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Islam and Liberalism

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First we need to be aware that term liberalism is both ambiguous and controversial. Then when we discuss liberalism and its relationship with Islam, we are discussing a phenomenon of Islamic renaissance which began in the nineteenth century A.D. In the 1950s, when Western scholars studied Islam they found a phenomenon of reform (*tajdid*) that is different from previous reform movements. *Tajdid* is reform of Islamic teachings. *Tajdid* has emerged since the early Islam. The schools of thought have emerged because of reform. Yet scholars saw in the nineteenth century a new form of reform arising in many parts of the Muslim world, including Turkey and Egypt. This phenomenon was later called Islamic liberalism. As far as I remember, the first scholar who introduced the phrase is Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his book *Islam in the Modern History*. Smith elaborates a phenomenon that is more or less like the one done by religious reformists in the West, emphasizing humanism and pluralism. After Smith, Leonard Binder, a political scientist from the University of Chicago, defined in a different way.

There is difference among scholars in defining this term. Islamic liberalism was in the 1950s defined in a quite broad sense: liberation. There was a spirit of liberating Muslims from static, conservative, and irrelevant worldview. Binder defined Islamic liberalism in a political scientific sense; thus he focused on Egyptian Ali Abd al-Razik he regarded as liberal Muslim and on another Egyptian Sayyid Qutb he called illiberal Muslim. Smith found that the roots of Islamic liberalism are in Islam. The roots are not to mean merely the Qur'an and the Hadith, but the attempts of interpretation of these two texts: in philosophy and in Sufism. This is interesting because we tend to see Sufism as a spiritual activity that is not liberal. For Smith, liberalism is any critical view of orthodoxy.

Another definition of liberalism in Islam is related to the notion of liberation theology originated from Latin American Catholicism. In the 1980s, Egyptian Hassan Hanafi coined "left Islam" which promotes Islam as the liberation religion, liberating Muslims from exploitation and injustice. Iranian thinker Ali Shariati defined freedom in a socialistic term.

I define liberal in a more general manner, as freedom and liberation from rigid and static interpretations... In history, Islamic civilization flourished in Baghdad, Cordova and the Ottoman Empire because of liberal spirit. If we talk about civilization we talk about humanism. We see pluralism, protection of human rights in these eras.

Many worry that to develop a liberal thought in Islam means jeopardizing the authenticity of Islam. Islam, however, is a very open concept. That would depend on how we define and give meanings to Islam. If we talk about the source of Islam, we talk about the Qur'an, and historical process shapes the Qur'an. I am not saying that the Qur'an in itself is liberal. What I am saying is that there are historical processes that influence values contained in the Qur'an. We should admit that there are illiberal verses in the Qur'an which are in contradiction with the spirit of the modern age. We should not take these verses literally. We should use a liberal reading of the text. Liberalism is a state of mind, not a thing.

In short, liberalism has flourished in Islamic history. Therefore Islamic thinkers should continue working hard to revive liberal tradition through education and public campaigns for an increased awareness about the values of humanism and pluralism. This effort needs time and energy, but we should do it.

Luthfi Assyaukanie, "*Islam dan Liberalisme*" (Islam and Liberalism), in Hamid Basyaib, ed, *Membela Kebebasan: Percakapan tentang Demokrasi Liberal (Defending Freedom: A Conversation on Liberal Democracy)*, (Jakarta; Freedom Institute, 2006), pp. 245-51.

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