

A New Approach to Christian-Muslim Relations: Inter-Religious, International and Interdisciplinary Studies in Indonesia

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Christians and Muslims often talk about dialogue and frequently hold conferences together in which they exchange perspectives and talk about differences and similarities between their religious teachings. But rarely do they form institutional structures that create a space for them to work together day in and day out, working towards the same goals. Even more rarely do such structures engage Christians and Muslims from a wide variety of theological and social commitments. Usually “inter-religious dialogue” is between liberal Muslims and Christians who can talk to each other more easily than they can talk with conservative members of their own respective religions. What happens when traditional boundaries break down and Muslims and Christians find themselves colleagues rather than opposing sides in a “dialogue”? In Yogyakarta, Indonesia a new consortium between “secular” (in the sense of religiously neutral or multi-religious), Muslim and Christian institutions is attracting international attention and support.

Yogyakarta is one of the most fascinating cities in the world in which to study religions, especially Islam. It is a city of universities including some of the best public and private universities in Indonesia. Muslim, Christian and state universities in Yogyakarta have demonstrated a unique ability to work together across religious boundaries in the field of religious studies. Three of these universities, University of Gadjah Mada (*UGM*), the State Islamic University, Sunan Kalijaga (*Universitas Islam Negeri, UIN*) and Duta Wacana Christian University (*Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, UKDW*), have formed the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (*ICRS-Yogya*). UGM, UIN and UKDW, cooperate with each other in many informal ways. Now, these three universities, with support from international partners, have founded an integrative Ph.D. program in Inter-Religious Studies with internationally recognized standards of academic excellence. The program cooperates with partner institutions in America, Europe, Asia and Africa.

ICRS-Yogya is located in and accredited by the Graduate School of UGM,

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which is the oldest and largest national university in Indonesia. ICRS-Yogya is part of the Graduate Program in Religious and Cross-cultural Studies at UGM that includes an M.A. program called CRCS (Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies) that was founded in the year 2000. In 2007, ICRS and CRCS were selected by the Indonesian Department of Higher Education (DIKTI) as a Center of Academic Excellence in Indonesia. UGM is rated as Indonesia's top university in the Humanities and Social Sciences and has been listed as one of the 10 best universities in Asia. It has about 56,000 students. UIN Sunan Kalijaga was the oldest State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) in Indonesia and recently became a full university (UIN). It has about 12,000 students and is one the leading Islamic centers of higher education in Indonesia. UKDW is one of the finest Christian universities in Indonesia with about 5,000 students and a highly respected Faculty of Theology.

These three universities represent different intellectual and religious traditions that seldom communicate with each other, let alone cooperate in a joint academic program. A single integrative and interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in religious studies between Muslim, Christian and "secular" universities is unique. This is the world's first and only Ph.D. program in religious studies, co-sponsored by Muslim, Christian and religiously neutral institutions.

In a world of polarization, suspicion and misunderstanding there are very few places where a joint venture between major universities with such different religious traditions could succeed. Different religions build their institutions in ignorance of each other's rich traditions of scholarship. Often ignorance is a pretext for distain or even active hostility towards other religious or secular groups. In Western and Middle Eastern countries a joint academic program in religious studies between secular, Muslim and Christian universities is unthinkable. Indonesia is proud of a tradition of tolerance and dialogue between Islam and other religions. However even in Indonesia, Yogyakarta is the only place where universities from different religious traditions have developed enough trust in each other to open an inter-university Ph.D. program in religious studies. During several years of preparation the leaders of these three universities built the academic structures necessary to open this joint doctoral program together in September 2007.

The doctoral program of ICRS-Yogya is international and conducted in English. All Indonesian students are required to spend at least one semester in another country and have a foreign academic advisor. Now in its second year, ICRS-Yogya Ph.D. students are already accepted for sandwich programs at Capetown (South Africa), Duke (North Carolina), Georgetown (Washington, DC), GTU (Berkeley), Hartford (Connecticut), Melbourne (Australia), NUS (Singapore), Ondokuz Mayıs (Turkey), Temple (Philadelphia), and Union (New York). ICRS-Yogya is exploring partnerships with other leading Asian

universities in China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand. In addition to students from Indonesia, ICRS-Yogya has accepted applicants from China, Egypt, Philippines, Poland, Serbia and the USA. Most students who are accepted receive scholarship help, not only for tuition but also for their living costs and sandwich program.

The primary strength of ICRS-Yogya is the study of Asian religions, especially Indonesian Islam. Indonesia includes the largest and most dynamic Muslim population in the world. ICRS-Yogya also has strong resources for the study of Indonesian and Asian Christianity, and can facilitate study of Balinese Hinduism, Indonesian Buddhism, Indonesian Chinese religions and local religious communities connected with specific ethnic groups such as Javanese mysticism. Indonesia has hundreds of unique tribal religions, some of whose practices may date back thousands of years.

A unique feature of these three universities is their strong commitment to their respective religious traditions, combined with openness and tolerance to learn from other religious and secular traditions. With their combined human and library resources, they provide the basis for a truly outstanding research setting in which the difficulties of dialogue between different traditions add to the value of the challenge. The whole project requires inter-religious dialogue at a very substantial level. The faculty members of ICRS-Yogya share a common commitment to inter-religious dialogue and the promotion of peace in Indonesia and the world. However they are not uniform but rather extremely diverse, representing not only different religions but different traditions and theological perspectives within the same religion.

ICRS-Yogya preserves a unique Indonesian character. Indonesia enjoys a rich context for research on religious communities. Scholars come from all over the world to study not only the largest and most diverse Muslim community in the world, but also to study a variety of religious movements throughout Asia and the world. Prior to the founding of ICRS-Yogya, there were many religious studies programs in Indonesia, but all of them are in religiously based institutions with normatively focused faculties that are relatively cut off from other academic disciplines and from the perspectives of other religious groups. ICRS-Yogya is governed by a Board of Trustees appointed by the Rectors of all three universities, and an Academic Council including faculty members from a wide variety of religious and academic backgrounds.

ICRS-Yogya is the first Indonesian religious studies program that is based in a multi-religious, "secular" university. Like many foreign Religious Studies departments, ICRS-Yogya studies religions descriptively using tools from the social sciences and humanities. However ICRS-Yogya has not simply copied the kind of religious studies available in foreign secular universities. Rather it has built a new structure for a doctorate in religious studies premised on a different approach. It is not a secular program that studies religions

“objectively” or focuses on deconstruction of religious beliefs as purely social phenomena. Nor is it a mono-religious approach that studies religions from a particular Muslim or Christian perspective. Nor is it a multi-religious, comparative religious studies program that focuses on the differences and similarities between religions. ICRS-Yogya makes no attempt to find the lowest common denominator that unites all religions. Nor does it aim to subtly show the superiority of one particular religion.

Rather, ICRS-Yogya is *inter-religious*. Sincere believers of different faiths study religions together. Doctoral seminars are taught by professors from different religious and academic backgrounds. They share their different perspectives and try to understand each other. They use social and human sciences to research the impact of religious communities in the world. But they also take divine revelation and the normative teachings of their different religions seriously. The goal of ICRS-Yogya is to study religions by creating dialogue, not only between people from different religious communities, but also between disparate disciplines such as anthropology, Quranic and Hadith studies, sociology, Christian ethics, history, Islamic law, philosophy, Islamic mysticism and biblical studies. In time ICRS-Yogya and CRCS will add faculty members who are expert in other religious traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism.

Including three universities and many Departments is not only to ensure religious diversity and dialogue between different traditions of scholarship, but also to dramatically increase the available resources for an excellent doctoral program. ICRS-Yogya enjoys world-class campus infrastructure through its location and integration with the Graduate School of UGM. The central offices and campus of ICRS-Yogya at UGM includes a study lounge with computers and free internet access on the third floor of a lovely building overlooking fountains, lawns and an old growth forest. ICRS-Yogya also has access, in the same building, to offices, large and small classrooms and a conference room for international seminars. Offices are available on the fourth floor for the use of core doctoral faculty and visiting faculty.

ICRS-Yogya and CRCS students share access to the UGM Graduate School Common Library in Religious Studies and have on line access to many journals. Doctoral and Master’s students also share in many common activities such as the Wednesday Forum and special lectures by visiting professors. Since CRCS is the only English language religious studies program in the three universities, its course offerings are also a very important part of the ICRS-Yogya program, especially for foreign students who do not speak Indonesian. Advanced CRCS M.A. students can also take ICRS-Yogya seminars with permission from the instructor.

In addition to the ICRS/CRCS library in the UGM Graduate School, ICRS doctoral students are expected to use the main libraries of all three

universities. Periodic ICRS-Yogya events are held at UIN and UKDW. ICRS-Yogya students are encouraged to take at least one graduate course from UGM, UIN and UKDW. The thirty ICRS-Yogya doctoral faculty members from all three universities are our most precious resource, representing many different disciplines related to religious studies. There are very few universities in the world which can match the number and quality of faculty members related to religious studies who have agreed to serve in our program. ICRS-Yogya accepts students with very different research interests because of the breadth of our faculty. ICRS-Yogya students have the opportunity to study, not only with fine Indonesian scholars but also with well-known scholars from around the world. These resources give us hope that ICRS-Yogya may one day become the best place in the world to do research on religious communities in Indonesia and throughout Southeast Asia.