

Muslims' Participation in Christmas Celebrations: A Critical Study on the Fatwa of the Council of Indonesian Ulama¹

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ملخص

لقد أثار الاحتفال المشترك لميلاد المسيح بين المسيحيين والمسلمين جدالا واسعا في أوساط الأمة الإسلامية في الثمانينات. وقد اختلف العلماء في مسألة حضور الاحتفال بمناسبة ميلاد المسيح لعدم وجود النصوص الصريحة التي تنظم المسلمين في هذه المسألة. وكان مجلس العلماء الإندونيسي قد أصدر فتوى يحرم المسلمين لحضور الاحتفال المشترك بمناسبة ميلاد المسيح بغية الحفاظ على عقيدتهم، إلا أن هذا الفتوى قد واجه ردود الأفعال من الجهات الكثيرة من بينها ما صدرت من قبل حكومة النظام الجديد وقتذاك. الأمر الذي يؤدي إلى استقالة حمكا (رئيس مجلس العلماء الإندونيسي حينذاك) من منصبه كما صدرت كذلك من الأفراد منهم المعارضون ومنهم المؤيدون ومنهم المترددون.

لقد كان هذا الفتوى يمثل العلاقة بين المسلمين والمسيحيين وتذبذبا من حين لآخر مع أن هاتين الأمتين قد شكلتا قسما كبيرا من سكان إندونيسيا كما أن لهما دورا كبيرا في تنمية الشعب. من هنا يمكننا القول بأن العلاقة بينهما في حالة ديناميكية.

¹ I am indebted to Prof. P.S. van Koningveld, a professor of Islamic Studies at Leiden University, with whom I had discussed the topic of this article. I had also presented this topic in the Seminar "Problems and Methods of Islamic Studies" at the same university in 1998.

Abstrak

Pada dekade tahun 1980-an, isu perayaan Natal bersama (*common Christmas celebration*) antara umat Kristiani dengan sebagian umat Islam mencuat ke permukaan dan menjadi masalah kontroversial di kalangan umat Islam. Para pemuka agama Islam (ulama') memperdebatkan tentang boleh tidaknya seorang Muslim mengikuti perayaan Natal bersama. Pertentangan tersebut timbul karena belum adanya ketetapan hukum Islam yang secara khusus mengatur peran serta umat Islam dalam perayaan Natal bersama. Untuk menjaga kemurnian akidah umat Islam, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) mengeluarkan fatwa berkenaan dengan perayaan Natal bersama yang intinya *mengharamkan umat Islam mengikuti upacara Natal bersama*. Namun, fatwa tersebut justru mengundang reaksi dari berbagai kalangan. Reaksi keras muncul dari pemerintah Orde Baru yang pada saat itu sedang giat-giatnya mengkampanyekan Trilogi Kerukunan Beragama yang digagas oleh Menteri Agama, H. Alamsyah Ratuperwiranegara. Reaksi keras dari pemerintah tersebut akhirnya mendorong Prof. Dr. HAMKA mengundurkan diri dari jabatan ketua umum MUI. Di samping reaksi dari pemerintah, reaksi terhadap fatwa juga muncul dari umat Islam sendiri secara perorangan baik yang bernada positif (mendukung) maupun yang bernada negatif dan skeptif. Fatwa MUI ini secara nyata merefleksikan hubungan antara umat Islam dan umat Kristiani yang mengalami fluktuasi dari masa ke masa.

A. Introduction

Muslims' participation in celebrating Christian feast days had already occurred since long ago. In Egypt, for example, the Coptic Christians distributed sweets to the important people of the Fatimites on the Christmas Day². In the thirteenth century, Muslims in Ceuta (Marocco) took part in celebrating the Christian feast days. Unfortunately, the authority of Ceuta at that time, Abu al-Abbas al-Azafi, tried to eliminate Muslims' involvement in Christian celebrations by introducing *maulid al-nabi* (the birthday of the Prophet) to Muslims. He also wanted, by his policy, to fortify Muslim identity in Ceuta³. When

²N.J.G. Kaptein, *Muhammad's Birthday Festival*, (Leiden: E.L.Brill, 1993), p. 28.

³*Ibid.*, pp.91-95.

Ayatullah Khomeini was exiled in France in the second half of 1970s, he addressed a speech to Christendom on the twenty-fifth of December. Through his speech he summoned to Christendom to recall the struggle of Jesus Christ for helping the oppressed people. Having delivered his speech, he commanded his companions to distribute gifts and flowers to the people of the village where he lived in.⁴

It was in February 1981 that the issue of *Natal bersama*⁵ started to be controversial issue among Muslims in Indonesia. Some Muslims viewed it as a good example of religious tolerance, while other Muslims viewed it as another form of strategy of Christianization and therefore, Muslims should avoid attending Christmas celebrations. Hamka, for example, gave a bitter remark on the issue by saying that it was forbidden (*haram*) for Muslims to attend Christmas celebrations, for Christmas was the belief of Christian in celebrating the birthday of God's son. He further asserted that it was their creed, and Muslims had their own creed. If a Muslim attended Christmas celebration, it meant that he/she had conducted the deed of a polytheist (*musyrik*)⁶ The discussion then developed from social aspect to theological one that resulted in question of whether it was allowed or not for Muslims to do such practice according to Islamic law.

The Quran and Hadith, as the primary sources of Islamic law, do not explicitly mention the legal status of such practice. Meanwhile, the majority of Indonesian Muslims are laymen and many of them have participated in Christmas celebrations. Given such condition, an official decree (*fatwa*) from an Islamic authority regarding permission to or prohibition from participating in Christmas celebration was badly needed.

This article aims to scrutinize the fatwa of the Council of Indonesian Ulama on Muslims' Participation in Christmas Celebrations. In fact, the topic of this article has already been discussed by Mohammad Atho Mudzhar⁷. Nevertheless, some important aspects related to the fatwa

⁴Husin Shahab, "MUI dan Natal Khomeini" (The CIU and Christmas with Khomeini), *Tempo*, 1 August 1981, p. 6.

⁵The phrase *Natal bersama* refers to celebrating Christmas jointly with Muslims. The practice of *Natal bersama* certainly occurred before it became publicly controversial.

⁶See Rusydi Hamka, *Pribadi dan Martabat Buya Prof. Dr. Hamka*, (Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 1981), p. 192.

⁷M. Atho Mudzhar dicusses the fatwa in his dissertation *Fatwas of The Council of Indonesian Ulama: A Study of Islamic Legal Thought in Indonesia 1975-1988*. The

such as reactions from other Muslims as well as non-Muslims are out of discussion. In addition, opinions of other Muslim scholars on the same subject matter are hardly taken into account. Therefore, the writer pays much attention to discussing those aspects.

B. A Brief Account on the Council of Indonesia Ulama

The Council of Indonesian Ulama (CIU) is a religious organization whose members are Muslim scholars (ulama) of various mainstreams of Islam in Indonesia. The CIU was established under the auspices of the government, and was expected to be a partner of the government in the efforts to develop the country. The CIU was also expected to become an organization, which could act as a bridge between the government and the *ummah* (Muslim community), so that the government policies concerning national development could be socialized as effectively as possible.

During the New Order period, the role of ulama was significant in the development of the country. The national development would not have been successful without real contribution from the ulama because they were central leaders of Muslim communities, whose deeds and sayings were referred to by Muslims. The Maduranese,⁸ for example, abided by ulama rather than the government bureaucrats. Therefore, ulama could effectively communicate the government policies on national development to the *ummah*. For that reason, President Soeharto called for an active participation of the ulama in national development.

In a workshop of Muslim preachers held in Jakarta on 30 November 1974, the president insisted on the importance of creating a forum in which leaders or representatives of religious organizations could cooperatively discuss religious tolerance.⁹ However, Muslim leaders had difficulty in observing the President's suggestion because they did not yet have an organization of ulama, which represented various main-

dissertation was published in 1993 by the INIS Jakarta in bilingual version. Muzdhar also discusses the fatwa in his article "The Council of Indonesian Ulama' on Muslims' Attendance at Christmas Celebrations" in Muhammad Khalid Masud (ed.), *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and Their Fatwas*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 230-241.

⁸Maduranese is a tribe which inhabits Madura, an island on the north east of Java. The majority of the Maduranese are Muslims.

⁹See MUI, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Sekretariat MUI, 1976), p. 9.

streams of Islam in Indonesia, while the other religious groups did.¹⁰ Based on the President's remarks, a council of ulama was established in every province by May 1975 under the instruction of the Minister of Home Affairs.

On 1 July 1975, the Minister of Religious Affairs issued a decree to set up a committee to form a Council of Indonesian Ulama (CIU) at the national level. The committee was chaired by Lieutenant General H. Soedirman under an advisory board consisting of Prof. Dr. Hamka, K.H. Abdullah Syafii, and K.H. Syukri Gazali. The committee held a meeting on 21-27 July 1975 in Jakarta.¹¹ The meeting brought about a charter declaring the establishment of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (CIU) on 26 July 1975. At the meeting, Hamka was successfully elected as the first General Chairman of the CIU.

At the beginning of its inception the CIU has functions as follows: (1) giving fatwas and advice to the government as well as to the Muslim community concerning religious affairs, (2) strengthening Islamic brotherhood and enhancing interreligious harmony in the framework of maintaining national unity and integrity, (3) being a delegate of the Muslim community in the Interreligious Consultative Forum, and (4) being a liaison between Ulama and the Government, and acting as an interpreter and conveyor of ideas and advice (of the government) concerning the development of the society.¹² To realize the functions, the CIU initially set up five committees: (1) the Fatwa Committee, (2) the Committee of Islamic Brotherhood, (3) the Committee of Interreligious Harmony, (4) the Committee of Ulama-Government Co-operation, and (5) the Committee of General Affairs.¹³ Now the CIU has added some new committees to the aforementioned ones in response to the development of the society.

¹⁰The organizations of other religions which already existed were: 1. *Dewan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia (DGI)* (the Council of Indonesian Churches) of Protestantism, 2. *Majelis Agung Wali Gereja Indonesia (MAWI)* (the Supreme Assembly of Indonesian Catholic Bishop) of Catholicism, 3. *Parisada Hindu Dharma Pusat (PHDP)* (Highest Administrative Council of the Hindu-Bali Religion) of Hinduism, and 4. *Perwalian Umat Budha Indonesia (WALUBI)* (Guardianship of Indonesian Buddhist) of Buddhism.

¹¹MUI, *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, p. 10.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 69.

C. The Fatwa on Common Christmas Celebrations

One of the CIU's functions is to strengthen Islamic brotherhood and to enhance interreligious harmony. The function has made the CIU take serious action to maintain interreligious harmony in Indonesia. To maintain and enhance interreligious harmony, the CIU established the Committee of Interreligious Harmony. The committee has tasks of undertaking research and study on issues concerning interrelations between Muslims and other religious adherents. Based on the result of its study, the committee is expected to be able to formulate solution to interreligious conflicts, which can be discussed together with leaders of other religious groups in the Interreligious Consultative Body (ICB).

In relation to Muslim-Christian relations, the CIU issued a fatwa on Muslim Attendance at Christmas Celebrations. The fatwa was issued by the Fatwa Committee of the CIU on March 7, 1981 in response to the questions rising up in the society with regard to the fact that many Muslims had attended Christmas celebrations on invitation. Some of them were even involved in the committee staffs of the celebrations. According to some Muslim leaders such attendance might undermine Muslims' creed (*aqidah*). For them, to quote M. Atho Mudzhar, "it constituted a direct threat of Christianization".¹⁴ Then, they wrote letters to the Ministry of Religious Affairs asking for an explanation for such practice. Because there existed no regulation regarding the practice at that time, the Minister of Religious Affairs then asked the CIU for a fatwa regarding the question of whether it was allowed for a Muslim, according to Islamic law, to attend Christmas celebrations.¹⁵ The *mustafti* (person who asks for a fatwa) in this case was the Minister of Religious Affairs on behalf of Muslims.

The fatwa was drawn up elaborately. To support its arguments, the fatwa reexamines Islamic teachings, which are relevant to the issue. The relevant Islamic teachings the fatwa takes into account are as follows:

- a. Muslims are allowed to cooperate and to associate with non-Muslims in term of profane matters (Q.S.49:13, 31:15, 60:8).
- b. Muslims are not allowed to mix their religious creed with the creed and ritual of other religions (Q.S.109:1-6, 2:42).

¹⁴ Mudzhar, *Fatwas of the Council*, p. 101.

¹⁵ *Tempo*, 16 May 1981, p. 74.

- c. Muslims have to confess the prophethood of Isa (p.b.h.), the son of Maryam, as they confess other prophets and apostles (Q.S.19:30-32, 5:75, 2:285).
- d. Whoever has conviction that God is more than one and Isa is His son, he is considered as an infidel and a polytheist (Q.S.5:72-73, 9:30).
- e. In the Doomsday, Allah will ask Isa whether he commanded his followers to confess him and his mother (Maryam) as god, and Isa answer: No. (Q.S.5:116-118).
- f. Islamic teaching says that Allah is single (Q.S.112:1-4).
- g. Islam teaches Muslims to avoid falling into things of *shubhat* and to prevent themselves from doing things forbidden by Allah, and to give priority to denying disadvantages rather than taking advantages (based on hadith narrated by Nu'man ibn Basyir and on Islamic legal principle (*qā'idah fiqhiyah*).¹⁶

From the Islamic teachings mentioned above, it can be concluded that the fatwa quotes twenty-five quranic verses of nine *sûrās*. The *surats* mostly quoted are *al-Mâ'ida*, *surat* 5, and *al-Kafirin*, *surat* 109. Six verses are quoted from each of the two *surats*. Furthermore, four verses are quoted from *al-Ikhlâs*, three verses from *Maryam*, two verses from *al-Baqara*, one from *al-Hujurât*, one from *Luqman*, one from *al-Mumtahana*, and one from *al-Tawba*. The many quranic verses quoted in the fatwa indicate that the fatwa was drawn up for a serious problem. In addition to the quranic verses, the fatwa utilizes one hadith narrated by Nu'man ibn Bashir, and applies an Islamic legal principle (*qā'idah fiqhiyah*) to support its arguments.

Before the fatwa elaborately explains its scriptural arguments, it mentions the result of an observation in society revealing that some Muslims had misunderstood Christmas celebrations and regarded it to be the same as the celebrations of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (*maulid al-nabi*), which had no ritual element. Consequently, they participated in Christmas celebrations and some of them were even involved in organizing the celebrations. Thus, the fatwa considered it necessary to offer clear guidance concerning the issue of Christmas celebrations in order

¹⁶A. Nazri Adlani, et al., (eds.), *Himpunan Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 1997), pp. 187-193.

that Muslims do not mix their own faith and rituals with the faith and rituals of other religions. It is also expected that Muslims do their best to increase the quality of their faith and obedience to Allah. Only after elucidating elaborate arguments did the fatwa come to the following decisions:

1. Even though the purpose of holding Christmas celebrations in Indonesia is to pay respect to the Prophet ^ﷺIsa, peace be upon him, the celebrations cannot be separated from Christian ritual issues.
2. It is forbidden (*haram*) for Muslims to participate in Christmas ceremonies.
3. To keep Muslims from falling into things of *shubhat* and forbidden categories, it is urged that they not take part in any activity of Christmas celebrations.¹⁷

The fatwa was issued on March 7, 1981 and signed by K.H.M. Syukri Gozali and Drs. H. Mas'udi as chairman and secretary of the Fatwa Committee respectively. The fatwa was initially drawn up to become a guide for the Ministry of Religious Affairs in dealing with Muslims concerning common Christmas celebrations. For that purpose, the fatwa was circulated for internal use only. Unexpectedly, *Pelita*, a national newspaper, published the fatwa on 5 May 1981.¹⁸ On the following day, the *Pelita* published a decree of the CIU no. 139/1981 concerning the withdrawal of the fatwa from its circulation. The decree was issued to eliminate people's misinterpretation of the fatwa and to maintain the national stability.¹⁹ The decree certainly bewildered Muslims and they were questioning what it all meant.

¹⁷For the complete text of the fatwa, see Adlani, et al., (eds.), *Himpunan Fatwa*, pp. 187-193. For the English translation of the fatwa, see Mudzhar, "The Council of Indonesian Ulama' on Muslims' Attendance at Christmas Celebrations", in Muhammad Khalid Masud (ed.), *Islamic Legal Interpretation*, pp. 240-241.

¹⁸In his article, Mudzhar mentions that the fatwa was published in the mass media and began to become publicly controversial within four months. Even though that is not totally wrong, the most accurate estimation is within two months, for the fatwa was issued on March 7, 1981 and was published by *Pelita* on May 5, 1981. Mudzhar also cites that Mas'udi and Tengku Muhammad Saleh had supposedly given the copy of the fatwa to a journalist. However, *Tempo* reported that *Pelita* adapted the fatwa from the CIU's bulletin No. 3/April 1981. See Masud, *Islamic Legal Interpretation*, p. 236; *Pelita*, 5 May 1981, p.1; *Tempo*, 30 May 1981, p. 13.

¹⁹See *Pelita*, 6 May 1981, p.1; *Tempo*, 30 May 1981, p. 13.

A day later, Hamka, the General Chairman of the CIU, gave an explanation concerning the withdrawal of the fatwa. His explanation consisted of three points. The first point stated that the decree no. 139/1981 did not alter the validity of the fatwa. The second item stated that the fatwa had been jointly decided upon by the religious experts of Muslim organizations and Islamic institutions at the national level. The last item said that it was the ulama's responsibility to issue the fatwa in order to both guide Muslims to preserve the purity of their creed, and to maintain religious harmony among adherents of all religions in Indonesia.²⁰

D. Reactions to the Fatwa

After the fatwa had been exposed in the mass media, it rapidly provoked reactions from various parties such as the government, Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Mohammad Atho Mudzhar even concluded in his dissertation that the fatwa was the most controversial of all fatwas the CIU had ever issued.²¹

The vehement reaction to the fatwa came from the government. The Minister of Religious Affairs, Alamsyah Ratu Perwiranegara, gave his comments on the fatwa, saying that it was drawn up on the basis of the Quranic verses and the Prophetic traditions from the creedal perspective only, while the social aspects were not taken into account. He also warned that Indonesia consists of adherents of many religions. Therefore, attending ceremonies of another religion is necessary to pay respect to other religious adherents who have extended invitations. Such a practice could enhance national unity and integrity, as well as harmony among the religious adherents.²² He further said: "To maintain the unity and integrity (of the nation), the government views it common for adherents of a religion to attend religious celebrations of other religions, but it is not necessary for them to attend the ritual ceremonies."²³

To distinguish the ritual elements of a religious ceremony from those which are not ritual is a formidable job, especially for those who have limited knowledge about it. For this purpose, the Minister of Reli-

²⁰ Hamka's explanation was published in *Kompas*, 9 May 1981, p. 4; and *Panji Masyarakat*, No. 324, 1981, p. 9.

²¹ Mudzhar, *Fatwas of the Council*, p. 124.

²² *Tempo*, 30 May 1981, pp. 13-14.

²³ See *Pelita*, 6 May 1981, p. 1, and *Kompas*, 8 May 1981, p. 12.

gious Affairs called for the Interreligious Consultative Body (ICB)²⁴ to hold a meeting to discuss the elements of the religious ceremonies, and to define the ritual elements and those that are ceremonial. The ICB held a meeting on 25 August 1981 and brought about a decision on holding celebrations of religious feast days. The decision later became the circular of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. MA/432/1981, issued on 2 September 1981. The circular lists all the religious feast days of the five recognized religions in Indonesia and defines the ritual elements as well as the ceremonial.²⁵ The circular is intended to be a guideline for those who want to celebrate religious feast days. As to the celebration of Christmas, the circular defines that Christmas has ritual as well as ceremonial values. Hamka exemplified activities of Christmas celebration which are considered to be ritual elements, such as lighting the candle, eating the bread that is considered to be the Body of Jesus Christ, and drinking water that is regarded to be the Blood of Jesus Christ.²⁶ It is hoped that Muslims be careful when they attend religious celebrations of other religions.

The Minister of Religious Affairs also showed his disappointment with the publication of the fatwa. In a meeting with the top leaders of the CIU on 23 April 1981, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Alamsyah Ratuperwiranegara, got angry and threatened to resign from his position as Minister, since the publication of the fatwa had forced him into a corner.²⁷ It was he who officially asked the CIU for the fatwa and would discuss it first with other religious leaders before publication.²⁸ The situ-

²⁴Interreligious Consultative Body (ICB) is a forum where representatives of all recognized religions in Indonesia meet to discuss problems related to interreligious relations. The Body was established in 1980 under government sponsorship.

²⁵As to the circular in detail, see *Panji Masyarakat*, No. 336, 1981, pp. 21-23.

²⁶*Panji Masyarakat*, No. 324, 1981, p. 7.

²⁷The Minister's anger was not merely caused by the publication of the fatwa, but also by the content of the fatwa. This can be inferred from the issuing of the decree No. 139/1981 which was drawn up after a discussion with the Minister of Religious Affairs. It was stated in the decree that "basically, attending interreligious celebrations is common, except for the ritual ones such as Mass, Liturgy and the likes." That statement was more lenient and seemed contradictory to the fatwa which decisively enunciated that "It is forbidden (*haram*) for Muslims to participate in Christmas ceremonies". If the Minister was content with the content of the fatwa, the decree No. 139/1981 would not have been read thus.

²⁸*Tempo*, 30 May 1981, p. 13.

ation prompted Hamka, the General Chairman of the CIU, to reply to the Minister's remarks. Hamka said: "It is illogical if the Minister of Religious Affairs resigns. It is I who have responsibility for the circulation of the fatwa....Thus, it is I who must resign."²⁹ Hamka, finally, resigned from his position as General Chairman of the CIU after signing a letter of resignation on 18 May 1981. He read it before the CIU's leaders on 19 May 1981.³⁰

Another reaction to the fatwa came from individual Muslims. Most Indonesian Muslims cordially welcomed the fatwa. M. Amin Ely, for example, absolutely agreed with the fatwa forbidding Muslims to participate in Christmas celebrations. He was worried that jointly celebrating Christmas at school could jeopardize the creed of Muslim students. His anxiety was fortified by his son's experience in 1965. When his son was in the third year of his study, he was involved in celebrating Christmas at his school. Moreover, he was appointed to be one of the players of a drama performing the theme "the Birth of Jesus Christ". The text of the drama contained a sentence which was regarded by his father to be hazardous for Islamic creed: "Then, let us surrender to Jesus Christ". Aware of such danger, M. Amin Ely decided to see the principal of the school and expressed his objection to the appointment of his son to be a player of the drama. He also asked the principal to release his son and all the Muslim students at that school from being involved in the performance of the drama and from participating in ritual ceremony of Christmas. The principal finally met his demand. Given such an occurrence, he felt it ideal that the CIU issued the fatwa forbidding Muslims to participate in Christmas celebrations. He further suggested that the fatwa be circulated to all Muslims to be complied with, not to be used as a guide only.³¹

Similar to M. Amin Ely, Samudi Abdullah, a religious teacher at a secondary school in Salatiga, Central Java, gave his comments on the fatwa. According to him, the fatwa was useful for Muslims who had no adequate religious knowledge, such as teachers and students at the secular schools, to be a guideline to avoid participating in Christmas celebrations. It was very important for them to maintain their Islamic creed. He also suggested that Muslims attend Christmas celebrations on invitation

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Kompas*, 23 May 1981, p. 1.

³¹ *Panji Masyarakat*, No. 327, 1981, pp. 53-54.

only, and should not participate in the ritual service as well as the ceremonial. He further suggested that the government issue a regulation regarding the exclusion of adherents of other religions from religious celebrations.³²

However, there were inevitably opponents to the fatwa. Abdurrahman Wahid, for example, wrote an article entitled "*Fatwa Natal, Ujung dan Pangkal*" (the Fatwa on Christmas, the End and the Starting Point). In his article he pointed out that jointly celebrating Christmas was not the crucial problem that immediately needed a fatwa as a guideline. Instead, he suggested that the CIU take the bigger problems of the *ummah* such as poverty, stupidity and injustice into account. He stressed his query on how to solve such big problems through the institution of religion. He worried that the fatwa might become a hindrance to creating the inclusive manner of life in a multicultural country like Indonesia. He was also afraid that the fatwa would lead to the issuing of another fatwa forbidding Muslims to associate with non-Muslims.³³

Another negative remark on the fatwa came from Soeprijanto, who lived in Rumbai Pekan Baru, Sumatra. He perceived that the issuing of the fatwa indicated that the Muslim leaders in the CIU tended to be religiously egoistic and fanatic. He then suggested that if Muslims wanted to get respect from adherents of other religions, they should respect other religious adherents.³⁴

Reaction to the fatwa also came from non-Muslims. Non-Muslim reaction ascribed to individual persons were rarely found. This might have been caused by the fact that the fatwa was not in their favour. Had there been reactions, they might have been the negative ones, which would have provoked counter reactions from Muslim groups. If this happened, relations between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia could have become worse.

However, a group of Christians who joined in the Interreligious Consultative Body (ICB) responded to the fatwa by discussing the ritual and ceremonial aspects of religious celebrations, together with the groups of other religions. The discussion brought about the decision which later became the circular of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. MA/432/

³² *Panji Masyarakat*, No. 325, 1981, p. 55; *Tempo*, 4 July 1981, p. 6.

³³ *Tempo*, 30 May 1981, p. 17.

³⁴ *Panji Masyarakat*, No. 322, 1981, p. 46.

1981. Having been published in *Panji Masyarakat* No. 336, the circular prompted reaction from *Kompas*, a Catholic daily newspaper. In its editorial on 23 September 1981, *Kompas* rejected the circular, for it violated the President's remarks on 25 May 1981, which declared that the state would not interfere in the religious law and religious services. Therefore, *Kompas* claimed: "... the government need not regulate how the religious adherents celebrate their feast days...".³⁵ *Kompas'* reaction to the circular No. MA/432/1981 constitutes an indirect reaction to the fatwa.

E. Other Muslim Scholars's Opinion

To take into account the opinions or fatwas of other Muslim scholars about the same subject matter as the fatwa being discussed is necessary to widen the perspective on understanding the fatwa. This also enables us to make comparison between the fatwa of the CIU and other similar fatwas. For this purpose, the writer presents the opinions of some Muslim scholars.

1. *The Fatwa of Lajna Daima li al-Buhūth al-Ilmiyya wa al-Iftā'*

There was a question posed to the *Lajna* by a Muslim whose uncle had a Christian neighbour. He asked about the Islamic law for his uncle who congratulated the Christian neighbour for being happy when his religious feast day came. It was due to the fact that he had done such practice, and so had his neighbour.

In response to the question, the *Lajna* issued a fatwa stating that it is not allowed for Muslims to congratulate Christians on their feast days. The *Lajna* argued that there is a sinful element in such practice which is prohibited in Islam (referring to the Quran S.5:2). It is further asserted that in the practice there is a tendency of getting their love, agreeing with them and supporting their religious symbols. Those are forbidden. Moreover the fatwa states that it is obligatory to show antagonism and demonstrate aversion to them, for they take another god beside Allah, and they make for Him companion and child (referring to the Quran S.60:4).³⁶ In the light of this fatwa, extending a congratulatory to non-Muslim for their religious holidays is forbidden, let alone attending their celebrations.

³⁵ *Kompas*, 23 September 1981.

³⁶ Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Dawish, *Fatāwā al-Lajna Dāima li al-Buhūth al-Ilmiyya wa al-Iftā'*, (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma'arif, 1991), vol. 3, p. 313.

2. Muhammad Rasyid Ridha's Fatwa

Muhammad Rasyid Ridha had issued the similar fatwa in response to the question of whether it was allowed or not for Muslims to pay homage to the national and religious ceremonies of non-Muslims. As to the first matter Rasyid Ridha stated that it was allowed for Muslims to participate in the national ceremonies as long as they did not commit prohibited deeds in Islam such as having alcoholic drinks.

With regard to the second item, Ridha forbade Muslims from taking part in non-Muslim religious ceremonies. He said in his fatwa:

It is forbidden for Muslim to joint with non-Muslim in their religious ceremonies such as performing special prayer with the as that practiced in the Church, by unveiling the head and directing the face to their *qiblah*, even though he says nothing forbidden in Islam. The forbidden things in this context are twofold: 1. committing forbidden things in Islam such as glorifying the pictures of the prophets and priests, or seeking for the good and getting rid of bad things from them; 2. conducting special religious practices jointly with non-Muslims which might lead him to follow their opinion.³⁷

3. M. Quraish Shihab's Opinion

The opinion of M. Quraish Shihab on Muslims' involvement in non-Muslim celebrations can be found in his book entitled *Membumikan Al-Quran* (1992). This book contains a chapter on *Selamat Natal Menurut Al-Quran* (Merry Christmas according to the Quran). In this section, M. Quraish Shihab discussed two different Muslims' views on saying "Merry Christmas" to Christian fellows. At first, he elaborated the opinion allowing Muslims to say "Merry Christmas" to their Christian counterparts. To support the opinion, he tried to decipher the meeting point between Isa al-Masih (Jesus Christ) and Muhammad (peace be upon him). According to the Quran, Isa is the apostle of God (Q.S.3:49), the same as Muhammad, Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa, Harun and the others. The Quran also exemplifies giving salutation to Jesus Christ on the day of his birth, death, and ascent (Q.S. 19:33). He then quoted the *hadith* saying that the Prophet Muhammad celebrated for the salvation of Musa (p.b.h.) from the

³⁷See *Al-Manâr*, no. 11, 1908, pp. 519-520. See also Shalah al-Din al-Munajjid and Yusuf Q. Khauri (eds.), *Fatâwâ al-Imâm Muhammad Rasyid Ridhâ*, (Beirut: Dâr al-Kitâb al-Jadîd, 1970), pp. 683-687.

Pharaoh's disruption by fasting on the tenth of *Muharam* (the first month of Islamic calendar). He also quoted another *hadith* stating that all the prophets are brothers. He finally emphasized the Quranic message that Jesus Christ and Muhammad were ordinary men.³⁸ Those arguments support the statement that Muslims are allowed to congratulate and attend Christmas celebrations in so far as they can maintain their creed (*ʿaqidah*).

Having elaborated the opinion on allowing Muslims to say "Merry Christmas" to Christian fellows, M. Quraish Shihab discussed another opinion prohibiting Muslims from being involved in Christmas celebrations. The opinion rests on the fact that Christmas is celebrated to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ, who is regarded by Christians as the son of God. This view is totally different from that of Muslims. Therefore, extending a congratulatory "Merry Christmas" to Christian fellows, or attending Christmas celebrations could jeopardize the *ʿaqidah* (creed) of Muslims who lack religious knowledge. Such practice can also be perceived as an acknowledgement of the divinity of Jesus Christ, which totally contradicts the Islamic creed.³⁹ Based on these reasons, it is concluded that extending congratulations, attending celebrations and taking part in any other activity related to Christmas are not permitted for Muslims.

After M. Quraish Shihab elucidated two contradictory views on Muslims' involvement in Christmas celebrations, he suggested another opinion in between. According to him, it is wrong and even sinful to victimize societal tolerance for the sake of religion. Conversely, it is also untrue and unrighteous to contaminate the sanctity of religious creed with acts on behalf of tolerance.⁴⁰ Therefore, he perceives the fatwa prohibiting Muslims' congratulations and participation in Christmas celebrations as understandable in the context of maintaining *ʿaqidah*. Such a fatwa should be directed to Muslims who have a weak and low level of religious understanding, for their creed might be jeopardized if they participate in such practice. However, it is not totally wrong for Muslims to extend a congratulatory "Merry Christmas" to their Christian fellows

³⁸ M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan Al-Quran*, (Bandung: Mizan, 1992), pp. 370-371.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

as long as they do it in such a wise way that they can keep their *'aqidah* (creed).⁴¹

4. Husin Shahab's Opinion

Husin Shahab⁴² had invited some ulama to discuss the topic on "Muslims' participation in celebrating Christmas". The discussion bring about the conclusion that (1) the twenty-fifth of December is not the exact date for the birthday of the Prophet Isa (p.b.h.); (2) there is no Quranic text nor is there definite argument ascribed to Prophet Muhammad or the Imams, which gives intruction to pay homage to or to celebrate Christmas. Therefore Celebrating Christmas for Muslims is categorized as *bid'ah*.⁴³

Referring to the the above conclusion and the experience of Ayatullah Khomeini when he was exiled, as mentioned in the introduction, Husin Shahab comes to the decision that the *hukm* of celebrating Christmas is twofold. Firstly, for Muslim, celebrating Christmas is categorized as *bid'ah*, for there is no argument or guidance for doing so. Secondly, if there is *maslahah* (advantage) in doing so, for instance to build mutual respect between Islam and Christianity, then the *hukm* becomes *ja'iz* (permitted).⁴⁴

F. Conclusion

It is clear that the fatwa under discussion reflects the condition of interreligious relations in Indonesia, particularly Muslim-Christian relations. Muslims, on the one hand, strive to preserve their Islamic creed from being corrupted; whereas Christian missionaries, on the other hand, attempt to convert Indonesian people, including Muslims, to Christianity. In this case, Muslims are rivals of Christians, since Islam and Christianity are missionary religions. Relations between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia has been cordial, but competitive.

It can be inferred from the study of the fatwa that the government had a strong influence on the implementation of the ulama' authorities,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁴² Husin Shahab was a Muslim who stayed in Qoom, Iran at that time. It was likely that he was an Indonesian Muslim who was studying there, for he wrote his article for *Tempo* in Indonesian.

⁴³ Husin Shahab, "MUI dan Natal Khomeini", *Tempo*, 1 August 1981, p. 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

especially those which were not in favour of the government policies. On the other hand, the ulama independently had a powerful authority in the field of religious affairs, even though they sometimes showed a tolerant attitude for certain cases. The ulama preferred to retain their decision pertaining to the religious principles rather than abandon their conviction in spite of stern pressure.

The fatwa also depicts the fact that Muslim scholars have different views on the Islamic teaching regarding Muslims' participation in non-Muslim festivities. Based on their opinions, they could be classified into two groups. The first group held that Muslims' involvement in non-Muslim celebrations was forbidden (*haram*). The other group, in contrast, allowed Muslims to attend the celebrations of other religions as long as they could preserve their Islamic creed. This group warned Muslims about participating in the ritual elements of the celebrations.

The issuing of the fatwa on Muslims' Attendance at Christmas Celebrations seemed to be an intolerant attitude of the CIU toward Christians, for the fatwa forbade Muslims to participate in Christmas ceremonies. It is necessary to note that the words "ceremony" (Indonesian: *upacara*) and "celebration" (Indonesian: *perayaan*) are quite different in meaning. The word "ceremony" denotes "a formal or traditional set of actions used at an important social or religious event";⁴⁵ while the word "celebration" denotes "an occasion or party when you celebrate something".⁴⁶ Thus, the semantic field of the word "celebration" is wider than that of "ceremony". The Christmas ceremony is a part of Christmas celebration. Referring to the meaning of both words and the text of the fatwa, I am of the opinion that the decision of the CIU to prohibit Muslims from participating in the Christmas ceremony is understandable, for the Christmas ceremony is ritual in nature. As for the Christmas celebration, the CIU strongly suggests that Muslims not take part in any activity of Christmas celebrations to avoid falling into things of *shubhat* (practices of which the legal status is subject to doubt).

However, some Indonesian Muslims commonly understand the second item of the fatwa in a way that seems different from what the item explicitly states. M. Atho Muzdhar, for example, uses the word "celebra-

⁴⁵ *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, England: Longman Group Ltd., 1995, p. 204.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

tion" instead of "ceremony", and the word "attending" (Indonesian: *menghadiri*) instead of "participating" (Indonesian: *mengikuti*).⁴⁷ The words "attending" and "participating" are also quite different in meaning. One can attend an event, ' *Idul Fitri* prayer for example, without having to participate in it, but he cannot participate in praying ' *Idul Fitri* without attending the event.

The CIU's prohibition for Muslims' participation in Christmas ceremonies is understandable, for the CIU is an Islamic organization whose members are Muslim scholars or ulama. Ulama are regarded to be respectable religious leaders who have powerful authority, especially in religious matters. Therefore, ulama have the moral responsibility for maintaining the *ʿaqidah* of Muslims. In this respect, the fatwa prohibiting Muslims from participating in Christmas ceremonies was issued for the purpose of maintaining Muslims' *ʿaqidah* rather than responding to Christian missionary activities. However, the issuing of the fatwa cannot be excluded from the Christianization issue in Indonesia. The fatwa also indicates that religious tolerance, according to the CIU, is applicable only to the social and political aspects of life. There is no compromise when it deals with ritual aspects such as *ʿaqidah* and *ibadah*. Religious practices which are considered to be ritual should be observed by adherents of the concerned religion only.

⁴⁷ See Mudzhar, "The Council of Indonesian 'Ulama' on Muslims' Attendance at Christmas Celebrations", in Masud (ed.), *Islamic Legal Interpretation*, pp. 238-241.

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Appendix

Chronological Order of Events Related to the Fatwa

- February 1981 The issue of *Natal bersama* (common Christmas celebration) came up to the surface and became a controversial issue among Muslims.
- 7 March 1981 The Council of Indonesian Ulama issued the fatwa on common Christmas celebration.
- 27 March 1981 The fatwa was forwarded to the Provincial Council of Ulama.
- 3 April 1981 The fatwa was published in the CIU's bulletin.
- 23 April 1981 Encounter between the leaders of the CIU and The Minister of Religious Affairs was held to discuss the fatwa's circulation. In this meeting the Minister showed his anger.
- 30 April 1981 The CIU issued a decree No. 139/1981 on withdrawal of the fatwa from its circulation, while its content remains valid.
- 5 May 1981 The fatwa was published on *Pelita*, a national newspapers.
- 6 May 1981 *Pelita* published the decree No. 139/1981 of the CIU.
- 7 May 1981 Hamka gave explanation regarding the decree No. 139/1981 on *Panji Masyarakat* magazine No. 324, 1981.
- 9 May 1981 *Kompas*, another national newspapers, exposed Hamka's explanation.
- 19 May 1981 Hamka resigned from his position as a chairman of the CIU.
- 20 May 1981 The Minister of Religious Affairs held an audience before the committee IX of the House of Representative concerning the fatwa.
- 25 August 1981 Interreligious Consultative Body (ICB) held a meeting to discuss religious celebrations and to define the ritual components of the celebrations as well as the ceremonial.
- 2 September 1981 The Minister of Religious Affairs issued the circular No.MA/432/1981 regarding the celebra-

- tions of the religious holy days.
- 22 September 1981 President Soeharto gave guidance to the Minister of Religious Affairs pertaining to the Circular no. MA/432/1981.
- 24 September 1981 The Minister of Religious Affairs issued Instruction Letter No.15 Year 1981 regarding the improvement of Guidance and Counseling in Holding Religious Holiday Celebrations.