

SEEKING A PLACE IN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY: AN EXPLORATION OF PERSONAL EXISTENCE AMONG STUDENTS WITHOUT FAITH-COMMITMENT IN INDONESIA.

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ABSTRACT:

Living without faith commitment is an existential struggle in Indonesia, where religion is essential for communal life. Despite the civic requirement to register one's religious belief, some students, in reality, live without faith commitment. Their formal religious status is not a reflection of their convictions. They never attend religious worship, and they also have no idea about the core beliefs. Using qualitative phenomenological research, this article reports students' existential struggle in a religiously-shaped society as an intense experience and struggle to find a place in the community. In the final part of the research, the paper also reflects the biblical perspective and provides recommendations for the church in the contemporary context.

Keywords: *atheism, freedom, civic, student experience, religion*

ABSTRAK

Hidup tanpa komitmen iman adalah perjuangan eksistensial di Indonesia, di mana agama sangat penting bagi kehidupan komunal. Terlepas dari persyaratan sipil untuk mendaftarkan keyakinan agama seseorang, beberapa siswa, pada kenyataannya, hidup tanpa komitmen keyakinan. Status agama formal mereka bukanlah cerminan dari keyakinan mereka. Mereka tidak pernah menghadiri ibadah agama, dan mereka juga tidak tahu tentang keyakinan inti. Dengan menggunakan penelitian kualitatif fenomenologis, artikel ini melaporkan perjuangan eksistensial mahasiswa dalam masyarakat yang berbentuk agama sebagai pengalaman dan perjuangan yang intens untuk menemukan tempat di masyarakat. Di bagian akhir penelitian, makalah ini juga mencerminkan perspektif alkitabiah dan memberikan rekomendasi bagi gereja dalam konteks kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Ateisme, kebebasan, kewarganegaraan, pengalaman mahasiswa, agama

1. INTRODUCTION

This research explores how students without faith commitment and atheists face the challenge of representing their convictions among their peers in the university. The existential struggle is enhanced by the law requirement in Indonesia to hold a religious belief. The constitutional mandate is translated into the Higher Education Curriculum and requires every university student to take a course on religion. The objective is to ensure that every Indonesian student grows morally and based on religious teachings (Indirawati 2006).

Recent research by Saskia Schäfer, *Forming 'Forbidden' Identities Online: Atheism in Indonesia* (2016) (Schäfer 2016), found that atheism in Indonesia is a hidden phenomenon. The community of atheists forms online networks using a pseudonym on social media. Schäfer found that atheists continue to be involved in religious rites while questioning the religion's central tenets. Their purpose is to avoid being expelled from the community, as in the case of Alexander An, a government employee in Dharmasraya Regency, West Sumatra. He was imprisoned because of his open confession on social media. His claim that 'Gods do not exist and his controversial page, entitled "Minang Atheist Facebook group," stirred unrest and violent protest from the local community and was judged as serious blasphemy (Ismail 2016). The case shows the challenge of openly confessing as an atheist in the context of the law and the social situation in Indonesia and explains why atheism is a hidden phenomenon in Indonesia.

This research aims to explore how students without faith commitment seek a place among their friends and how they resolve their religious convictions about Indonesia's social and civic contexts. As an exploration, this is not mainly a prescriptive paper, but a descriptive approach to provide initial qualitative data for further research. This is because research about atheism is at an explorative stage in Indonesia. Specifically, this paper explores the existential experience of the students in the context of a religious community; what is their view on God, religion, and religious people; how they manage to live with others with such distinct convictions; and how they feel about themselves in the context of a civic requirement to register a religion or to belong to a faith community. Nevertheless, before concluding the presentation, the paper also provides biblical exploration and some pastoral recommendations for the church in response to the atheism challenges. These recommendations however need further testing and validation in research that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research is conducted by qualitative exploration of three participants using the phenomenology approach. The data is collected through semi-structured interviews and open questions to explore their understandings and experiences. The participants consist of two male students and one female student. The participants were selected purposively to represent students with atheistic convictions in their beliefs. All participants are students in a Christian university and

are required by the university system to participate in a class on Religion and participate in religious worship of their choice.

The data analysis follows descriptive phenomenological analysis as suggested by Giorgi (Morrow et al. 2015). The steps in data analysis are as follows (Peranginangin and Saragih 2020): (i) researchers read the interview and construct the overall understanding, meaning, and representation of the students (ii) researchers structure the experiences of the students into units of distinctive meaning (iii) researchers take an individual unit of meaning as representing the struggle of the students (iv) researchers summarize the meanings into a descriptive representation that conveys the existential experience of an atheist in Indonesia.

3. RESULTS

Subject 1 – Indifference toward Religion

Subject-1 is a male student who had visited the church several times but felt disappointed with the rules and regulations. His parent provides him with the freedom to decide on his religion. But in his opinion, religion is not essential, but morality is, i.e., as long as one does not harm one's neighbor. The following is his response to the question of the place of religion in his life and the way he manages his conviction in the religious community. He resolves to develop an indifferent attitude toward religious life.

If it is possible in Indonesia, I will not hold onto any religion. I have no motivation at all to join any religious belief and practice. This is what I want: freedom from religious obligations and freedom to believe in any religion; free from all religious requirements, as long as I do good things in life. Maybe there is a Mighty Being in this universe, but it seems to me it is also not unreasonable to believe the contrary. But everything that happens in the world is random, although people might claim that it is God's plan... I joined available religion classes on campus and registered for Buddhism for formality. Sometimes I debate with my friends about religion, and I find their answers are not too convincing. In my view, many religious leaders in Indonesia are hypocrites because they use religion for political purposes. What is essential is not holding to religion but living my life based on freedom, i.e., freedom to be what I want to be.

Indifference toward religion and the will to live in freedom is the reason why the subject has little care toward religious life. For him, freedom is a condition in which one is free to do anything as long one does not harm anyone. He explicitly confessed two reasons for his indifference to religion: the meaninglessness of religious regulations and the hypocrisy of religious leaders. Furthermore, the lenient attitude of his parent provides a free space to believe anything and gives him no incentive to involve in religious worship. All the civic and educational requirements to hold

to one religion are burdensome but mandatory formal requirements as an Indonesian citizen. However, as long as it has no critical consequence on his life, he keeps his anonymity about his atheistic convictions and understandings.

Subject 2 – Freedom to be without God

Subject-2 is a female student registered as a catholic student but identifies religion primarily as an inner consolation for its adherents. But religion also has other functions, such as the yardstick for good and evil in moral life. She believes that God is a just, perfect, and loving being if there is one. The rule of thumb in life is that every decision has a consequence, and each person must be responsible for one's decision and action. The future is the accumulation of one's decisions and actions in life, and in that regard, one must be responsible for whatever happens in one's life. She believes that the world is operating more kin to Deism, i.e., the reality is like a giant clock machine, and the world runs in its course without any necessity of divine intervention. In other words, she believes that practically God is not needed in human affairs. The following is the response to her religious convictions and practices.

Honestly, I prefer not to hold to any religion, mainly because religion means responsibilities and is burdensome. In my opinion, religious activities are unnecessary because this is my life, and it is my choice of what to do with my life, where I want to go, and what I want to do. If there is such God, God creates us to be free to make choices, including free to believe or not to believe. When I have a problem in life, there is no use in praying to God because I am responsible for whatever happens in my life. I think God does not control anything in the world. I heard that religion said human beings are created in God's image. It means that we have to choose our pathway in this life... I don't like religious people who do religion only for the sake of social acknowledgment or popularity. That is hypocrisy. What important is to do your duty and live with dignity.

Subject 2 shows a unique combination of religious conviction and aspiration for freedom. Her way of thinking is not difficult to find in a western context but something special in the context of Indonesia. Her understanding is a form of Deism that sees no connection between divinity and human life. The idea of freedom provides a starting point for her opinion on religion and morality, which places the ultimate importance on one's capacity to accept the consequences of one's decision in life and live with them. God does not involve in anything except at the beginning of the universe. As such, there is no strict moral demand to follow, and in this regard, religious obligations are unnecessary burdens that one needs to leave off when social condition allows one to do so. Combining these beliefs is a unique point of view that reflects a process of freeing herself from what she deems as the dogmatic slumber of religion. It is interesting to find such an experience of a young adult in a religiously-shaped community.

Subject 3 – Good life as an Atheist

Subject-3 is a male student who views the existence of God as ambiguous, i.e., one can claim that God exists or does not exist with the same logical weight. As such, life should not be governed by unproven religious beliefs but by moral impulses to do good things in life. Both intellectually and concretely, he decides not to involve in religion. He registers for formal requirements for Buddhism, but his religion is just a civic status without implications for his personal life. These double lives are a social necessity, given that one has to live in Indonesia with a requirement to register to a religion.

I know I am required to choose one of the religions. But if possible, I will not adhere to one of the religions. As long as I do not disturb others, it is enough. I never go to any religious worship, and what is wrong with that? Nothing. When I see the hypocrisy of religious people, I think it is better to be an atheist. Sometimes, I hoped that God would help me when I was in trouble. But I know that it is just wishful thinking. Religion has little use. In Indonesia, many people use religion for personal and political gain. In this regard, I think being an atheist is better. I think what is essential in life are these: family and money. God is not that important.

Compared to previous subjects, subject-3 shows a more robust moral and intellectual ascent toward atheism. He believes that a moralist atheist can live a better life than a religious person. He highlights the fact that religion has been used for personal and political gains, proving that religion has failed to sustain the morality of society. Firm in his conviction is that an atheist can live a good life. However, he defines a good life as a pragmatic view of life measured by happiness in family and financial freedom.

4. DISCUSSIONS: SEEKING A PLACE IN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Based on the qualitative findings, the participants manage to keep their convictions hidden and undergo a personal struggle in keeping the secret of their beliefs in the context of a religious community. Their deepest desire is to be free from any religious obligations, particularly the requirement to participate in religious rites. But they also need to register a religious identity as a civic requirement. As such, they formally have a religion while secretly doubting the existence of God. They hold the principle of freedom intensely as the highest norm, and it includes the freedom to be an atheist. Nevertheless, this existential urge is a sociological impossibility given the civic requirement in Indonesia, and they will never confess openly as an atheist. If we compare with another context, Juliana Baggini et al. found that being a confessing atheist continues to be a problematic option even in the United States. Moral boundaries and cultural membership in

American society still require some form of belief, and up until recently, atheists were still stigmatized with other historically marginalized groups (Arcaro 2012).

As found in this research, atheists in Indonesia will always claim to adhere to a religion. The pressure creates a personal struggle to be an authentic person who can express one's personal beliefs, while in present Indonesia's sociological context, such open confession is very challenging. As such, they continue to live in a kind of ambivalent existence, seeking to find a place where they can express an authentic life with no faith commitment. Ismail Hasani states that this is one of the challenges in developing democracy in Indonesia because the more democratic a state is, the freer it is to guarantee the freedom of its citizens. But historically, Indonesia is a very religious country, as stated in the first principle of the constitution. As Rizalluhag (2011) argues, 'Freedom of expression should be guaranteed for everybody, just like freedom of religion.' But how is this applied to students who have no faith commitment? While the more democratic a country, the more freedom its people enjoy. Citizens in Indonesia must register a religion as part of their identity, thus limiting their freedom of belief and conviction (Ismail 2016).

In line with the subjects' view about morality, the most offensive aspect of religious people is the hypocrisy of their leaders. Given the public perception of recent sociological developments in Indonesia, this is challenging, where religious fanatics have become a standard feature. The abuse of religion for personal and political gain provides a negative incentive for their appreciation of religion. On the other hand, religion could still place subjects' life, mainly when problems or difficulties in life (pain, suffering, death, etc.) make one reflect upon spiritual reality and try to give meaning to the absurdities in human experiences. These metaphysical questions do not necessarily demand a faith commitment to God. Still, it arouses a search for an alternative narrative that opens a metaphysical quest for meaning in life. This 'religious' aspect of human life makes the subjects open to the role of religion in human life while they also want to keep their distance from the formal part of religion. This research needs further exploration to find the religious dimensions of atheism in Indonesia, which may not be pure atheism. In the conclusion of Andrew S. Eshleman, an atheist might believe in God because the language about God is understood in a non-realist sense (Eshleman 2005).

The search for a place in a religious community continues to be an existential struggle in Indonesia until its regulation provides a space for those who cannot make an honest and truthful public confession of their atheism. As a democratic country, Indonesia's constitution should guarantee freedom of religion in the public sphere. People still seeking a place in a religious community can openly express their true beliefs and understanding. On the other hand, the Indonesian constitution is ambiguous for people who choose no religious beliefs (Syafi'ie 2011).

5. A BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Atheism refuses to accept the existence of God. They reject God neither as creator nor authority in human life as a movement. Based on this research, the rejection of God's existence is

correlated to the social context of religion in Indonesia. There are many disappointments toward various hypocrisies of religious leaders and communities. They are perceived as very religious but show minor signs of genuine existence. They are marked mainly by religious passion but little compassion. In everyday life and in public, many religious leaders only use religion as a tool for personal or sometimes political gains. Furthermore, the new generation of Millennials supports the new attitude that does not readily accept received tradition but questions them critically based on contemporary plausibility structure (Peranginangin and Saragih 2020). As reported in the research by Smith (2011), many young people see religious rituals as burdensome activities. Smith further states that “an atheist identity is an achieved identity, and one that is constructed in social interaction”(Smith 2011).

Based on this exploration, the church’s response needs to be founded on the call to live as a living witness that combines speech and action as part of everyday life. This needs to be combined with a fresh approach to received traditions and rituals contextualized according to Millennial contexts. In line with these two points, the church can respond appropriately to the call to provide pastoral ministry to groups that have not decided to accept the existence of God. Ezekiel proclaims, ‘I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice (Ezekiel 34:16). Similarly, Jesus also teaches, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17)

The church is called to reach out to the world. It is the nature of the church to witness to the people who do not believe in God. The church also needs to bear witness to influencing the harsh attitude of the society that condones the cruel treatment of atheists in the community. The love of God reaches out to everyone and opens arms for everyone so that everyone can take part in God’s redemptive purposes (John 3:16; Mat 28:18-20).

In this context, we need to reevaluate the need of the era in which the church engages in Indonesia, where new challenges arise in a new context. The Bible provides ample examples of the failures of the people of God, particularly the Israelites who do not meet up the need of their time. There are examples where Israelite compromise and becomes worldly themselves and fail to fulfill their calling to be different to bring the light to the world (Mikha 3:1-10).

In the New Testament, we also can find the religious hypocrisies of the Pharisees who ignore love and justice in favor of ritual and tradition. Many religious people show fervent and passion in religious exercise but ignore society’s need to the extent that fulfilling religious rites can replace duty to the poor and needy (Luke 11:42). During that time, religion was used for social discrimination and cultural alienation, as seen in the case of the Samaritan ethnic group and among those labeled as sinners. Jesus repeatedly rebuked them as the stumbling block from helping people who need the gospel by opening their ears and hearts to the Good News of the Kingdom (Mat 23:13).

This research shows that atheist groups are ordinary people seeking a place, an existential position within the society in Indonesia that legally and culturally alienates them (Saragih 2019). The church's calling is to meet the need and see in the yearning an opportunity to share the gospel. Significant in this context is the finding that they strongly dislike religious hypocrisy. The witness of the Gospel needs to be seen not only in the sacred rites or verbal apologetics but also in the concrete examples of good deeds and compassion. The report of the general social survey shows that the number of respondents who said, "they don't believe in God now, but used to," outnumbers "they believe in God now, but didn't use to." Furthermore, while having no religious preference is not equal to atheism, Stark and Finke suggest that "converts are overwhelmingly recruited from the ranks of those lacking a prior religious commitment or having only a nominal connection to a religious group." This shows a great opportunity list in people with atheistic inclination. This research support firmly the conviction that conversion from an atheistic attitude toward the Christian faith is a real possibility and opportunity.

The church should initiate a dialogue with atheism in which honest and open discussion about philosophical questions on God can be explored together. The church needs to open itself to grow in this calling. The dialogue is the most strategic venue for reaching them. This is one of the insights this research found during deep interviews with the participants. Furthermore, some studies have shown that a dialogue that crosses the boundary of religious faiths shows fruitful and good results in the religious experience of the participants (Saragih, Mokorowu, and Peranginangin 2018). Another way to approach the atheistic group is to discuss general issues of the day. The problems can be explored from religious and non-religious approaches (including atheism) to provide room for both parties to exchange ideas, values, and convictions. In this way, they can be connected to the church and open their mind and heart to the perspective of the faith.

Finally, the church can also initiate a group concerned with atheism. This can be a study or mission group engaging in dialogue and friendship. In this way, the church can provide a place for an atheistic person to be understood, loved, and accepted. They can also be asked to work together on a social or humanitarian project. This can be a good way for them to engage concretely in a Christian worldview as the discussion of the project will open the conversations on the values, purpose, and moralities of such endeavors.

6. CONCLUSIONS

There are three main findings of this research. First, the student develops an indifferent attitude toward religion to cope with the requirement of law and regulation. The finding shows that they cannot openly confess their views. However, they still need a sense of belonging as part of the community, and the easiest way to cope with the situation is to be indifferent toward religious beliefs. Second, all subjects view that the most important aspect of religion is morality, and in this regard, freedom must be the foundation of ethics. Freedom is also the reason for halting one's opinion and belief about the existence of God. Third, the subjects believe that atheists can live a

good life without committing to religious rites and belonging to religious communities. In all these aspects, this research found that an existential struggle is experienced due to conflicting personal beliefs, sociological pressures, and civic demands.

From a Christian perspective, the group is a challenge and an opportunity to engage with society's needs. Christianity can contribute to the community by showing that religious groups can open their doors to various existential struggles in modern society (Wijayanti 2016). The real challenge is to show concrete examples of the faith in meeting today's needs. We provide some recommendations based on our findings during the interviews. Nevertheless, further exploration is needed to understand this phenomenon and provide a more comprehensive response to people with an atheistic inclination for actual existence in society.

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