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Abangan Muslims, Javanese Worldview, and Muslim–Christian Relations in Indonesia

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Abstract
One of the many faces of Islam in Indonesia is the *abangan* Muslims or the *abangans*. As one of the most populous Muslim groups in the country, it is important to know them. To understand Indonesian Islam or Muslims, one cannot overlook them. The article argues that, amid recent escalating Muslim–Christian tension in the country, this majority Muslim group can play a significant role in enhancing Muslim–Christian relations in the future, on account of their worldview that emphasizes and maintains cosmic harmony and balance of all existence. Their open and syncretic attitudes toward other religions may foster religious tolerance and coexistence. These are attested in the author's personal engagement with them. It is suggested that Christians be more inclusive toward them, but, at the same time, be critical in engaging their worldview. These attitudes are necessary for building a mutual and peaceful Muslim–Christian relationship in the region.

Keywords
Islam, *abangan* Muslims, Javanese worldview, Muslim–Christian relations, Indonesia

Introduction

In Indonesia, Islam has many faces. There is no single religious form representing this religion in the country. Since its beginning, Islam was already diverse in terms of doctrine, and more specifically, in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an. Various schools (*madhab*), from the Sunni denomination like Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali to Shi'a and Ahmadiyah, emerged as a consequence of this diversity. Besides, as a religion of *da'wah*—inviting people to embrace its faith—Islam had to contend with established local cultures in places where Islamic religious proclamation and expansion took place. As a result, Islam in Indonesia became much more syncretistic.

In central and eastern parts of the Island of Java, Indonesia, people embrace this kind of Islam, which has come to be called *abangan* Islam, and its adherents are Muslims, or, in short, the *abangans*. As is widely known, Islam is demographically the dominant religion in the country. In 2020, its adherents reached approximately more than 272 million people (Kettani, 2010). Interestingly, the majority of its followers are Javanese and, more specifically, associated with this *abangan*

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group (Rabasa, 2004: 370). It implies that to understand them means to be familiar with this Islamic form in Indonesia. This group of people, furthermore, has its socio-religious roots in the local cultural context of Java. Their religious beliefs and practices are deeply immersed and rooted in the Javanese cultural worldviews. Later on, they became a subcultural group in Indonesia, particularly in Javanese society.

This article argues that *abangans* can play a significant role in bringing a peaceful relationship among religious groups in the country, particularly Islam and Christianity. Both worldviews about the dynamics of the whole creation will enable them to think and act harmoniously toward others. The future of Muslim–Christian relations assumingly depends on how both religious groups interact with each other. From a Christian perspective, the author contends that being openly and critically engaged with them can enhance interreligious relationships. This article tries to explain *abangan* Muslims and analyze their Javanese worldview. In the end, implications are drawn and applied to future mutual and peaceful Muslim–Christian relations in the region.

The Background of *Abangan* Muslims

Abangan Islam or *abangan* Muslims did not exist in a vacuum. They came into existence through a long, complicated, and even controversial historical development. One cannot separate their presence from the initial coming of Islam into Indonesian soil, mainly in the Island of Java. Scholars, however, differed on when and how Islam came to the region. Some Dutch orientalists such as Hurgronye, Kraemer, Krom, and Van den Berg, on the one hand, have argued that Islam came to Indonesia from the Arab peninsula via the Persian hub (Laffan, 2011). Islam then came across Shi'ah beliefs and mystics, which unavoidably influenced the former. It then continued its expansion to India, where it met and was influenced by the mysticism of the Shafi'ian schools. From this region, as Azra (1990: xi-xii) argues, the Muslim traders from Gujarat and Malabar, India, brought Islam to Indonesia in 13th century CE.

On the other hand, some Muslim scholars such as Agus Salim, Hamka, Syed Nagui Alatas, and Thomas Arnold have opposed and rejected the above conjecture (Utomo, 1993: 33). They questioned the Orientalists' proposals about the characteristics and the date of the coming of Islam in Indonesia. They maintained that the mystic form of Islam and its arrival in 13th century CE is inaccurate. Accordingly, Islam, which first came to Indonesia, had different features and timing. Utomo (1993: 34) observes that these scholars believed that Islam came to Indonesia directly from the Arab peninsula through Madagascar and Malacca in its purest religious form and free from Persian and Indian mystical and Tasawuf's elements during 7th century CE.

To reconcile these opposite views, some have taken a middle or third view. They proposed another theory: Islam came to Indonesia at least through two inflowing waves of Muslim traders (Utomo, 1993: 36). The first one was in the 7th century CE when Arabian traders brought Islam to the region. At that time, Islam was still in its original state for the traders directly brought it from its land of origin, Saudi Arabia. However, this kind of religious tradition had little significance or impact on the new society compared to the type of Islam brought by the second batch who came to the region via Persia and India (through their respective traders) in 13th century CE (Utomo, 1993: 36). The acceptance of this third/middle view thus implies that the date of arrival of Islam in Indonesia remains uncertain, and its characteristics vary in form.

Up to the present, discussions on the arrival of Islam in Indonesia are still ongoing, unfinished, and debatable. As its historiographies are continuously developing, many have proposed alternative views and claimed theirs are more trustworthy than the others. Ricklefs (1991: 3), however, gives an essential aide-mémoire that there is no all-embracing and persuading approach or method that can describe the theories of the coming of Islam in Indonesia. Moreover, De Graaf (1989: 1–2)

insists that the tension and uncertainty between mythological and historical facts will always affect the periodization of the advent of Islam in the region.

In the Island of Java, Islam came during the weakest point of the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit. Raden Patah established the first Muslim kingdom in the Demak region, Central Java, in 1475. Boland (1985) opines that, during his ruling, Muslims spread Islam amid tensions between faith and politics (power struggle) and religion and culture (syncretism). Out of such context emerged significant divisions among Indonesian Muslims: the *santris* and the *abangans*. Abdullah and Siddique (1989: 1) describe that the *santris* geographically have their bases in the northern coastal area of the island. They are more religiously conservative and robust. On the other hand, the *abangans* tended to live in the interior and southern part of the island and were accommodative and syncretic in dealing with the original Javanese cultural forms. Thaba (1996: 123–124) suggests that there was a polarization where their leaning was more toward the center of political authority, while the *santri*s consequently kept a distance from it and became the symbol of opposition. Thus, the divisions of its adherents have been characterized by the above strains during the period of the coming of Islam in Indonesia.

From the period of post-Indonesian Independence until the New Order era, Islam became quite active in the political arena. According to Thaba (1996: 122), it came along with the spirit of Islamization that started from the modern Islamic revival or renewal to embrace and enter all areas of life such as commercial business (trading), inter-marriage, education, arts, and politics. Noer (1982: 340) argues that, as a religious and political movement, Islam generated their power through the *santris*, while the *abangans* (together with the nobles and the haves, or the *priyayis*) affiliated themselves into nonreligious political groups called “secular nationalists.” In practical politics, the *abangans* preferred to join the nationalist political parties such as Partai National Indonesia (Indonesian National Party) and Partai Komunis Indonesia (Indonesian Communist Party). For the past few decades, they have been affiliated with Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (Indonesian Democratic Struggle Party), Partai Golongan Karya (Party of Working Group), or other similar political parties (Utomo, 1993: 68).

The Concept of *Abangan* and Its Criticisms

The origin of the term *abangan* is uncertain. Chao (2017: 40) argues that the word *abang* may mean “red,” which in Javanese also refers to the color red. In reality, however, the term has some other etymological and hypothetical explanations. It could, first, be in association with the communist political party (Partai Komunis Indonesia [PKI] or the Communist Party of Indonesia), where people symbolized communism with the color red. During the 1960s’ political unrest, the Indonesian communists and communist supporters massively embraced Islam (as well as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism) as their religion. According to Bertrand (2004: 74), such a mass conversion was an escape from potential accusations, discrimination, and imprisonment by the anti-communist national ruler and society. It was a way to avoid political oppressions from anti-communist exponents. As a result, they did not truly devote to Muslim faith and practices. Second, it may relate to a Javanese pronunciation of *aba*’*yah* to the Arabic word *aba’an*, which means “unfaithful” or “disobedient” (Soebantarjo, 1976: 47). As a result, people often stereotypically stigmatize them as being religious defiant. Third, it may probably connect to a group of people who lived in the highland of Northern Africa (between the Nile River and the Red Sea), Ababde or Ababida. They professed themselves as Muslims but maintained only one out of the five pillars in Islamic beliefs, that is the profession of faith (*shahada*): “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” They also believed in the saints mixed with many ancient pagan religious ideas and ate animal meats that are unclean according to Islamic dietary laws (Sumarto, 1990: 301).

Since there is no consensus about the definite meaning and some proposals are very hypothetical, conceptualizing the *abangans* is a challenging task. One still needs to critically ask if these propositions are adequately representative to carry the whole concept behind the name. Albeit it remains debatable, Ricklefs (2006: 35–55) argues that the terminology is just an antonym of the word *putihan* ("the white one"). Socially, it refers to those who are more devoted to Islam, educated in Islamic teachings, and lived around a mosque and formed a community called *Kauman* (from the word *kaum*, which means "people" or the Muslims who live in around the mosque). Thus, one may consider the *abangans* as nominal Muslims. The fact is, although professing themselves as Muslims, they do not have enough knowledge and understanding about Islam and do not consistently practice what it teaches. Geertz (1968: x) observes that eventually in some places in Central Java, people often use the term cynically to humiliate someone or to undermine one's dignity.

As an anthropological concept, Geertz was the one who first introduced it to the academic sphere. His two monumental works, *The Religion of Java* (1960) *and Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968), become the textbooks for Indonesian Muslim scholars, especially when they study Islam in Java. In these resources, he grouped Javanese Muslim communities into three categories or stratifications: *santri, abangan*, and *priyayi* (Geertz, 1960). As mentioned above, the *santris* are the more religious and conservative group of people than the other two. Different from the *priyayis* (the noble and the educated ones), the *abangans* are considerably those who represent people of low social status, uneducated, illiterates, villagers, farmers or factory workers, peasants, and marginalized (Geertz, 1960: 6).

As has been previously mentioned, the term *abangan* generally refers to the Muslims who live in the interior parts of Central and Eastern Java. They considerably do not firmly adhere to Muslim religious precepts and are inattentive to its ethical demands. In short, they tend to neglect their important Islamic religious rituals (Van Akkeren, 1970: xvii). They view their religious beliefs and lives as different from the rest of their pious Muslim counterparts. They think of themselves as a different kind of Muslims originating in Java. Albeit professing Islam, their lives are a mixture of religious and cultural elements in Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, and even folk or tribal religions. Therefore, as Ali (2007: 33–62) proposes, one can conclusively say that *abangan* Islam is a syncretistic Islam to the core, not only in its religious rites but also in its worldview.

This syncretistic form of Islam has its roots in the Javanese religious-cultural traditions. It is not relatively easy to explain this fact because it heavily relies on how one's perception of when and how Islam at the outset arrived in Indonesia. As mentioned above, the type of Islam that came to the region was quite accommodative to Javanese local religious and cultural elements. Accordingly, this accommodative type of Islam was a *Tasawuf* or Sufism (Ali, 2011: 5, 18). Such a highly compromised and open kind of Islam initiated its followers to encounter and embrace the local culture and religions uncritically. This practice at present is widespread in some parts of Java, mainly where Hindu and Javanese indigenous religious influence and practices (called *Kejawen*, or "Javanized") exist. When this fusion happened, the two then syncretically merged into a new form of religion: *abangan* Islam. As an anthropological phenomenon, one can still find this type of Islam in almost all areas in the southern part of Central Java (Ricklef, 1995: 1).

Conversely, some have criticized Geertz's triadic model of *abangan-santri-priyayi* stratification, especially the use of the term *abangan* when referring to a group of Muslims in Java. In its sociological use, the name appears to be controversial. To begin with, Boland (1985: 29) explains that such a division is not convincing because the argument is entirely tendentious. There is an assumption that Geertz might have used geographical segmentation and social stratification as a means to discredit Islam in Java. He sees these variants are in a competitive condition, where the *abangans* and the *priyayis* (as the defenders of original Javanese traditions) are in an ongoing rivalry with the *santris*. They are considered and accused as the opponents against the true Islamic

religious tradition and scripturalism (Geertz, 1968: x). By triadic stratifying the Javanese Muslims, Geertz seems to believe that there is a severe lack of the *ukhuwah Islamiyah*, the unity and solidarity among the Muslims, in Java.

Another criticism comes from a view that objects Geertz's over-generalization of Islam in Java. This view is against his argument to comprehend Islam through the modern lens, connecting Islam with past Hindu and Buddhist elements. This kind of Islam—its tenets and practices—is considerably not purely Islam but a "Hinduistic Islam" (Hodgson, 1974: 551). For this reason, Geertz appears to be unaware of the history of Islam in Java, particularly if one connects it with the insignificant Hindu influence on Islam in the past. One remaining question about this issue, however, was raised by Madjid (1989: 82n). If there was indeed the insignificant influence of Hinduism, why then was Islam's victory in the soil of Java almost perfect and total?

The next critic focuses on Geertz's segmentation of beliefs based on their territories. He has mapped Islam in Java into those who lived in the cities and villages. The *priyayis* (the nobles and the educated) orient themselves with the urban city-like culture, while the *abangans* and the *santris* are more on the rural village-like culture. The disapproval holds that such divisions are not valid since the composition of the demographic dispersal of these groups is unconcentrated in one particular area or territory. Moreover, its problem lies in the category of *priyayis*. Compared to the *abangans* and the *santris*, one cannot categorize this group of people into any religious system of belief (Kartodirjo, 1993: 2; Muchtarom, 1998: 8–9). In other words, one can only categorize the religion of Java into two kinds: the syncretic and non-syncretic one (Koentjaranigrat, 1994: 310; Noer, 1982: 3). In this lieu, the *priyayis* and the *santris* are indistinguishable. Madjid (1997: 52–53) gives a few examples of this. First, genealogically, the Muslim religious leaders, or the *Kiais* (the Kyais), who are the heads of the Islamic boarding schools (the *Pesantrens*) throughout Java, are also Javanese nobles (the *priyayis*). Ki Ageng Hasan Basri from the Tegal Sari *Pesantren*, for example, is one of the prominent figures in Java, a combination of a *kiai* and a *priyayi*. Second, the Muhammadiyah movement in Indonesia, a kind of modern Islamic movement in the country, started its campaign with the *santris*, and the majority of its membership consists of the *priyayis*. Lastly, decades ago, the young Javanese *priyayis* who were studying in Dutch higher education institutions became respected religious as well as political leaders in Indonesia.

The last criticism refuses Geertz's anthropological approach in categorizing the level of religious quality of each Muslim variant. The view holds to the oneness of Islam in Java. It insists that although consisting of unique variations, the Javanese Islam is one entity. Further, Islam in Java, in its pure and robust form of religion, is similar to other kinds of Islam in every place on the whole earth (Woodward, 2011). This view does not object to the options Geertz proposed. Instead, it syncretically tries to draw a straight line or link within the above typologies. It conclusively says that these variants have their single origin or source: in Java, Islam itself is more elastic and dynamic than other forms of Islam that exists in Indonesia (Murtadho, 2002: 1, 6; Woodward, 2011). Thus, this view believes that Islam in Java is only one, but has different unique variants.

Albeit the analyses on Geertz's typologies are still taking place and debatable (Burhani, 2017: 329–350), the contribution of his *abangan-santri-priyayi* pattern remains useful, especially for those who want to study and understand Islam and its uniquenesses in Java in an in-depth way (Prasetyo, 1994: 74–78). Moreover, although the horizontal stratification of Javanese Muslim society remains unclear and ambiguous, these variants are significant and helpful because they help one understand the essential factors that dynamically impact social, political, and religious transformational processes in Indonesia (Ali, 2007: 33–62). At present, scholars or those who are interested in studying Islam in Java or Indonesia still use, refer to, and gain benefits from Geertz's simplistic propositions, at least, as a starting point of their studies.

Javanese Worldview

Worldview is an integral part of human life. It illustrates the ways people think and act. Hiebert (1985: 45) explains it as "the basic assumptions about reality which lie behind the beliefs and behavior of a culture." If a worldview is at the core of every culture, what is then the worldview of the Javanese? One of the main Javanese worldviews is the conviction of the essential unity of all existence (Mulder, 1970: 105). It views the divine, human beings, and the *cosmos* as one integral unit or system. It means that the survival of such a system depends on the relationship among each other. Every Javanese has a responsibility to attune to the universal order, mainly to maintain a harmonious relationship with the divine and the world. It thus implies that he or she has to acclimate himself/herself with all existence, seen or unseen.

Such a worldview may syncretically affect religious beliefs and practices of the Javanese people, regardless of religious affiliation, including Islam. The Javanese *abangan* Islam, as Geertz (1960: x) infers, has a syncretistic character in its cosmology or worldview. Here, it is essential to relate worldview and cosmology because "cosmology and worldview tend to be interchangeably used to depict ancient and nonwestern worldviews" (Iwaniszewski, 2009: 100). One thus cannot separate the *abangans*' worldview from their cosmology. These are evident in their religious-cultural concepts (beliefs) and expressions (practices) as a whole. The following discussions will briefly explain the most common cosmological entities, including reviews on their syncretic elements.

Safety

The *slametan* (literally means "safety") concept and practices have their roots in ancient Javanese indigenous religion and culture. According to Subagya (1981: 77), it relates to the animistic belief, particularly a belief in the existence of the good and the evil spirits, which also imply the positive and negative forces. Geertz (1968: x) argues that these spirits can interact with the human world in the form of spiritual beings such as *memedi* (fearful or haunted spirits), *lelembut* (domesticated spirits), *tuyul* (friendly spirits), *demit* (inhabited spirits), and *danyang* (guardian spirits). The Javanese people usually do not want to engage with the spirits because they prefer to be in a safe condition or of being safe (*selamat*) from the fear or difficulties caused by such spiritual beings. However, their presence is necessary for keeping the universe in balance. It thus reflects a prevailing oriental-animistic worldview, a belief in the existence of the spirits that essential for cosmic harmony. These spirits can generate a positive attitude toward a harmonious living with other beings inhabiting this world (Van Rheenen, 1991).

Consequently, Javanese people always perform the *slametan* rituals on every special occasion in their lives. It occurs, for example, at a baby's birth, circumcision, wedding, burial, major official Muslim religious celebrations such as the *Ied al Fitr* and the *Maulid* (the birth of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH), and harvest seasons. Van den Boogert (2017) identifies that these rituals are performed to keep them safe from any wrong or evil thing that could happen in the future. It includes, for example, from negative human experiences such as confusion, sadness, poverty, sickness, a tendency to harm others, or even emotional disturbance. Thus, the religious and cosmological leitmotif behind all rituals performed is salvific. It can be a means to experience the state of *slamet* or *selamat* (safety), being free from natural and supernatural chaotic problems.

Newberry (2007) observes that people usually perform *slametan* rituals both in individual and communal settings following a specific pattern. The individual here is in a situation where he wants to conduct the ceremony for his or her salvific purpose. However, most of the time, such a person will invite some neighbors around to join the ritual. With a short introduction using high

aristocratic Javanese language, the host welcomes the guests and explains to them the purpose of the event. The host asks an appointed guest, usually a *santri* who lived nearby, to recite some Qur'anic verses and lead the congregational prayer. Throughout the ceremony, they do an unusual religious practice, the burning of incense. The host finally serves food to be taken home by the guests (Mulder, 2005: 89). It is a syncretic combination of Islamic religious elements (a pious *santri* Muslim, Qur'anic recitations, and prayers) and a Javanese Hindu/animistic element (the burning of incense). Interestingly, in that particular event, a collaboration between the *santris* and the *abangans* also exists (Noer, 1982: 23).

Meanwhile, communal setting refers to the community that has a shared concern: the safety or salvation of the whole people in a village or a region. The *slametan* practices become a way of protecting or avoiding the villagers from disturbances caused by the evil spirits. People perform such rituals to maintain a peaceful, orderly, and well life. The most common rituals are *bersih desa* (cleansing the whole village from impurities) and *sedekah bumi* (offering something to the mother earth). In such events, all residents of a village join and participate in purchasing a healthy water buffalo or a goat. They slaughter and consecrate the animal and bury its head and bones in the earth. Again, during the ceremony, a *santri* is called to recite Qur'anic verses and pray in an Islamic way. The host cannot choose the place and time of the event randomly. The elders of the village (or even a shaman) refer to a specific cycle guided by the *petungan* (numerology system used to count the days in the Javanese calendar). They are the ones who determine when and where to conduct the ritual or to perform the ceremony (Geertz, 1960: 31–35). The *slametan* process shows that there is a syncretism between Islamic religious (the *santris* and the recitation of the Holy Qur'an) and Javanese traditional (the elders/shaman and Javanese *petungan* system) elements.

Union with the Divine

The Javanese people believe in *manunggaling kawula gusti.* It is "the union between the servant and the master," or spiritually "a divine–human union." They believe in the existence of the divine, including his transcendent and immanent nature. According to Mulder (2005: 20–27, 48–49), albeit the origin of this idea came from an ancient Javanese mysticism, a standard view believes that it was from the traditional Javanese epic of Syekh Siti Jenar. He was a Sufi Muslim figure known as one among the first persons who brought Islam to the soil of Java. Jenar proposed that divine–human union can transpire since the divine is where all creatures, especially human beings, turn back to their Creator and be in union with him (Rahimsyah, 2006). On that note, they also believe that a human being as *jagad-cilik* (the microcosm) cannot be independent of the *jagad-gedhe* (the macrocosm); even in its ideal state, the two can be substantially in the union. It is a union in the sense of essential fusion between human and divine natures (Koediran, 1990: 347).

In the traditional Javanese shadow puppetry or traditional dance, the story of *Serat Bimasuci* captures such a union well (Arps, 2016), the *manunggaling kawula gusti (mystical union with the divine)*. It is a story of the unification between Bima, a heroic Javanese mythological superhuman figure from the protagonist clan of Pandawa (in the Ancient Javanese version of the Hindu Mahabharata story) and Dewaruci, a white ape-like god representing the manifestation of the Mighty One, or the divine. In this story, as the two are intensely interacting, Bima realizes that his real existence is mostly being in the union or becoming one (*manunggal*) with the divine. Therefore, the story ends up with Dewaruci (representing the divine) living inseparably inside him (representing the human being). Such a union or fusion is where everything substantially becomes one and united with the divine. It is interesting to realize that, while reading the story, the Javanese *abangan* Muslims used to interpret it differently; for example, Bima's quest as the path to mystical union with Dewaruci can be associated with a prototypical Sufi theme (Arps, 2018: 77–102). Simuh

(1995: 62) thus concludes that the Javanese people creatively Islamicized the figure of Bimasuci (the union between Bima and Dewaruci), and indigenized Islam to fit their culture.

Just King

Though it is difficult to trace back the origin of the Javanese belief in *Ratu Adil* (the Just or Righteous King/Queen), one can still connect this idea to the natural reaction of the people toward suffering or affliction (Yewanggoe, 1987: 277, 233). Accordingly, the ancestors of the Javanese people were nomads, moving from one place to another in the tropical forest of Java. At one point, they eventually did deforestation, established villages, and created an agrarian culture (Van Akkeren, 1970: 3). In difficulty, the idea of *Ratu Adil* was born. It is an eschatological hope in the future coming of a leader or savior who someday will liberate and bring people to a state of order, peace, justice, abundance, and well-being (*tata tentrem karta rahardja*). It is a cultural-social expression of the people who resist and protest against life-suffering or affliction. Besides, it is a kind of people's messianic hope for liberation or freedom from harsh circumstances.

The history of the Javanese people shows that they have been handing down such hope from generation to generation. In reality, as Wiyono (1999: 28–29) infers, there were historical records about the appearance of messianic hope in the form of *gerakan-gerakan rakyat* (people's movements), mostly inspired by a belief in the coming of *Ratu Adil*. This hope has caused the rebellions led by local religious leaders against the Dutch colonial oppressions in some areas of Java, like Cilegon and Srikaton (1800 CE), Gedangan (1904 CE), Jebrak Bangkal (1919 CE), and Tambak Merang (1935 CE). These events showed that some people still believed in the *Ratu Adil* figure who would come to deliver them from suffering and bring them to a peaceful and well-being state (Partokusumo, 1995: 28–29). One may see another example of this movement in *Babad Dipanegara*. It is a story about a national hero, Prince Dipanegara or Diponegoro. In the past, the Javanese people believed that he was a reincarnation of the *Ratu Adil*, who would fight and free them from the Dutch colonial oppressions (Carey, 1986: 22–46). Thus, one may associate *Ratu Adil*, as an eschatological figure, with any person who can play his or her role as a morally righteous liberator.

According to a well-versed Indonesian anthropologist, Koentjaraningrat (1994), most of the Javanese also believe in forecasting or foretelling, as written in books like *Primbon* and *Prelambang Jayabaya* (Jayabaya, the most excellent Javanese foreteller). In these books, it is believed that there will be a time called *Jaman Edan* (the Era of Madness) or *Kala Bendu* (the Period of Suffering), the final event of the seven episodes of world history. It is a time marked by the emergence of life hardships, anarchies, the demise of law and order, and moral and spiritual degradation. Amidst these situations, *Ratu Adil* (the Just King) will eventually appear and establish a *tata tentrem karta raharja* condition (a state of order, peace, justice, abundance, and well-being) in the land of Java. During his reign, there will be no suffering, affliction, and evil. Inversely, he will establish order, peace, and the truth for a millennium. After this period, there will be a return of another chaotic era (Any, 1990: 76–78). After the age of the land of Java reaches its 2001st year, the day of doom will come preceded by a great war between Imam Mahdi—an Islamicized manifestation of *Ratu Adil*—and *Raja Iblis* (the King of the Devils) called *Ja-majuja* when, in the end, the previous would come out as the victor who will destroy this great enemy (Ileto, 1995: 298; Santiko, 2016: 124–125; Van Akkeren, 1970: 4).

Harmony and Respect

The Javanese people, including the *abangans*, embrace two life principles: *rukun* (living peacefully or harmoniously with others) and *hormat* (living respectfully toward others). Geertz (1961:

146) explains that harmony refers to an attitude of avoiding conflict with others through keeping one's talks and gestures as polite as can be. To attain *rukun*, one should maintain a position of restraint from any conflict or quarrel with others. It includes practicing and living in a peaceful relationship with others, working together as fellows, and accepting others without complaint and disagreement. Accordingly, such a state does not necessarily intend to create harmony, but rather to avoid disturbance on the assumed unity—already built-in within every human being (Suseno, 1988: 39). Also, respect (*hormat*) points to the attitude or act when one avoids or even suppresses ambition, competition, impoliteness, and the will for selfish material gains and power. These things are believed to be the root of all fragmentation, disharmony, and contradiction. Both principles of harmony and respect are deemed as pre-conditions for perfect order in society.

These Javanese life principles are creative human efforts for living out social-religious-cultural ethics. The primary purpose of practicing these is to promote harmonious or peaceful living among fellow humans and created beings. Aside from that, Javanese people live in specific ways to respect and honor others, regardless of their social status and religious affiliation. Thus, based on such social and moral values, the Javanese *abangans* will take a more tolerant and moderate way or attitude toward others, especially those who come from and have different backgrounds. It is an act out of their fundamental social and moral values: to live in peace, harmony, and respect with others.

The above discussions show that Javanese *abangans* perceive the world relationally. There is a close connection between material and immaterial things, or the physical and the spiritual. They holistically see the world in a universal-cosmological way. Human beings are an integral part of the universe. Their prosperous or preserved life depends on how they precisely place themselves in the well-ordered balance of both the macro and microcosmic worlds. They religiously tend to adopt, adapt, syncretize, compromise, and accommodate whatever good and positive from all religious-cultural elements without critically filtering them. These leanings then will construct a new and unique religious and spiritual (mental) quality of the people. By this quality, they become adaptive, syncretistic, compromising, accommodative, pluralist, and nationalist Muslims. Therefore, the worldview of the Javanese *abangan* Muslims plays a vital role in shaping their open, soft, friendly, and tolerant attitudes toward others.

The *Abangans* and Muslim–Christian Relations in Indonesia: A Personal Engagement

For the past few decades, Muslim–Christian relations in Indonesia have not progressed smoothly. In some parts of the region, Muslim–Christian religious and communal conflicts have occurred and frustrated the peaceful-harmonious coexistence between the two. Rasmusson (2008: 218) reports that Indonesian Muslim–Christian conflicts reached its peak of violent and persistent conflicts between December 1998 and 2001. Unfortunately, it resulted in the death of hundreds of Muslims and Christians, displaced millions, and destroyed substantial private and public property. According to Arifianto (2009: 73–89), one of the many causes was the mutual prejudices and suspicions that gradually developed between the two sides. From the Muslim side, it is the suspicion of *Kristenisasi* (Christianization) of the Muslims, and, from the Christian side, it is the suspicion of *Islamisasi* (Islamization) of the Christians. One may trace such sentiments back to the history of initial Muslim–Christian encounters in Indonesia, from the Dutch colonization to the New Order regime.

Responding to the above situation, the author considers that the *abangans*—as the most populous Muslim group in Indonesia—including their unique worldviews, can be a potent force in enhancing mutual and peaceful Muslim–Christian relations in the country. Their open, soft, friendly, and tolerant attitudes toward others may contribute to the moderation of the above tensions. Christians may work well with them since their nonviolent or nonaggressive response is in

line with and supported by the similar Christian values, as seen in the parabolic teachings of Jesus about love (see Mat. 13:40–43, 49–50; 18:23–35; 21:33–46; 22:1–14; 24:45–51; 25:14–30, 31–46; see Reid, 2004: 237–255). Quoting from Jesus Christ, they can hold on to a biblical principle: “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mrk. 9:40). Therefore, aiming for peaceful and harmonious living with the divine and all creatures, as the *abangans* promoted, Christians should engage in mutual and fruitful conversations or dialogue with the *abangans*. One may learn about this engagement through the following case study taken from the author’s personal experience.

In the mid-1990s, the author moved to Salatiga, Central Java, Indonesia, to help relocate a small Bible school from its former hostile place. The main reason of choosing this small town as a new site for the school was its renowned open, moderate, and tolerant society. The town is home to at least six different branches of the keen *Kejawen* Javanese religion (officially called *Penghayat Kepercayaan kepada Tuhan Yang Mahaesa* or “Adherent to the Belief in the One God”): Esa Tunggal Sejati, Paguyuban Wisnu, Paguyuban Sumarah, Kejiwaan, Paguyuban Kepribaden, Pangestu, and Pangudi Rahayuning Budi (Prabu). Consequently, numerous *abangan* Muslims were living in the author’s neighborhood. His daily interaction with the neighbors then helped develop good relationships with them over the next few years. He then observed that these people were devoted *Kejawen* Muslims, not only professing themselves as Muslims but also embracing the Javanese worldview. They faithfully hold on to the traditional Javanese values, beliefs, and practices, as mentioned above in detail.

Being present among them, the author had opportunities to explore what their thoughts were about the Muslim–Christian relationship and how to develop it till sustainable peace occurs. He then proposed intense conversations or dialogues with them in an “open but cautious” manner (cf. Azumah, 2012: 128–138). The open approach here may mean that he would have to welcome and treat them as fellow human beings created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27; Greenberg, 1997: 386–394). It includes respecting and honoring them as equal creatures in God’s sight. Moreover, as a created divine image, a human being has a natural tendency to return to his or her source (God or alike), as the ultimate *ad fontes* (Ps 42:1). In this lieu, a Christian may also consider the *abangans* as walking companions toward a similar final destiny: to find and rest in the Creator. Both are in the same path of spiritual pilgrimage toward the divine. In response to the author’s attitude, they acted positively and became more respectful and receptive to him, and Christianity in general.

The author was also cautious regarding the *abangans*’ syncretistic approaches to their religious traditions. He noticed that they were compromising and accommodative in incorporating their Javanese indigenous traditions with their religious beliefs. As seen in the *slametan* rituals above, these include the burning of incense, choosing proper dates/time or places based on good or bad luck forecasting, believing and trusting in spirits and supernatural powers, praying to other beings who are not God, and so on. Suppose the standard Islamic teachings oppose and consider these things as *shirk* (a sin of idolatry or polytheism; cf. Q 4:48) and against *sharia* or Islamic precepts (laws) taught by the Qur’an and the Hadith (Mulder, 2005), Christianity also should do the same. It believes that such a mixture is similar to pagan religious beliefs and practices and thought as idolatries. Thus, the *abangans’* syncretic ideas and manners must be refused because God is against these things (Ex. 20:2–5; 2 Ki. 18:38–39; John 14:6). As the *abangans* got used to such a criticism from their *santri* (the conservative Muslims) neighbors, they would not get offended by Christian disapproval regarding their syncretistic point of view.

As the relationship grew personally, the author was able to direct discussions and dialogues with the *abangans* to a deeper level, their fundamental religious beliefs, or convictions. He was able to share the Christian faith, particularly the experience of Christian salvation (*keselamatan*). The word “salvation” terminologically relates to the *abangan’s* terminology of *slametan* (safety). In Christian belief, one can attain salvation only by the grace of God (the divine) and receive it

through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a belief in him as the Lord and Savior. His substitutionary death on the cross (as an offering) and resurrection is an act of saving human beings from the penalty of death caused by human sinfulness (Holcomb, 2017). Responsively, the *abangans* could themselves relate to such an idea, for they also believed that personal or communal impurities could cause threats such as punishment, harm, destruction, or even death. Conversely, they must do *slametan* rituals to find salvation or experience safety. The author found out that sharing the same concerns for human lostness and helplessness and longings for experiencing salvation here and after with the *abangans* could help increase oneness and empathy toward each other.

Further, the author was able to discuss with the *abangans* about the concept of *manunggaling kawula gusti* (the mystical union with God/divine). He explained to them that the idea was not foreign at all for Christians (Dupré, 1989). In Christianity, when a person repents from sins and believes in Christ, he or she can participate in the life of the Triune God. It means that a Christian has access to be in mystical union with the Godhead, and it can only be attained through and within the work of the Holy Spirit that enables him or her to have mystical union (*unio mystica*) with Jesus Christ (Chin, 2003), the God himself. However, he continued, such an association is not in the sense of union in substance or essence. The human being does not become and cannot be God. Still, there is a significant distinction, as proved biblically, metaphysically, and logically, between the creature and the Creator because of the principle: *finitum non est capax infiniti*, or the finite is not capable of the infinite (Rehnman, 2002). It is a mystical union in the sense of intimate, vital, and spiritual communion with the Triune God. This explanation created a stark contrast between the Christians' mystical union and that of the *abangans*. The difference described then left the *abangans* to rethink whether or not their concept of mystical union (in substance and essence) was realistic enough to attain.

The author's discussion with the *abangans* became exciting when they shared a common yearning for a savior or liberator. The author could relate it to the *abangan*'s idea of *Ratu Adil* (the Just or Righteous King/Queen). He then explained the similarity between the concept of *Ratu Adil* and Christ. He emphasized Jesus Christ as the savior and liberator for all human beings from sins and oppressions (cf. Wiyono, 1999). The biblical basis of this truth comes from Jesus's declaration that he was anointed and sent to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and setting free of the oppressed (Luk. 4:18-19). In Christianity, the reality of human sinfulness presumes the idea of salvation or the savior. It means that the way out from human predicaments and hopelessness requires divine intervention and remedy. Salvation from sin must come from outside of human beings, or salvation is from elsewhere ("hetero-salvation," see Moreau, 2011: 393–396). God, therefore, sent Jesus Christ to save human beings from their sin as well as to liberate them from captivity and oppression. On that note, since *Ratu Adil* can be associated with any possible historical figure, some of the *abangans* believed that Christ would be Imam Mahdi, the Islamic eschatological messianic figure, as featured in Shi'a's religious tradition.

In 1998, Muslim–Christian conflicts occurred in several places in Indonesia, including Central Java. Some unknown groups of people (associated with specific groups of Muslims) burned down several churches, and persecuted and killed numbers of Christians, especially those from the Chinese ethnic group (Steenbrink and Aritonang, 2008: 903–923). Responding to this situation, the author had an opportunity to discuss the issue with his *abangan* neighbors for days. They were very disappointed with the tragedy and condemned the violence that happened. It was against their fundamental idealism about living in peace and harmony with all creatures coined in a term of *rukun*. The author also shared the same concern and supported that virtue. Jesus Christ calls his followers to live the values of his kingdom, and one of them is to promote peace and harmony by being the peacemakers (Mat. 5:9). Amid world conflicts, it is a Christian call to resolve destructive conflicts. It is Christian participation to transform society into "peaceable civility" (Bourne, 2009: 262–291).

Besides, Christianity teaches doing good to others, meaning to love wholeheartedly other neighbors as themselves, regardless of who they are and what they believe (Mat. 11:39). The attitude of loving others enables one to live in peace and harmony with others. Since love can be a universal value, it is also compatible with the *abangans'* concept of *rukun*. The discussions then ended with the conclusion that both the *abangans* and Christians can promote respect, honor, and love toward all human beings. Embracing these values, they can be partners in developing a peaceful and harmonious living through their social-religious-cultural values.

Over the years, these engagements have continued to develop and bear fruits. The *abangans* have been very open and welcoming toward others from different backgrounds like the author. They treated him like a fellow pilgrim or brother in a spiritual journey toward the divine. They were also eager to have more in-depth conversations or discussions about almost all things, primarily related to spirituality, piety and ethics, salvation, and end times. They showed, most of all, high tolerance and peace by accepting and supporting the presence of the small Bible school and its community established among them. Understanding the *abangans* and their worldview is vital in enhancing religious tolerance and co-existence, particularly for the future of peaceful Muslim–Christian relations. One may use such comprehension as a platform for mutual and constructive religious dialogue in Indonesia, particularly in Java. Based on the study of the *abangans*, their history, and worldview as well as spiritual practices, the author is very optimistic that the future of inter-religious cooperation and living together will be bright.

Conclusion

As the most populous Muslim group in Indonesia, Javanese *abangan* Muslims are a unique socio-cultural-religious phenomenon. In its development, Islam has encountered and interacted with the existing and established local beliefs and cultures. As a result, they became more syncretistic, compromising, and accommodative. These are apparent in the blending of their traditional-cultural heritages and Islamic faiths. Their worldview demands a harmonious balance between the macro- and microcosmic worlds. It then positively affects the peaceful relationship of the *abangans* with other creatures, especially with their fellow human beings. The author's personal experience with them shows that they are open, soft, tolerant, and cooperative toward others. Such a worldview guides them from their birth until death, and from personal issues to common ones. Regardless of being critical toward the problems of syncretism, Christians need to respond and relate to the *abangan*s positively and inclusively. It is due to the truth that they are fellow human beings created in the image of God. Christians are encouraged to befriend, talk, share, discuss, and witness to them. Engaging *abangan* Muslims may imply enhanced peaceful and mutual Muslim–Christian relations in Indonesia.

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