

Artikel Tinjauan

“THERE IS NO GOD BUT ALLAH” An Indonesian-Christian Reading on Miroslav Volf’s “Allah: A Christian Response”

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When I first heard that the Malaysian government had prohibited Christians in that country from using the word “Allah” in referring to God (including what is written in the Bible), I felt it was odd but at the same time also sad.¹ I felt it was odd because it is ridiculous to say, as the law implies, that there are more gods

1. “Malaysia Court Reinstates Allah Ban Pending Appeal.” *The Jakarta Post*, January 6, 2010. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/01/06/malaysia-court-reinstates-allah-ban-pending-appeal.html>, (accessed May 5, 2012). See also Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 80-83.

besides “Allah.” Also, it is the word Christians in Indonesia use to identify God. But, I was also saddened, because the prohibition is a sign of the influence of extremist Islamic thought. This attitude, will influence interfaith relations negatively in that country.

Then, when I arrived in the United States, I never thought seriously about this “Allah” matter, because in Indonesia we, Christians, use that word routinely; it is taken for granted, as I will explain later. Apparently, the word is also problematic in the US context, because there are Christians who do not believe that Allah is the same as the God they worship. This issue led to my interest in Miroslav Volf’s book, which addresses “Allah” from a Christian perspective.

A recent example of this controversy in the US context centers on Rick Warren, the noted Christian author and pastor. In an article, Warren was reported to have said that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.² However, this report was rebutted by Warren in an interview.³ Moreover, Warren caused a controversy when he delivered the prayer at President Barack Obama’s inauguration: he used the phrase “... you [God] are the

2. E. Abraham, “Rick Warren Agrees Not to Evangelize Muslims,” *Americans & Veterans Against Jihad*, February 28, 2012. <http://avaj.us/rick-warren-agrees-not-to-evangelize-muslims/> (accessed May 14, 2012).

3. Ed Stetzer, “Rick Warren Interview on Muslims, Evangelism & Missions (Responding to Recent News Reports),” Ed Stetzer, *The LifeWay Research Blog*, March 2, 2012. <http://www.edstetzer.com/2012/03/rick-warren-interview-on-musli.html> (accessed May 14, 2012).

compassionate and merciful one,” attributes assigned to Allah and used widely by Muslims in America.⁴ Therefore, Volf’s writing is really important, as he addresses Christians in America particularly, and all Christians in general. In this paper I will engage deeply with Volf’s book since it is quite remarkable in answering the issue of “Allah” in American context. After that, some comments and insights will be provided from Indonesian-Christian perspective in hope to sharpen the discourse around the issue.

Volf’s Response to Allah

Miroslav Volf is one of the best-known contemporary Christian theologians. As a native of Croatia, he experienced the tragic situation of his home country, which was torn apart by ethnic and religious conflicts. His theological writing covers the areas of reconciliation, peace-building, and interfaith engagement, especially between Christianity and Islam. He and other people wrote a response on behalf of the *Yale Center for Faith and Culture* to *A Common Word*, a document created by Muslim scholars from around the world.⁵ He wrote his book in the same spirit of building bridges between Islam and Christianity.

4. Volf, *Allah*, 6.

5. Harold W. Attridge et al., “A Christian Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You,’” *Yale Center for Faith and Culture: A Common Word at Yale*. <http://www.yale.edu/faith/acw/acw.htm> (accessed May 5, 2012).

From the beginning, Volf explains that he is using a Christian perspective designed to address mostly Christians. His focus is on Christians because Islam already has been luminous enough about the issue of the one God. But, there are still some Christians who doubt that Muslims and Christians worship the same God.⁶ Although the Malaysian government's attitude reveals that there are some Muslims who doubt it, still, in general and along with their scripture and traditions, Muslims believe there is only one God for both Muslims and Christians.⁷

However, Volf's book looks beyond the one-God issue to explore the common ground shared by the two faith groups. Through the chapters in this book, he presents four theses. First of all, he urges, God is one, so Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Secondly, because the two religions are rooted in the same God, then there are overlapping common foundations and values between the two, despite differences in principal matters: Islam and Christianity are not diametrically opposite. Thirdly, among the overlapping commonalities, the most profound one is love—a loving God and loving neighbors.⁸ Thus, the idea that Islam is violent at its core is not true.⁹ Fourthly, these three theses should bridge

6. Volf, *Allah*, 1.

7. Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, Irfan A. Omar, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 2-3.

8. Volf, *Allah*, 9-10.

9. See for example J. Lee Grady foreword on *Islam and Terrorism* that described Islam as the main perpetrator in 9/11 tragedy, not the Muslims. In other words, Grady supports the idea of the book he

the gap between the two religions and so sustain the interfaith engagement process, including a shared ethical praxis in today's common world.¹⁰

Volf's first thesis, that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, is not the only view. Rather, the opposite idea seems to be more sound and widespread, since it is compatible with the spirit of Islamophobia so widespread in the contemporary Western world, including the United States. Thus, Volf must answer the voices that would negate his thesis. These voices usually reflect the ideas of John Piper, who makes two points. Firstly, because Islam rejected Jesus Christ as God and the concept of the Trinity explicitly, then obviously they are not worshipping the right God, YHWH.¹¹ Secondly, a comparison of the two sources for the religions reveals substantial differences in Islamic teaching from what God in Christ taught the Christians.¹² This difference in foundational beliefs would seem to explain why the Muslims apparently engage in violence. The second view is parallel to a "popular" stereotype of Islam as a religion of violence that creates terrorists. Furthermore, R. Albert Mohler insists that the use of the word "Allah" by Christians might

endorsed that Islam is violence in its core. J. Lee Grady, foreword on *Introduction to Islam and Terrorism* by Mark A. Gariel (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2002), xi-xii.

10. Volf, *Allah*, 12-13.

11. Volf, *Allah*, 34, 81.

12. Volf, *Allah*, 35.

create confusion.¹³ This argument is exactly the same one used by the Malaysian government, but from the other extreme point.

At this point, there are only three logical possibilities from a Christian view if Muslims and Christians are, in each group, referring to a different God: a) Muslims are worshipping another God; b) Muslims worship no real object; c) Muslims worship an idol.¹⁴ To address the issue, Volf emphasizes that the first option (a) is absurd and theologically incorrect, from both religious traditions' points of view, as each is a monotheistic religion. The Bible clearly states that there is only one God, and the Quran holds to the same reality.¹⁵ Also, the worst sin in both religions is worshipping any other gods but the God. How is it possible for there to be two gods, as some claim, one for the Muslims and the other for the Christians? The second (b) and third (c) options lead to the same consequence, so now there are only two choices: either the Muslims worship the same God as the Christians, or Islam is an idolatrous religion.¹⁶ Indeed, Volf is aware of the possibility that Christians might just easily take the second possibility for Islam, so he continues to argue for the first choice.

Next, Volf argues from Christian tradition addressing the issue, as set forth by Nicholas Cusa and Martin Luther. Volf shows that neither thinker ever adopted the view that Muslims and

13. Volf, *Allah*, 81.

14. Volf, *Allah*, 84-85.

15. Volf, *Allah*, 35.

16. Volf, *Allah*, 85.

Christians worship different Gods or that Islam is an idolatrous religion. Conversely, Luther's and Nicholas's polemics against Islam were based on the thesis of the same God between the two religions. In his polemic, Nicholas relied on the Quran as his source, thus indicating that he learned about and respected Islam, even if only to some extent.¹⁷ Luther said that Muslims know the true characteristics of God, as also the other types of Christians that were labeled heretics at that time.¹⁸ The difference is that Christians know God more deeply than Muslims, because the latter failed to realize that Jesus died for human sin and that the Trinity is the truest picture of God.¹⁹ While citing those two theologians, Volf explains that they lived at a time and in a place in tension with Muslim empires.²⁰ Still, even in those situations, both theologians did not say that Muslims worship a different God or a false god.

Volf also comments on the prohibition against Christians' using the word Allah. He states, "'Allah' is simply Arabic for 'God' just as *Theos* is Greek for 'God' and *Bog* is Croatian for 'God' ... 'Allah,' like 'God,' is not a proper name, but a descriptive term. 'Barack Obama' is a proper name; 'president' is a descriptive term."²¹ That is the reason why the Christians in the Middle Eastern call on Allah to refer to God, the same as Christians in Indonesia; all

17. Volf, *Allah*, 52-54.

18. Volf, *Allah*, 64.

19. Volf, *Allah*, 67-68.

20. Volf, *Allah*, 40-47, 60-61

21. Volf, *Allah*, 81-82.

of them live faithfully as Christians.²² Here, however, a question arises: are the “term” and the “referent” (object) in mind the same for Christians and Muslims? To answer this, Volf quotes a narrative in the Gospel of John: when Jesus meets with the Samaritan woman, he stresses that both Jews and Samaritans worship the same God. Moreover, the Samaritan’s faith was impure or lacking, so the Samaritan was not worshipping another God or an idol. Thus, difference conceptions about God do not mean that God, the “object” of faith, is different.²³ If that were the case, then various denominations in Christianity would be worshipping different gods. Volf cites the example of his child’s thinking about God, which is very different from the way he thinks, but the God in each case is the same. Only the level of knowledge differentiates one from the other. Luther and Nicholas followed this line of thinking by stating that Muslims already know about the truth, but their knowledge is not perfect. But, how can Luther and Nicholas arrive at this conclusion, without accusing Islam of worshipping a different God? Indeed, both theologians see the conduct of the Muslims as a sign that the source of their religion is the same God as the One Christians worship.²⁴ Thus, to strengthen belief in the oneness of God, Christians and Muslims should focus on their commonalities,

22. Volf, *Allah*, 82.

23. Volf, *Allah*, 90.

24. Volf, *Allah*, 86.

as each religion tends to promote it.²⁵ Here, Volf offers the second thesis of overlapping values between the two religions.

Volf explores the similarities in teaching and ethical practice across Christianity and Islam thus proving that both religions are rooted in the same God. He concludes that there are six points on which that Muslims and Christians could agree: "1. There is only one God, the one and only divine being; 2. God created everything that is not God; 3. God is radically different from everything that is not God; 4. God is good; 5. God commands that we love God with our whole being; 6. God commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves."²⁶ Volf claims that when Christians and Muslims agree on these six points then in their worship of God they refer to the same object. He notes that on the normative level, if it is true that there are a few adherents of Islam who fail to follow what is normative in their religion, that is also the case in Christianity; we cannot, because of those failures, jump to the conclusion that we have different gods.²⁷

He shows that Islam refutes the Trinity concept in Christianity to the extent that Christianity neglects God's oneness. However, if Christians could prove that the Trinity does not detract from God's oneness and actually is a form of monotheism, there should not be any problem.²⁸ He needed to address this

25. Volf, *Allah*, 91.

26. Volf, *Allah*, 110.

27. Volf, *Allah*, 112, 118-19

28. Volf, *Allah*, 143-44

controversy, because the argument of those who claim that Muslims reject the concept of the Trinity said that because Muslims reject Christian concept of God, then they are not worshipping the same God with Christians.

Furthermore, Volf argues that love as the core of Christianity is also the core of Islam. This is his third thesis. Volf aims to deflect the view that Islam is a violent religion. He does so by showing sources from Islam itself, such as the Qur'ān, hadīths, and some writings by Islamic theologians. He also relates how his childhood experience of living with Muslims supports the idea that the Islamic core teaching is love, as states in A Common Word document.²⁹ Volf conclusion is: the two religions are parallel in their teachings on love, compassion, and justice.

Next, Volf develops his fourth thesis on the praxis shared between Muslims and Christians. "Muslims and Christians have a common God and partly overlapping understandings of God and God's command," is his argument so far.³⁰ A criticism relevant here asks this question: If Volf's argument is true, then what is the difference between Islam and Christianity? Does either have no particularities?³¹ Volf replies to this challenge by showing how "religion" is an ambiguous category, since there are pluralities inside each religion and humans always embrace a belief in specific way,

29. Volf, *Allah*, 155-62

30. Volf, *Allah*, 187.

31. Volf, *Allah*, 191.

but at the same time always hybrid.³² In his opinion, it is better to let alone such questions about the esoteric nature of religions, and instead focus on looking at commonalities.

Volf is quite optimistic that his focus on the sameness of God and commonalities in values, especially love, can bridge the gap between the two religions, a gap widened by past and current conflicts. These include the Crusades and Western colonialism, which contributed so much to today's negative atmosphere between the two religions across the world. Volf also explains to his fellow Christians that dialogue does not lead to reducing Christian faith (including evangelization) or Islamic faith. Conversely, when those two groups bring their faiths to the table and have a dialogue, the output will be a *common code of conduct* that might help build a better world for all.³³ As an example, Volf argues that the output of the dialogue might cover these three propositions: "1. The one benevolent God relates to all people on equal terms; 2. Love of neighbor demands that we grant the same freedoms to others that we claim for ourselves; 3. There should be no coercion in matters of faith."³⁴ Volf also supplies features of the shared code of conduct: democracy, justice, and inclusiveness.³⁵ Basically, Volf proposes that Islam, modern culture, and politics of the United States could co-exist happily because of these basic commonalities.

32. Volf, *Allah*, 193, 199-200

33. Volf, *Allah*, 212.

34. Volf, *Allah*, 231.

35. Volf, *Allah*, 223-24.

Finally, Volf states the importance of good relations between the two religions for pursuing the common good in today's world.³⁶ This is possible because they worship the same God, the main source for both religions.

Analysis of Volf's Response to Allah

Having summarized Volf's thinking, we will now analyze and consider its advantages and disadvantages. This book, without a doubt, is written for the United States' context and readers, not only at the academic level, but on the public one as well. All four theses brought to the table by Volf purposely end with a practical proposal imperative for Christians to embrace their Muslim neighbors. He present these despite the chorus of Christian voices opposing them. Obviously, the voices that describe Islam with suspicion, stereotype, and condemnation are widespread and heard more in American public discourse, and in other Western countries. Islamophobia is not only sustained and nurtured by those negative voices, but it becomes more complex as it is mixed into socio-economic-political interests. This is Volf's first focal point, by which he engages the opposing view in public discourse, while staying faithful to the academic way.

Secondly, Volf is correct that the heart of Muslim-Christian dialogue is the question of the oneness of God. One of my professors was surprised when I told him that Christians in

36. Volf, *Allah*, 247.

Indonesia use the word “Allah” to refer to God. He said that this practice would be unimaginable for Americans. Thus, Volf’s effort to argue that Muslims and Christians worship the same and one God is very positive, in order to open more rooms for dialogues. Moreover, most academic books about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations rarely present literature that explore the Christian view of the Muslim perception of Allah. This is also true on popular literatures as well.

Thirdly, Volf is correct, to some extent, that failing to recognize that both religions are worshipping the same God could lead to a religious conflict. In Volf’s opinion, the notion of different God is another way to differentiate and demarcate the two religions with unrelated values; the logic here is that each has its own values rooted in the belief in separate gods. Those who defend this approach say that even if we have different God[s] (sic!), we can still tolerate each other. Here, I agree with Volf that making a robust distinction between the two implies that the other is of less value and, thus, inferior. Further, it could lead to religious conflict too as the example of Malaysia. Soon after the government declared the prohibition against non-Muslims using the word Allah for God, attacks on churches increased and relations between Muslims and Christians deteriorated.³⁷ Although religion was not the sole cause

37. Sean Yoong, “Malaysia Church Slams Islamic Officials Over Raid,” *The Jakarta Post*, August 4, 2011. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/08/04/malaysian-church-slams-islamic-officials-over-raid.html> (accessed May 8, 2012). See also “Malaysian Muslim Acquitted of Torching

of the conflict, without a doubt, the robust differentiation between Christianity and Islam, including their theological views of God, played a key and initiating role.

Next, Volf stresses one important rule in comparing religions: do not compare our ideals with our religion's factual practice.³⁸ Certain Christians say that the evil and violent conduct of some Muslims reflects on their religion; this behavior, they note, is very different from Christianity, which puts so much emphasis on compassion. Thus, how can it be possible that both have the same God as their source? This argument is based on a misconception: if its logic were true, then any evil conduct by Christians would condemn the whole Christian community, and point to their worship of a not-really-good God. That is the reason Volf uses what is ideal from Islamic teaching to compare it to Christianity's normative teaching, too.

Last, Volf focuses on answering the theological questions regarding the one God between Islam and Christianity. At the beginning, he acknowledged that for Christians there is no one slightly explicit remark in the Bible has nothing to say about the God of the Muslims; it is thus difficult to argue from specifics about this

Church," *The Jakarta Post*, July 30, 2010. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/07/30/malaysian-muslim-acquitted-torching-church.html> (accessed May 8, 2012).

38. See also the fourth commandment of Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue" in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20:1, Winter (1983):1-4.

matter. But, if we use the overarching Biblical notion of *shema* Israel, “Hear O, Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,” (Deuteronomy 6:4), which repeated by Jesus (Mark 12:29), then we can assume that there is only one God. Thus, saying that Muslims and Christians worship different gods is an oxymoron, according to the Christian faith. However, Christians could just as easily deny that Muslims worship God, by claiming they worship nothing or just an idol, since the Bible is silent on this point. To prevent his fellow Christians from following that line of thinking, Volf offers other arguments based on traditions—i.e., Nicholas Cusa and Martin Luther never concluded that Islam has its own god different from Christianity. What distinguishes Islam and Christianity is the concept of the one God, whom each claim as the truest. Neither exactly excludes what the other believes as totally wrong, but as less-true and needing to be transformed.

In addition to Volf’s effort, we can look to the earliest debate between Muslims and Christians: around 780 CE, Caliph al-Mahdī and Patriarch Timothy I, exchanged views. Nothing was mentioned there about Muslims’ and Christians’ worshipping different gods. Rather, the debate focused on about how Christians and Muslims perceive God based on their own particularity.³⁹ Furthermore, Volf points to those who say that because Muslims do

39. Alphonse Mingana, trans., “Timothy I, Apology for Christianity,” The Tertullian Project, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/timothy_i_apology_01_text.htm, (accessed May 8, 2012).

not accept Jesus as the second Person of the Trinity, then Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God. Volf underscores that different approaches to God do not automatically mean they are approaching different God[s]. Nevertheless, how can we explain the various denominations inside Christianity, including those which carry the “heretics” label? Should we say they worship different gods, since some are having different thoughts about Jesus Christ as well? If we are all honest, every Christian has a unique approach to God and Jesus, even in one congregation. Thus, those differences should be celebrated as God’s invitation, who is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, to an open-mystery and journey of faith in order to discern her in the fullest sense. Indeed, in this process, people of other faiths are our precious partners.

Among the positive points of this book, some critical points emerged. To begin with, Volf’s first thesis is focuses on the importance of a shared confession of the one and same God by Christians and Muslims. He points how this commonality will play the key role in joining the two religions in dialogue in order to create a better world. I found this not really convincing, although I fully agree with the thesis that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. The reason I doubt this point is that there are other factors to urge the process of interfaith encounters—whether conflict or peace, especially if we talk about Christianity and Islam—not only the matter of if they worship the same God or not. It is true that to differentiate between the God[s] of the two can disparage

other religion, a division Volf tries to counter. But in building interreligious relations, it is obviously not the only decisive factor, even in the US context. There are many obstacles to the effort of building interfaith relations, such as violence, negative stereotypes, past or current the religious conflicts, the emergence of extremism, and so on. All of these elements can complicate matters as much the one in Volf's book.

Secondly, his thinking on the relation between monotheism and polytheism is problematic.⁴⁰ His statement that polytheism is mainly cultic and that monotheism is more about ethics echoes a binary opposition that is misleading: it can create favoritism toward monotheist religions and society. In fact, many adherents of monotheism, at least Christians, are too attached to cultic behaviors and give more emphasis to "orthodoxy," the right proposition of belief. Thus, they have failed to bring the ethical imperative to its fullness. In addition, Volf's notion of relating monotheism with a society free from state control and ethnic belonging is also not a strong argument; it is not based in fact and mirrors a foundationalist assumption that monotheism is the most powerful type of faith is and at the core of Western society. The danger of this thinking is that it easily neglects all contributions from other faiths to countless societies around the world, just because Volf treats the Western experience as the *axis mundi* of human civilization. Here, Volf has failed to realize that human identity is always hybrid: each society is

40. Volf, *Allah*, 227-29.

constructed not on a single pillar, i.e., monotheism.⁴¹ Even if monotheism should be prioritized, Christianity, and also Islam, is influenced highly by Greek thoughts, which did not develop in a monotheist society. This is only one counter-example. Moreover, this line of thought could mislead people to marginalize non-theist religions, people, and their societies.

Thirdly, Volf talks about the rights of people to change their religion, while also condemning the laws of apostasy. These laws “... disregard two essential and socially revolutionary feature[s] of monotheism: the decoupling of religion and the state, and the tying of religion to loving all neighbors and to doing justice.”⁴² In my opinion, Volf is leaning on his assumption of the foundation of monotheism without realizing that monotheism is a “thin” category, while Islam is a “thick” one—due to its scripture, hadīths, traditions, local customs, and religious laws. This is the disadvantage of foundationalism. As a result of his assumption, Volf tries to bargain away the Islamic particularity by reducing elements that are important to Islamic identity.

A Response from the Indonesian-Christian Perspective

As I said in the beginning of this paper, Allah is not a foreign word for millions of Christians in Indonesia. We have used that word from the very beginning. The word Allah also is very close to our

41. Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 78-79.

42. Volf, *Allah*, 234.

daily piety, not only part of our formal liturgy. We call on Allah in our Sunday worship, songs, daily prayer, everyday conversations, and every occasions of our life. At the same time we hear our Muslim brothers and sisters use the same word to call on God. Further, we use other names for God, according to our ethnic connection, because Christians in Indonesia have gathered from diverse ethnicities and cultures. For example, the Batak people refer to God as *Debata*, and the Javanese people call her *Gusti*. Thus, Volf's first thesis is not something new for the Indonesian people. Rather, we already have lived this attitude for many years without thinking that there is more than one God. Instead of engaging in philosophical argument, as John Hick did,⁴³ about the oneness of God, Indonesian Christians approach the issue culturally. Arguments from the Bible and tradition, which Volf uses, are also important, added to the cultural approach. Personally speaking, I used to say that I believe the God of Muslim and Christian worship is the same because the Bible tells me so, but now, with Volf's writing, I could argue with even more convincing arguments.

Unfortunately, despite our confession to the one God, Christians and Muslims in Indonesia have not always engaged peacefully. There have been tensions and bloody conflicts, especially after Suharto fell and the Reformation order began. That history is another reason I cannot fully agree with Volf's thesis that

43. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

the oneness of God alone can be the common ground for better interfaith relations. Although I believe with him that our God is one, there are layers in religious tensions and conflicts that are sustained by many other factors. In Indonesia, for example, those factors are structural poverty, lack of law enforcement, lack of education, including knowledge about other faiths, and the nature of theology rooted in both religions, which treats see other faiths as threats and inferior systems. Here, I find Mahmoud Ayoub's words as very true: "The main obstacle to true Christian-Muslim dialogue on both sides is, I believe, their unwillingness to truly admit that God's love and providence extend equally to all human beings, regardless of religious identity."⁴⁴

Many Christians in Indonesia have failed to recognize that their negative views of other religion and their adherents have been inherited from a theology developed in the colonial era. The result is that interfaith relations become part of our sociological encounter, but are not included in our theological reflections. Unsurprisingly, I have found some youths show a negative view of Islam despite their friendly relationship with many Muslims at school or in their neighborhood. Indeed, it requires a lot of time and effort to change these attitudes. Here, I found Volf's effort in engaging theological discourse should be appreciated, especially when people around the world are more connected and where ideas are easily transferred from one place to another. Simultaneously, both

44. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 69.

positive ideas and negative ones are shared, including forms of extremism, which promotes the attitude that other religions are not worthy and should be treated as inferior.⁴⁵

Once I posted an article in Facebook about an attack on an Indonesian church by an intolerant mass, then my friend commented on it, arguing that the “religion” of those people is evil and promotes violence, because it arises from sources different from Christianity. I was shocked at this response, but tried to convince him that we cannot compare the ideal with what is factual. But he did not accept my view. My friend used an argument similar to a negative view on Islam, just like the ones Volf wants to counter. Unfortunately, the negative view is easier to find and spreads readily through the media and internet, so people in Indonesia can access it and used it.

To conclude, the blind spot of Volf’s work is that the theological confession that both religions worship the same and one God is inadequate, as illustrated from the Indonesian context (above). Relations between the two religion are informed by many decisive factors, not solely by the debate on the meanings of monotheism. I will bring in one more example from Indonesian experience to enrich the discussion.

Ambon became a ground of severe Muslim-Christian conflicts several years ago. Now an effort is being made to bring

45. I do not want to use the word fundamentalism since the real meaning is not always negative. I prefer to use the term “extremism”.

young people to public meetings and connect one group with others through a “non-religious” medium. Nowadays many communities have emerged in Ambon based on interests or hobbies, such as photography, bicycling, Hip-hop dancing, traditional music, literature, and so on. Obviously, these groups are multi-faiths in nature. For peacemakers in Ambon who are trying very hard to heal the trauma of religious conflict and improve relations between people of the two religions, those emerging communities are an asset to create and keep the peace so they use these interest groups to bring them together. Jacky Manuputty, a pastor and peace worker from Ambon, told me once that, through this method, young people are able to engage each other, learn how to deal with diversity, and, more importantly, build deep relationships as friends. Even though religion is not the focus of the activity, their religious identities are still inherent in their selves and apparently they reflect on their experience with people of other faiths in the light of their own faith. Here, I found what Hill-Fletcher explains as hybrid identity as very true. Thus, despite religious identity differences, people of different faiths still can connect through their other overlapping identities, such as ethnicity, hobby, local culture, or common vision.⁴⁶ These connections can be more effective in achieving the purpose of “formal” interfaith dialogue. Moreover,

46. Fletcher gives an example how “feminist” could connect one another despite various religious tradition and are working together. In Ambon case, it is “Amboinese” that connected people despite religious differences, Fletcher, *Monopoly*, 92-93.

Indonesia has so many problems that should be addressed together by all people from different faiths, like structural poverty, lack of education for people, corruption, ecological destruction, and many others.

One of the participants who attended a presentation I gave on religious conflicts and peace building in Indonesia asked me this question: "What do you think will be the best way to bring young people in interfaith dialogue in our context (United States)?" I replied to her that the best way to bring young people together shall not in the usual formal environment of typical interfaith dialogue. Let the young people decide what kind of activity they would prefer to use to meet people of other faiths. They can be as creative as they want: football matches, art concerts, eco-social justice programs, and so on. Interfaith dialogues need not always occur in the form of religion *per se*, but can occur in many ways. This new paradigm can address social issues at the local, national, and even global scale. It can also be used to bring people of different faiths together and not require them to confess belief in one God in order to engage in dialogue.

Conclusion

Volf's book has many important aspects, especially related to the American context and its contemporary challenges. This book also offers ideas for the Indonesian context. It urges people to engage in the theological area, not only in the sociological area.

Indeed, both routes are important. But, on a practical level, sharing confession of the one God between Christians and Muslims is inadequate because religious tensions and conflicts have many layers and are perpetuated by other factors. There is a possibility that Volf's thesis might work in American context, not in other places such as Indonesia. However, Volf has done something important for Christian-Muslim engagement in general.

To end, I heard a story about two kids, one Muslim and one Christian, from Indonesia who were debating about religion in their elementary school. They were discussing who is going to be saved and go to heaven, a Muslim or a Christian. After debating for a while, finally they make a bet about it: the decision about whose view is righteous should be extended until they have died and meeting God. Once that is decided, they continue to play and study together as friends and have a great time in their later relationship, just as other children are doing. In religious encounters, people of different faiths find that there is room for disagreement, even about whether or not they worship the same God. Interfaith encounter is a journey that holds many possibilities for all the participants. The talking about belief in one God is only one of many. There are matters that humans are too limited to discern, but also there are other initiatives that could become a common imperative for creating a better world for all.