat Islam dan umat Kristen di Indonesia untuk menyelesaikan konflik-konflik mereka dalam permulaan abad ke-21 ini.*

### خلاصة

حاولت هذه الدراسة استعراض مسألة المسألة والمصالحة بين الأديان. والتي يغلب عليها الاتجاهات المختلفة. ففي داخل مفاهيم الدين الإسلامي يوجد تطور من خلال رؤية الإسلام بأنه دين مصالح يتجه إلى المسألة مع كل الأديان، وفي بعض الأحيان في داخل مفهوم المسيحية أيضا يوجد تطور من خلال النظر إلى المسيحية على أنها دين مسالم ويتجه نحو المصالحة. وبالنهاية فإن كل من الدينين توجد داخله المفاهيم المذكورة ولذلك يجب الاستفادة منها في إندونيسيا من أجل إنهاء النزاع الديني بين الطوائف الدينية في بداية القرن الواحد والعشرين.

**Keywords:** *Salvation, Reconciliation, Common Horizons, Islam, Christianity*

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### A. Introduction

**A**s a person who comes from Indonesia, it is with some trepidation that I offer to broach on such broad and important themes. Although in the past Indonesia was known as a country where several religions can live in peace and harmony, today it can hardly hold on to that image. Consecutive governments cannot prevent communal conflicts between Muslims and Christians from happening in various regions formerly known for their traditional religious tolerance, for instance in the North Moluccan islands (Halmahera), South Moluccan islands (Ambon) and Central Sulawesi (Poso). For the first time in so many years we are witnessing that people are harmed or even murdered because of their religious affiliation. In the last years of the former president Soeharto's reign (1996-1998) the coastal areas north of Java frequently exploded in riots, and hundreds of churches and church-related buildings were burned to the ground or ransacked. Recently the government of president Megawati has acted to reconcile the warring parties in the three conflict areas above, and formal agreements have been achieved (known as 'Malino I' and 'Malino II'), but is not yet clear whether peace and reconciliation are truly established. From time to time violence erupted, as if there are people who seem to think that salvation and reconciliation are detrimental to their (political, socio-economic and religious) interests. If the situation is that bad, how can I speak on salvation and reconciliation as our common horizons?

• However, as we say in Indonesian, *habis gelap terbitlah terang*, "after darkness comes light". Many Indonesians never lose hope, that someday we will again live in peace. Even in the midst of deep darkness, there are still signs of hope. Not everybody lets him/herself be swayed by religious fanaticism and regard the other side as evil. When turbulence was in its heights in the coastal areas of North Java, there are reports that many Muslim villagers defended their Christian neighbours from the attacking mobs. In Halmahera, a social researcher who happen to be the wife of one of the faculty-members at Duta Wacana Christian University at Yogyakarta (where I am working as a lecturer), is facing no difficulties at all. The Muslim community pledges to give her all the necessary protection. And in the small province of Yogyakarta (and its capital which has the same name), Christians and Muslims are doing their best to maintain normal relationship with each other, even though there are some tensions influenced by news about the affected areas. This can be seen from the fact, that the Indonesian delegates to the Parliament of the World's Religions (held in Cape Town, South Africa, December 1-8, 1999) consist of two Christian lecturers from the Theological Faculty which forms part of the Christian university above and one Muslim professor from the Sunan Kalidjaga State Islamic Institute. They come from Yogyakarta and they are at the meetings of the Parliament as one team!

Since the days of the former president Soeharto, these two institutions and the people who are responsible for their day-to-day affairs have always been able to

communicate with each other in the spirit of dialogue, even when elsewhere the relation between the two communities are at its lowest ebb. And so I think, as somebody who lives in a society full of tensions, I may be allowed to talk of salvation and reconciliation, as a theological basis for why Muslims and Christians should live together in peace. I am struggling to contribute something from my perspective which is meaningful for both Muslims and Christians. It is precisely when two or more religious communities are in conflict, that they are unawarely showing their deepest longing or desire for a different situation, and this deepest longing or desire could be termed as "salvation and reconciliation".

### *B. The Existing Differentiation between Islam and Christianity*

To enable us to see salvation and reconciliation as our common horizons, it is a matter of necessity that we reconsider the existing differentiation between religions, in particular between Islam and Christianity. I am following closely the arguments put forward by Karel Steenbrink in his remarkable study on the Adamic tradition and its interpretation by Indonesian Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Muslim theologians usually divide religions into two groups: the prophetic religions characterized by a holy scripture, and those who do not claim a written divine revelation. As Christians adhere to the Bible as their holy book, together with the Jews they have a special position whenever a country is under a Muslim rule, such as in the Ottoman empire in the past. However, they have to pay special taxes. In the present day in Indonesia, official categorization of religions, to some extent, follow this line of thought. All the recognized religions of Indonesia (Islam, Christianity [meaning: non-Catholics], Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and recently, Confucianism) each have their holy books and prophets. But of course the main criteria is the belief in one Godhead, in accordance to the first principle of Pancasila as the foundation of the state.

Western academics also produced dichotomies in the general theory of religion. Some followed mainstream Islam in the division between prophetic religions and mystical religions (Zaehner), others made a distinction between prophetic versus priestly religions (Weber). Still, some tried to go beyond the formal elements, and look at the basic goals of religion. And so now we have the division between religions of salvation and religions of reconciliation. Theo Sundermaier is a contemporary proponent of this tendency. He classifies Buddhism as religion of salvation par excellence, while the numerous tribal religions are considered as religions of reconciliation. Contrary to what is regarded as common consensus, Sundermaier thinks that the Jewish religion found in the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly termed "The Old Testament" by Christians) is basically not a religion of salvation, but a guidebook for

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<sup>1</sup> See Karel Steenbrink, 1998, *Adam Redivivus, Muslim elaborations of the Adam saga with special reference to the Indonesian literary traditions*, Meinema, Zoetermeer, the Netherlands.

reconciliation. The same holds for Christianity as it is found in the Christian Scriptures (commonly termed "The New Testament" by Christians). It is only in the second century that we can see elements of the gnostic and other-worldly religion of salvation enter Christianity and reshape life and ritual and ethics into an elaborate preparation for the world hereafter. If so, it is logical to regard the combination of the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures by the ancient ecclesiastical authorities into what we now have as "the Christian Bible", as focused together on reconciliation rather than on salvation.

On the one hand, Steenbrink accepts Sundermaier's division between religions of salvation and religions of reconciliation and the latter's attempt to redefine Christianity and the Hebrew religion. On the other hand, he rightly questions whether we can make a neat separation between the characteristics of Christianity and those of the Hebrew religion (sometimes termed as "early Judaism"). Probably we should accept a much more complicated picture for the early developments of both religions. As someone who is trained in the scholarly exposition of the texts of the Hebrew Bible, I think Sundermaier underestimates the frequency of Hebrew terms related to salvation, such as *yasya*. It may be better to say that the Hebrew religion contains both characteristics. Sundermaier does not refer to Islam. However Steenbrink builds from this analysis to develop his own insights into a reconsideration of the common typology of Christianity as a religion of salvation and Islam as a religion of reconciliation.

### *C. Christianity and Islam as Religions of Salvation and Reconciliation*

Based on his study of Adam, Steenbrink focused on the common differentiation between Christianity as a religion of salvation and Islam as a religion of reconciliation. According to him, through a mental reference to the Adam saga, people often construct a quick and easy contrast between Christianity as the religion of original sin and salvation through the redeeming death of Jesus on the cross, versus Islam (and Judaism) as a more this-worldly religion, without original sin, emphasizing the original purity of the human condition. Taking the doctrine of original sin as an axial point, one might well categorize Christianity and Islam in such a way. However, this categorization would yield to an oversimplification of the real picture. Any student studying for the ministry, who has been through a course on exegesis of the book of Genesis chapters 1-3 will confirm that in the texts themselves there is no evidence at all of "the Fall". Within Christianity there has been a long and continuing tradition of Adam's sin as a minor mistake, while the first human being remained the prototype of the pure and perfect human being. To consider the sin of Adam as a minor mistake in Christianity is of course problematic, and will give the impression that to Steenbrink the problem of sin is not serious. I think on the whole the Christian tradition regards sin as a serious breach in the

communication between humankind and God. Sin is rebellion on the side of the creature against its Creator. It is only in the matter of original sin that people in that tradition differs. This tradition of sin which is unrelated to the fall of Adam has persisted in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and is also strongly represented in several streams within the Roman Catholic Church. Emphasis on original sin remains strong in the Protestant tradition, but even here there are signs of change in the meaning of salvation.

Marcus Borg has reexamined references to salvation in the Christian Bible and discovered at least eight meanings where the term "salvation" occurs.<sup>2</sup> Salvation has to do with healing the wounds of existence. The biblical images of salvation are correlated with images of the woundedness or predicament from which humankind need healing or deliverance. This is not the place to examine all of the eight meanings (salvation as liberation, salvation as reconciliation, salvation as enlightenment, salvation as forgiveness, salvation as experiencing the love of God, salvation as food and drink, salvation as knowing God, salvation as the kingdom of God). I shall only consider the first two. The first image of salvation is liberation from bondage. The story of exodus is a story about all of humankind and the need to be liberated from what holds them in bondage. Liberation is a central theme in the story of Jesus. For Paul, God in Christ has defeated the powers, exposing and dethroning the other lords of our lives. The second image of salvation is reconciliation: to be brought back into good relations after an estrangement. The central biblical image for the condition of estrangement is "exile". Life in exile can have political and cultural meanings as well as psychological and spiritual ones. Its psychological symptom is alienation, which involves the feeling of being cut from the center of meaning, and its spiritual equivalent is estrangement from God. Salvation as reconciliation is the experience of being reconnected with God, who invites, encourages and empowers people to return to him. The reconciling work of God in Christ also brings about reconciliation with one another, breaking down the walls of separation and hostility.

I think Borg is more convincing in his view about the close relationship between salvation and reconciliation and their contents than Sundermaier's narrow designation of salvation as related to the other-worldly and reconciliation as related to the this-worldly. Christianity is about salvation and reconciliation, and they encompass both the realms of this-worldly and other-worldly. Of course one could question Borg's attempt to describe the meaning of salvation by utilising various images as to place less attention to the utmost significance of the person of Christ. Is Christianity not a religion of salvation, where salvation is brought by God in the person of Christ? While acknowledging that this is true, still, in my opinion, one needs to explain what it means. The usual comparison

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<sup>2</sup> See Marcus Borg, 1998, *The God We Never Knew*, chapter 7, San Fransisco: Harper, pp.156-175.

by some Christians, between salvation brought by the person of Christ and the meaning of salvation in other religions, is an instance of comparing apples and oranges. A person, X is compared with a meaning Y. The person is then considered superior over the meaning. This is an illegitimate comparison. Meanings should be compared with meanings. Recent theologians such as Roger Haight has built Christologies where the person of Christ is seen as symbol,<sup>3</sup> and of course as in Ricoeur's famous adage, symbol is very closely related to meaning.<sup>4</sup>

I am not an expert on Islam. To describe how Islam can be described as a religion of salvation and reconciliation, I have relied on Steenbrink and others such as the Indonesian Muslim scholar, Kautsar Ashari Noer.<sup>5</sup> Steenbrink proposes a new direction for a solution to the long tradition of Christian-Muslim polemics on the meaning of the counterpart of Adam's sin: the redeeming death of Jesus on the cross. For Muslims the topic of the debate is usually the facts of Good Friday. But more important is to consider a few related texts about the eschatological message of the Qur'an and specify, whether they must be interpreted in the framework of salvation or reconciliation. According to Steenbrink surah 93 does not absolutely refer to the Last Day of Judgement, although this is a quite commonly accepted meaning that is based on similarities in theme and style with many other surahs from the first Meccan period of revelation of the Qur'an. But no doubt the consequences of the admonition in this surah, eschatological or not, are for the near future. As such the eschatological dimensions do not simply denote prediction of future things, but involve a call to generosity and proper social behaviour.

This is even more clear from surah 100 *Al-ʿAdiyat* (The Chargers). It is divided into three parts. The first five lines evoke the apocalyptic conditions of the Day of Judgement. Like in the Apocalypse of John, the horses are signs of war and destruction. The second section introduces a person who is overly attached to his richness, not realizing that everything in this world is transient. Therefore the last verses go back to the opening scene of the apocalyptic horses and remind the person that on the Last Day he/she will lose everything and have to stand before God for trial. From these texts it is clear that the Qur'an has an eschatological message, and following Sundermaier's criteria, Islam could be regarded as a religion of salvation. On the other hand, this eschatological message is closely linked with a strong ethical vocation, concrete for the contemporary situation as a means to overcome the gap between the rich and the poor. As such, Islam could be regarded as a religion of reconciliation, as indeed has been its more common designation.

<sup>3</sup> See Roger Haight, 1999, *Jesus Symbol of God*, New York: Orbis.

<sup>4</sup> The exact wording is "The symbol gives rise to thought", see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 1967, Boston: Beacon Press, Conclusion, p.347ff.

<sup>5</sup> See Kautsar Ashari Noer, 1996, "Keselamatan menurut Islam", *Penuntun* vol.2, no.6, Jan-Mrt, pp. 154-63.

Steenbrink does not limit his research to the texts of the Qur'an, which are commonly regarded as normative by the Muslims. His main focus is on the literary sources concerning the figure of Adam in the Indonesian religious tradition. This tradition is commonly regarded in a negative way as consisting of deviations. However, Steenbrink proposes to see it in a new light, as the result of the dynamics of faith in a changing cultural environment. These deviations, or better, creative re-interpretations are not something which suddenly come out of the blue. As in the story of Adam in the Hebrew Bible, the same references to Adam in the Qur'an often yield questions rather than answers to serious readers. Under the influence of Jewish and Christian traditions, the 'gaps' in the story of Adam are filled. Later on there are also influences from Persia (Gayomart), India (Brahma and Vishnu cycles) and Southeast Asian creation myths. As the fruit of dialogue between Muslim theology and the common Neo-Platonic and Eastern philosophies of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, there appears a theological anthropology with Adam as the perfect man.

Later on in the Malay mystical tradition, especially in the writings of Hamzah Fansuri, this theme is developed further. In the Javanese literary tradition the figure of Adam is 'blown-up' to reach fantastic proportions, and in the end we find an image of Adam which is considerably different from both the Qur'anic and the Biblical images. However, it contains the deepest aspirations and religious longings that emerge from the Javanese context. This mystical Adam is more compatible with the category of a religion of salvation than of a religion of reconciliation. Steenbrink is quick to point out that in a different context the same development is seen in the idea of the Light of Muhammad as the first concrete emanation of the Divine. Thus, it can be argued that at least some streams within the great Islamic tradition have formulated a doctrine which is close to the general and abstract concepts of the "religions of salvation". As we have seen above in Borg's attempt to broaden the meaning of salvation by looking back at the contexts of the occurrences of the term salvation in the Biblical tradition, the trend in contemporary Christianity to move from salvation to reconciliation, so now we can say that in the history of Islam there have been attempts to do the reverse, namely to move from reconciliation to salvation.

Kautsar Ashari Noer begins his observations on Islam as a religion of salvation by acknowledging that the term "salvation" is not as popular in Islam as it is in Christianity. Salvation as a noun (*najâh*) occurs only once in the Qur'an (Q 40:41). But the verb "to save" (*najjâ*) occurs more frequently. Although salvation is rarely mentioned in the Qur'an, it does not mean that Islam has no doctrine of salvation. *Najâh* is semantically related to other terms such as *sa'âdah* (happiness), *fawz* (success) and *salâm* (peace). The most popular of the three is *salâm*. Heaven is described as *dâr al-salâm*, and one of God's name is *al-Salâm* (Q 59:23). The term *salâm* and the name of the religion - *al-Islâm* - are

derived from the root *SLM*. As befits its name, Islam teaches that the way to receive salvation is to surrender oneself to God. Those who do, will not only receive salvation, but also welfare and peace. *Salâm* is then an all-inclusive term (not unlike the Hebrew *shaloom*).

Kautsar continues by referring to the supposedly common knowledge that the view of Islam and Christianity on humankind is different. So, according to this view, in Christianity humankind is in need of salvation because of the fall of Adam as the first Man. In Islam humankind is a theomorphic creature and as such, humankind is fundamentally good. The relationship between God and humankind is established through a "primordial covenant" (*mitsâq*), which antedates the creation. Based on this covenant, humankind is given strength, intelligence and other potentials, but also obligations toward God. By utilising the gifts of God, human beings performs their roles as God's representatives (*khalifah*) in the world. Their obligations include witnessing to the Oneness of God (*tawhid*), with the consequence that humankind will be obedient to the will of God and keep a distance from what God forbids. Although humankind is *khalifah*, at the same time, by fulfilling the divine obligations, humankind is also God's servant (*'abd*). So there is no need for a miracle in the sense of a divine act which will enable humankind to receive salvation. In Islam, humankind is reminded to fulfill the contents of the primordial covenant between God and humankind. Although humankind is regarded as a theomorphic creature, he/she is also weak and imperfect in nature. It is these shortcomings which make human beings ignorant of their theomorphic existence and forget that they have made a covenant with God. So in Islam, sin is ignorance (*ghaflah*), and ignorance begets all the evil deeds done toward God and fellow human beings. To prevent ignorance, humankind must absolutely surrender to God. By this act of surrender, humankind will receive salvation both in the present state of being in the world (*dunia*) and in the hereafter (*akhirat*). According to Kautsar, Islam is also a religion of salvation and reconciliation, but in my opinion Kautsar's view of Islam as a religion of salvation is unique, as he has the audacity to describe Islam from a perspective which is more commonly utilised to describe Christianity.

We have seen above how both Christianity and Islam can be described as religions of salvation and reconciliation. At least it can be shown that as phenomena, religions are too complex to fit into neat categorizations. Although Christianity is different from Islam, we have to be wary about claims about their differences that have the characteristics of an antithesis. Steenbrink's remark is worth pondering: "Any grand theory about more general distinctions between Muslims and Christians, especially relating to concepts of salvation or reconciliation, lacks a solid foundation and is contradicted by the facts testifying the historical and actual diversity of the religions".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Steenbrink, *op.cit.*, p. 168.



#### D. Closing remarks

I select Steenbrink and Kautsar, as they describe the notions of salvation and reconciliation in Islam from the perspective of the Indonesian understanding of Islam. Steenbrink puts forward the results of his research on the Indonesian literary tradition both ancient and modern, while Kautsar can be regarded as representing a contemporary Indonesian Muslim theological reflection. As Adam is an important figure both in the scriptures of Christianity and Islam, Steenbrink inevitably has to look also on Adam in the traditions of Christianity. I have developed a few insights based on their views, to reach a simple conclusion: that salvation and reconciliation are very important to Islam and Christianity. While there is development in Christianity from a religion of salvation to a religion of reconciliation, and similarly in Islam, a movement from the characteristics of a religion of reconciliation to a religion of salvation, in their present state both contain the two characteristics. We can say that salvation and reconciliation are common horizons in Islam and Christianity. We can look for proof of these horizons in the religious praxis of the Indonesian people.

In their evening prayers both adherents of Christianity and Islam in Indonesia praise God that they are allowed to witness the end of the day in peace. In Indonesian it is *selamat* (The complete phrase is *hamba-Mu bersyukur dapat tiba pada malam ini dengan selamat*). As Kautsar pointed out, *selamat* also means "saved". This is no mere ritual. Not infrequently people go out in the morning from their homes, not knowing for certain whether they are going to meet their beloved ones in the evening. It is the prayer of contemporary Indonesians. Personally I am hoping that the most important religious feasts in Indonesia among Christians and Muslims, Christmas and *Idulfitri*, will be commemorated as feasts of both salvation and reconciliation, and celebrated by adherents of the two religions. During Christmas, Muslims could go to the homes of their Christian neighbours and celebrate salvation and reconciliation of both the host and the guest, and during *Idulfitri* Christians could do the same thing to their Muslim neighbours. In fact, before the society is torn by conflicts, visiting the neighbour when he/she celebrates his/her most important religious feast already exists as a tradition, but the meaning is social rather than theological. What I propose is to revive and enrich this tradition with theological meaning. If salvation and reconciliation are our common horizons, let us make this theological commonality a force to remove our feelings of animosity towards one another. *Wallahu alam bi-al sawab*.

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