



# Reflecting on Religion in a Plural Society

## Artistic Perspectives from Indonesia

Claudia Seise

Online Exhibition by 14 Indonesian Artists  
<http://democracyandreligion.com>

Artists have the potential to shape the representation of religion, belief, and religious practice in the public sphere. In this sense, conceptual art represents a creative medium to approach the question of religion in public space and interreligious engagement in an alternative and interactive way. For this collection, 14 established Indonesian artists contributed work on the following central question: What space do beliefs and religious practices occupy in a plural society? The virtual exhibition “Religion in a Plural Society: Indonesian Perspectives” is part of the project “Democracy and Interreligious Initiatives,” funded by the Berlin University Alliance. Due to Covid-19 mobility restraints, the project members searched for alternative ways to carry out the project. The idea of a virtual exhibition was born out of the author’s previous engagement with and research on contemporary art in Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> When choosing the artists, we tried to reflect

on the fundamental importance of diversity in the Indonesian archipelago. Four of the 14 artists are women. In Indonesia there are more male than female artists, and comparatively fewer women study art. The majority of the 14 artists have a Muslim background and four artists either have an evangelical Christian or Hindu background or follow a Javanese belief system. The artists come from Java, Sumatra, Bali, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi and belong to different age groups. We also aimed at reflecting diversity in the choice of artistic media. In addition to paintings, the exhibition also includes graphic art, glass painting, and sculptures. Except for one participant, all artists studied art at an Indonesian institution of higher education; e.g. the Institute of Fine Arts (*Institut Seni Indonesia*) in Yogyakarta.

With this virtual exhibition, we hope to make a creative contribution to academic communication that focuses on active observing. Adding an artistic perspective

to research on inter-religious initiatives in Indonesia expands the expertise on inter-religious commitment and increases understanding of democracy in connection with religion. The crossing of linguistic boundaries through visual art offers the possibility of new communication channels. In this spirit, this virtual exhibition can also be perceived as a research instrument. In addition, we hope that this exhibition makes a small contribution to inter-religious dialogue and understanding.

### Indonesia and her Pancasila

Indonesia is an insular state in Southeast Asia, bounded by the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. Home to a wide variety of ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic groups, Indonesia has existed as a nation-state since August 17, 1945. It combines the above-mentioned diversity

in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, (“unity in diversity”), as well as within the *Pancasila* (Indonesia’s official state ideology, literally the “five principles”). The first pillar of the Pancasila is “The belief in the One and Only God” (*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*). The other four pillars are: “Just and civilized humanity” (*Kemanusiaan yang adil dan beradab*), “National unity of Indonesia” (*Persatuan Indonesia*), “Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in unanimity resulting from the consulting of the delegates” (*Kerakyatan yang dipimpin oleh hikmat kebijaksanaan dalam permusyawaratan/perwakilan*) and “Social justice for all people of Indonesia” (*Keadilan Sosial bagi seluruh masyarakat Indonesia*). Around 87% of Indonesians identify as Muslims, 7% as evangelical Christians (Kristen), 2,9% as Catholic Christians, 1,7% as Hindu, 0,72% as Buddhist, 0,05% follow Confucianism, and 0,13% follow other belief systems (*kepercayaan*).<sup>2</sup> Most artists of this virtual exhibition expressed the opinion that the *Pancasila* and especially its first pillar serves to foster and guard religious harmony in society. In fact, the pillar of the belief in the One and Only God opens the possibility to include most religions that express the belief in and include the worship of one higher being. This moves the belief and not the religious affiliation of an individual or a group to the foreground.

Several artists in the exhibition refer to this Indonesian national ideology (*Pancasila*), which is understood as an important basis for national harmony and tolerance of religions. In describing her work *Tree of Life* [Fig. 1] Budiasih (b. 1983) conceptualizes the *Pancasila* as a vessel that becomes a tool to connect religions and beliefs in Indonesia in order to achieve ideal coexistence. The graphic artist Syahrizal Pahlevi (b. 1965) also refers to the *Pancasila* in his work *6+1 ID Card* [Fig. 5], albeit from a more critical perspective. The first pillar of the *Pancasila*, the belief in the One God, de facto states



Fig. 1: *Tree of Life*, Budiasih, crayon and colored pencil on watercolor paper, 57 cm x 79 cm, 2015

Fig. 2: *Healing*, Franziska Fennert, mixed media sewn on canvas, worn clothes, filling with rice straw, gold leaves, copper leaves, acrylic paint, ink, 94 cm x 60 cm x 18 cm, 2021

Fig. 3: *Ritual of Liberation*, Suparman, varnish, oil paint on hardboard, 120 cm x 155 cm

Fig. 4: *Hablumminallah wa Hablumminannas*, Ariyadi, oil paint on canvas, 130 cm x 100 cm, 2021

Fig. 5: *6+1=ID Card*, Syahrizal Pahlevi, monoprint, woodcut on thick paper glued to the wood surface, 39 cm x 54 cm @ 7 plates, 2021

Fig. 6: *Dialogue*, Sindu Siwikkan, galvanized wire and cement, 22,86 cm x 20,32 cm x 81,28 cm, 2021



that all Indonesians must register their religious affiliation on their ID card. Pahlevi is convinced that the publishing of an individual's religious affiliation can also lead to discrimination. Meanwhile, Robert Nasrullah (b. 1977) connects his work *Ta'aruf: Getting to Know with the Pancasila*, which he perceives as a sort of umbrella under which all religions and belief systems in Indonesia enjoy the state's protection.

Religion, faith, and spirituality are profound elements of Indonesian life. Prayer, connecting to the invisible world, spiritual practice, and deeply rooted faith are important parts of many Indonesians' lives. At the same time, belonging to a religion or belief system is traditionally seen as a prerequisite for learning the virtues of tolerance and respect for those of different faiths to become part of a harmonious society. It is assumed that the geographic location of the archipelago has contributed to openness and tolerance towards new and different ideas. Sindu Siwikkan (b. 1994) states that the geographical location contributes to the fact that Indonesians are generally very curious and open towards other people. He sees tolerance towards religious practice, which his piece *Dialogue* evokes, as its result [Fig. 6].

### Religion in the public sphere

Religion, belief, and spirituality in many different facets are an integrative and indispensable part of Indonesian society. Faith is not expressed in a homogeneous way. In her work *Twilight at the Harbour*, Rina Kurniyati (b. 1970s) wants to express the diversity of cultures, religions, and profane life in Indonesia. She explains, "Every element of society shows and lives its uniqueness, because the real essence of mutual respect is the existence of differences and the beauty of the different colours." In his concept to his work *Ta'aruf (Getting to Know)*, Robert Nasrullah describes this phenomenon with

the analogy of the white canvas, which is painted with different colours and thus results in a meaningful work of art. Fika Ariestya Sultan (b. 1983) compares the religious and spiritual diversity in Indonesia with a *flower meadow*, which is also the title of his work.

With his artwork in lacquer technique, Suparman (b. 1975) reflects on the diversity of the different cultural and spiritual currents in Indonesia by displaying a cultural festival [Fig. 3]. Figures wearing traditional masks and costumes dance together in the capital city of Jakarta. In the background, one can see an important symbol of the Indonesian nation, the National Monument (Monas). It symbolizes the struggle for independence and stands as a symbol for unity. The national monument represents a key element in the public space and collective consciousness of the Indonesian population. It is charged with personal and religious interpretations. For example, it can be read as symbolizing the vertical as well as horizontal dimensions in relation to the Divine.<sup>3</sup> This theme is also found in some of the artworks. Ariyadi alias Cadio Tarompo (b. 1971) points to the vertical and horizontal connection between the Creator and creation, especially humans. In his work [Fig. 4], he illustrates the Islamic perspective and points out fundamental values of Islamic teaching: (1) there is no compulsion in religion (Quran 2: 256), and (2) there is a need for mutual tolerance of followers of different beliefs (Quran 109: 6). He also sees the Indonesian state ideology *Pancasila* as a necessity in order to preserve and protect religious diversity in Indonesia.

Coexistence and the horizontal connection of humans with the rest of creation also play an important role in the work of I Wayan Legianta (b. 1984). He explains that in Balinese Hinduism, God is present in every living being through the Divine Soul called *Atman*. *Atman* can be understood as a small spark of God that gives life to every living being, including humans. Therefore, according to the artist,

it is important to respect and appreciate every living being and the diversity in creation, which leads to glorifying God Himself. His work of art *Positionless Mixing (from horizontal to vertical)* reflects these thoughts in different shades of colours and layers, which harmoniously create a whole. According to him, the merging of colours and forms is supposed to hide the particular religious identity and to allow each person to be seen as a "being of faith" irrespective of religious affiliation. Franziska Fennert (b. 1983) also reflects the horizontal connection with creation and the vertical connection with the Creator in her work *Healing* [Fig. 2]. With her piece, the artist points out the responsibility of humans towards the environment and all other creatures. According to her, every element of the cosmos testifies to the existence of God.

### Personal faith and spirituality

Religion, belief, and spirituality also play an important role in the life of the individual, which then and influences society through an individual's actions, behaviour, interactions, words, etc. In this way, the individual on a micro level shapes the public sphere. In his artwork *Self-Reflection*, the artist AT Sitompul (b. 1977) reflects the importance of acquiring money in a religiously permitted framework so that it is also beneficial and blessed. In his work *Vertical Knot*, Rudi Maryanto (b. 1981) also reflects on his own religious affiliation and places the symbol of the Islamic direction of prayer, the Kaaba, at the centre of his work. In her artwork *Not...*, the artist Laila Tifah (b. 1971) describes the influence of every individual in society. In her work, the word "not" receives a positive connotation when combined with negative qualities. For example, to not feel self-righteous, to not prevent other people from worshiping, to not be intolerant. This helps preserving

harmony in Indonesian society. The artist Muhammad Andik (b. 1984) introduces another important aspect into the discussion about religion and belief in a plural society – namely, religious education. In his artwork *The Murshid (The Spiritual Teacher)*, the artist reflects on the importance of a spiritual teacher for a person's spiritual development from an Islamic perspective.

The exhibition illustrates that the desire and pursuit of harmony in Indonesia is a special quality that is cultivated, regardless of religion or creed. In their concepts, some artists have pointed out that ideas and ideologies "imported" from outside sometimes try to attack the pursuit of harmony and the deep-rooted tolerance towards those who think differently and those of different faiths. This reality reminds us of the importance to preserve, cultivate, and teach the historically grown and established tolerance and openness – and to pass it on to the younger generation.

Claudia Seise holds a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies and is currently working as a postdoctoral researcher in the junior research group "Perspectives on Religious Diversity in Islamic Theology" at the Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology at the Humboldt University of Berlin. Email: [claudia.seise@hu-berlin.de](mailto:claudia.seise@hu-berlin.de)

### Notes

- 1 *One Year on the Scene: Contemporary Art in Indonesia*. Regiospectra. Berlin 2010. <http://www.regiospectra.de/buecher/asien/suedostasien/indonesien/one-year-on-the-scene-detail>
- 2 Data taken from 2010 population census: <https://pkub.kemenag.go.id/files/pkub/file/Data/zuqit368036766.pdf> (accessed: 03.01.2022)
- 3 See the curatorial statement to this exhibition for a detailed explanation: <http://democracyandreligion.com/de/uber/en/foreword>