

BOOK REVIEW

Kisah Masuk Islamnya Sang Mantan Pendeta (Dari suku Dayak di Kalimantan)

Abdurrahman al-Islami dan Prof Abdurrazaq al Badr.

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“The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Precisely the ultimate and the most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations”. (Max Weber in Gerth and Mills, 1991, 155)

This is a book that owes very much to the diligence of its editor, Abu ‘Abdil ‘Aziz Munir al-Jaza’iri. In this book, he put together a letter written by a former Christian priest from East Kalimantan and a sermon delivered by a preacher from Saudi Arabia, Syaikh Abdurrazaq ‘Abdil Muhsin al-Badr. In addition, the editor wrote the Introduction and added extensive footnoting below the text of the letter. His introduction is full of praise of the religion of Islam and its self-professed truth that draws people into submitting to God. The footnotes are laborious undertaking as they expanded upon the various gestures manifested in the letter. They did more than just passive signalling. They actively direct to particular emphasis because the footnotes are self-asserting, fully assured by the evidence furnished from the verses of the Quran and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, also adding citations from religious scholars to increase the urgency of the appeal further. Remarkably, the Syaikh’s sermon and the notes of his disciple-editor were positioned in the starring role. Their mission was to represent the text of the letter and sublimate it into a theology-proper confession.

Robert Tanhu Mangkulang was a Dayak priest serving in Kutai, East Kalimantan. He composed a letter to Syaikh ‘Abdurrazaq to share with him his story of finding Islam through a pamphlet found in the deep interior settlement in the regency of Paser, East Kalimantan. Robert spent 30 years of his life as a Protestant priest. He recalled that throughout those years, his priestly position brought him fame, wealth and respect from his congregation. Yet, internally, there was unrest. He failed in his marriages, he squandered his wealth in gambling and, occasionally felt conflicted by the religion he professed. He retired from the office when his health started to decline. He retired to a village that he knew from the early years he spent as a travelling missionary. The village is located in the regency of Paser and is populated by Dayak communities who are largely practising ancestral belief system. Within the village, there were small families of Muslim, one of whose were Robert’s former in-laws from his third marriage. Robert was curious as to how Islam could reach so further inland. The only route into the village was the unpaved, muddy track that gets submerged swiftly after heavy downpour. A story was related to Robert of a young Muslim wandering preacher, a da’i, who first came to the village carrying with him a cupping apparatus. The people saw in the young man a pleasant, polite and was able to assist the sick in a simple treatment. Eventually, his perseverance was rewarded by the first conversion of two families, and followed by many others. In addition to being a healer, he was also their teacher and brought with him some Islamic pamphlets which he handed down to his new converts. One of them “Sebab-sebab meraih kebahagiaan” (The means of attaining happiness) penned by Syaikh Abdurrazaq, was passed to the inquiring Robert. The pamphlet struck an immediate impression to him. Its messages stirred and his heart quivered as he sensed the inner contentment he had been longing for was finally discovered in those spiritually-inspired words. Robert admitted that it was not the precise understanding of the sermons that provoked the intensity but the author’s good and sincere intention that he grasped first and won him over. When Robert finally met the young da’i, he confessed his intention to become Muslim and the date was immortalised in the beginning of his letter – ‘Saya

masuk Islam pada tanggal 15 Desember 2011 M'. Now Abdurrahman al-Islami, he persuaded the da'i to take him to meet the Syaikh who was due to appear on a rally in Jakarta on February 2012 but the plan was aborted after he was inflicted by a terrible and persisting rheumatism. From then on, his health took a turn for the worse. He composed a letter to the Syaikh dated at the end of the pages 15 August 2014 in the village called Muara Indah (sic. Andeh). The letter reached the syaikh after Abdurrahman passed away, who shared the content that subsequently had led to its publication.

There are two choices in reading the book. The first is to take it as it is, a manifesto for the propagation of Islam (dakwah) among the multi-religious, multi-ethnic society. Despite its spartan outlook, the book is not meant for lay reader, Muslim or otherwise, who may be intimidated by those fifteen extensive, doctrinaire footnotes. It is specifically written for the wayfaring da'i whose vocation is to inspire his listeners, to incite reflection into their temporal existence and, to deliver hope and joy to the drifted souls. Story-telling is a craft to be excelled by the effective preacher. To the captivated audience, the spiritual message is judged by its persuasive effects in arousing the wonder of the mysterious, omnipotent God. Sunan Prapen in the 16th century Lombok used wayang kulit (puppet theatrical) in his dakwah while the present-day da'i revel in the digital game of YouTube in reaching out to new demographics who are no less probing. Storytelling is just a part in the dakwah repertoire. Another skill-set promoted to the da'i is the healing skill. For a common da'i, per character in Abdurrahman's letter, his knowledge of healing is basic but necessary for the task he had among the rural population who are typically disconnected from the provision of public health. It is essentially a folk medicine accompanied with Islamic chants and prayer that works in simple ailment cases. On the other hand, for a highly learned kyai, his knowledge of medicine was more erudite as he has the privileged in accessing the classical books of medicine and healing (kitab at-tibb wa'l syifa') whose contents ranging from the diagnosis of bodily and spiritual ailments to the knowledge of pharmacopeia.

The other choice is to look at the repression performed by the editor with some dexterity. Repressed through the maze of the inspirational quotes underneath the letter-text is the disenfranchised subjects, Abdurrahman and his milieu of existence in the periphery. The letter-text directed the syaikh to the marginalisation that he and his community endured. The means of connecting to the outside region were hampered by the poor roads, irregular satellite communication and limited public facilities. Being at the periphery has also presented obstacles in the ambition for a fulfilment of an ideal, spiritual subject. Abdurrahman talked about the feeling of abandonment after the da'i ceased his sojourn. He and the others were left to fend for themselves, unable to learn and practice the teaching, Abdurrahman lamented their insignificant existence in the margin as the cause for not being taken seriously by any teacher or da'i. These were the objective facts that Abdurrahman demanded attention from his idolised Syaikh, alas, they were forgotten in the vast swathe of notes. The 'forgetting' of such disenfranchisement is usually blamed on the "scholastic automaton", a term used by Pierre Bourdieu (2006) to describe "the systematic principle of error in the realm of knowledge" perpetrated by (well-meaning) scholars. The error, argues Bourdieu, is the "forgetting" of the reality and the practice of everyday existence. This exemplifies by a production of knowledge that projects the favoured worldview of the scholars upon the subjects as if it was how the common people see themselves. This is an instance of vanity at the expense of the removed subjects, that a scholar, writes Bourdieu, "credits agents with his own vision, and in particular, an interest in pure knowledge and pure understanding which is normally alien to them" (p. 52). The resemblance of the "scholastic automaton" to the editor's handiwork is uncanny. To the well-intentioned editor, the confession of the former priest dwarfed that of the higher calling that he sees primary to any mortal's story. In his "forgetting", he too must have been incognizant of the boundary that he unwittingly set up between the spiritual and the practical reality, although to the ordinary people - evident in the letter - such separation is not a choice they could make or even relate to. While the editor is liable to the choice that he made, the principle behind his decision is not owed to his idiosyncratic failing but a demonstration of a reality that he shares with the rest and of which his book partakes. It is the reality of culture

Culture industry is a term used by Theodore Adorno (2010) to describe the phenomena of popular culture – duplication, uniformity and mass production – exaggerated by technology and capital for commercial ends. It is for the common people that the mass commodity is insinuating the correct attitude, the one that makes them forget about the exigencies of life. The culture industry “proffers precisely for the disenchanting world” (p. 61), the world where, according to Max Weber, spirituality and sublime values retreated from public life as technocratic rationalization reigned supreme. Of course, Weber exaggerated the spiritual retreat because as Adorno’s concept entails, spirituality too has been riding the waves of culture industry. The current book is the illustration. According to the editor, the letter that was shown to him by a son of Syaikh Abdurrazaq was already then translated into Arabic. Separately, the letter written in Malay language was circulated in online websites which deals with topics on Islamic dakwah in Indonesia. There are plenty of variations between the online letter and the version republished in the book. The name of the Syaikh in the letter was simplified into Tuan Syaikh Abdurrazaq while the book credited the full name Syaikh Abdurrazaq bin Abdil Muhsin al-Badr. The letter had dates written on top of the header in alternate pages, but it is not clear if the dates directly corresponded to the chronology of the story. There were gaps in the information such as the online letter mentioned Abdurrahman’s age at 58 and there was also a description about the Muslims in his village reverted to ancestral practices right after the da’i ceased his visit. In addition to the online letter and the present book, there is also an English language version of the book which appeared identical to the latter, minus editorial Introduction. There is also no mention of the name of the book’s editor. The English title, *The Story of the Priest Who Embrace Islam*, was published in 2018 by an Islamic dakwah publisher in the USA called Authentic Statements. As in the Malay-language version, there were extensive footnotes accompanied the text of the letter and the two sermons by Shaykh Abdurrazaq ‘The Means of Goodness and Happiness in this Life and the Hereafter’. The appearance of the three sets of accounts originating from the letter of Abdurrahman Islami suggest they addressing to different audience in different contexts. The English-language version is circulated in the Western metropole albeit, where Islam is peripheral, while the Malay-language edition is meant to preserve the context where it originates and relevant to the multi-cultural Kalimantan and Indonesia. Technology and capital allow their simultaneous distributions, and for which to be wielded in the disenchanting time. Should one read either and forgets its humble origin is where the line is drawn for the disillusioned.

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