

Basking in God's Light: Non-religious and Religious Minority Students in an Indonesian Christian University in East Java

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Abstract:

Many Christian universities maintain their distinct identity as faith-based institutions by bringing the central narrative of Christianity into their mission. They design a good curriculum and integrate Christian teachings into students' activities and life. However, in so doing, they are often in conflict with the values of their non-religious and religious minority students. In this paper, through the case study of a Christian university in East Java, Indonesia, I investigate how its campus ministry negotiate between implementing its mission and avoiding the potential conflicts. Preliminary findings show that being aware of these conflicts, campus ministry's officials ascribe new meanings to the framework of the university's mission, which enable them to help the non-religious and religious minority students navigate the Christian imbued academic experience. They hope that the latter can thrive in a Christian University. Viewed from this context, this paper can shed the light on spiritual hospitality in Asia.

Introduction

Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country. Data from the latest population census (2010), out of 237,641,326 people, 23,436,386 or 9.8% are Christians. In East Java, there are 872,671 Christians. That means 2.33% the population is Christian. Officially, Indonesia is not an Islamic country. However, Islamism is gaining more prominence. Yet, Indonesia allows other religions to take part in developing the education in the country.

A number Christian educational institutions, from elementary schools to universities, are found across the archipelago. All of them are private institutions. They are considered as having

better qualities than their peers. That is why they are able to attract students from other faith as well, although the majority of their students are Christians.

Christian educational institutions, especially Christian universities, believe that they should bring the central narrative of the Christian faith into their mission, which helps them maintain their distinct identity as faith-based educational institutions and sustain their Christian beliefs and practices. Their mission often requires that they design academic curriculum on par with the one offered in other universities and integrate Christian teachings into students' activities and life. However, such a mission is often in conflict with the values of their non-religious and religious minority students. Non-religious students refers to students claiming that they are nominal Christians, or cultural Christians. Whereas, religious minority students: students who do not embrace Christianity.

In this paper, through the case study of a Christian university in East Java, Indonesia, I investigate how its campus ministry negotiate between carrying out their mission and avoiding the conflicts that may trigger the feeling of isolation among these students and give them additional challenges in their study.

Methodology

Data for this paper are collected from interviews with informants, who are students from different religious background and the officials of the campus ministry, and analyzed using grounded theory and narrative analysis.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, the theoretical frameworks that I use are grounded theory and narrative inquiry.

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Grounded theory:

- Grounded theory methods are “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006:2).
- It theorizes the interpretations of the participants but also recognizes that the resulting theory is an interpretation.
- The appeal of grounded theory is that it highlights the multiplicity of ways of viewing the world and one’s experience within it.
- It enables me to provide a full theoretical description of the subject, that is, the participants.
- It is used to analyze the transcripts of the interviews I conducted, as well as the contents of the note I took when I observed my participants.

Narrative inquiry:

- It is a method in a qualitative research designed for studies in which participants tell the stories of their experiences in detail (Creswell, 2013).
- Their stories give a micro analytical view and insight into personal experiences and interactions in a natural setting, which means that their stories are units of analysis providing information on how they create meaning in their lives.
- Their stories constitute the data, which is valuable to understand “how people create meanings out of events in their lives” (Chase, 2005:651).

Findings and Discussions

Major Findings:

- Being aware of the negative impact the non-religious and religious minority students' experiences as a result of the conflicts between their values and the values of the university.
- Ascribing new meanings to the framework the university's mission.

Being aware of the Negative impacts:

Non-religious and religious minority students:

- experiencing marginalized feeling.
- having limited opportunity to be active in student committees and organizations.

The Marginalized feelings and limited opportunity that may affects their progress are exemplified by the following narrations;

The Marginalized feelings

Non-religious and especially religious minority students said that they were marginalized in relation to their belief and religious identity by some faculty members and fellow students.

Oscar (a junior who claims to be a Buddhist): I remember when I was in Religion class two years ago, the lecturer belittled Buddhism. He said that Buddhism was an idolatry.

Arman (a freshman Muslim): It sometimes happens that my Religion course lecturer shed the negative light on Islam. While I agree that the examples he gives [about radical Muslims] are correct, he should not tar moderate Muslims with the same brush.

Angeline (who claims to be a nominal Christian): Some lecturers are quite fundamentalist and judgmental toward [Christian] students whom they think are not Christian enough.

Stand point theory (Hennessy, 2017:31), which argues ¹ that knowledge is socially situated, and that marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized, is helpful in analyzing what the participants says during the interview. This theory helps me find what Collins (1991) calls as “outsider-within,” referring to a sense of marginality of individuals who feels that they are outsiders in an organization, despite their being full members of this organization.

Having limited opportunity to be active in student committees and organizations. Religious minority students cannot be the chair of student organizations or student committees, although there are not restriction for them to be members.

Henry (a Muslim): I am aware of the restriction for [the religious minority students] in their participation in student organization. I know it before I studied here. It is a common thing here in Indonesia. Non-Muslim students have limited opportunity in participating in student organization in Islamic universities. The same thing also happens even in public universities, which should be secular. It occurs because non Muslims are minority.

How do they navigate the situation? Here are their responses.

The first one is “Going undercover”

Non-religious Christian: I think I am critical toward biblical values. I was outspoken in expressing my opinion. Once, there was a discussion on current issues in a tutorial section. The topic discussed was LGBT community. Although I am not a member of this community, I voiced my support for it. Then everybody looked at me. The tutor tried to “correct” my view, in a friendly way of course. A couple of days later, I heard from my friend that the tutor and some religious friends mentioned my name in their prayer, to ask

for divine help to correct my thinking. ... Well, I think I should not have said something against the mainstream opinion, especially if the topic is about Christianity.

Buddhist: Not many people here know that I embrace Buddhism. It does not mean that I hide my religious identity. Rather, it is like that I don't want to flaunt my Buddhist identity. I rarely talk about my religious belief unless somebody brings it up.

Going undercover seems to be an easy way out. But in reality, going undercover makes most participants conflicted. While they do not want to deny their faith or their values, they often feel ill-equipped, or unwilling, to defend their beliefs in order to avoid friction or conflicts. It seems to me that they prefer to be silent, something that some of them resent because they feel unfairly constrained from talking about their faith or expressing their values in a university that should favor freedom of expression.

By trying to be invisible, the participants understand what the standpoint theory label as situated knowledge, namely, knowledge specific to a particular situation. Because of their understanding on this knowledge, they prefer not to reveal their religious beliefs and values (unless in the presence of close friends) in order to avoid negative and unwanted reactions. The second response is being open-minded, as exemplified by the following narration

The first verse of the Holy Koran is "Iqra!" which means "Read!" It is like an instruction for us, the Muslims, to read, to find new information. It can also mean that we should not stop learning, which implies that we should be open-minded.

One tenet of Buddhism is open-mindedness. My stay here teaches me to learn from everything, to learn to accept perspectives which, more often than not, are different from ours.

Being open-minded shows that participants know how to negotiate what Bourdieu calls as “cultural fields” because they have a “practical sense,” that is, the ability to:

- understand the “rules of the game,” an understanding that can help them evaluate which actions are appropriate in specific situations, and
- acknowledge that they need to reflect on their own practices and think about how their cultural background and position on various fields shape their view of the world.

(Bourdieu, 1998:49)

How about the mainstream’ response when they see their minority counterparts’ feelings and thoughts?

Here are some comments

An official of Campus Ministry:

- I am aware that a number of students and some lecturers do not exercise cultural and religious sensitivities. I believe that they do not have any ill intention. They want to help [the non-religious and religious minority students] based on the lecturers’ perspectives. ... All I can do “inspiring” them to go back to the gist of Christian teaching that emphasize on loving kindness, by being culturally sensitive, ... helping our students to succeed in their studies, not to conflicts that jeopardize students’ academic performance.

A lecturer of Religion class [responding to my statement that some lecturers teaching religion course made negative comment on those who do not share the university’s values]:

- I do not deny that we can find lecturers who are like that. But for me, I try to be sensitive and open-minded. Perhaps my involvement in interfaith dialog groups make me more open-mindedness, and help me show greater acceptance toward differences. ... We should help students, regardless of their religious affiliation to be successful.

A Christian student who believes that forcing her belief on his friends is not a good thing to do

- I don't think it is everybody's job to go out and to ask people to go to church, or to believe in Christ. But, when we see a friend who looks sad or have a problem, we can pray for him. If he happens to be a Christian, we can suggest him go to church, or invite him to go to church with us. If he seems uninterested, we should stop there.

What do those responses mean?

Ascribing new meanings

- The mainstream translates their responses into action by ascribing new meaning to the framework of the university's mission.
- The central narrative of Christianity is translated into an act of loving kindness.
- The university's Christian mission is carried out as helping non-religious and religious minority students navigate the academic life.

The act of loving kindness

- Creating a social network that emphasizes the university identity, instead of its religious values and beliefs.
 - Explaining her involvement in a support group for students in her department, an active member of Christian fellowship said: We are all students of this university. We should emphasize this commonality, instead of the religious affiliation. I understand that some students who do not share our religious belief might feel

uncomfortable with a number of Christian-imbued academic and social activities. I used to experience that feeling when I was a high school student in a public school. I was the only Christian in my batch. It was an experience that I wanted to forget. Now I am not minority anymore. I don't want my non-Christian friends to experience what I have experienced in high school. I want to tell them that we, the Christians, love them.

The creation of and the participation in social networks gives students a kind of what Bourdieu (1985) calls social capital. Capital, according to Bourdieu, refers to assets a individual possesses which can be used to negotiate some aspects of one's existence. Thus, social capital in the context of my participants' case refers to the value of social networks and the opportunities that come from these networks to do things for each other. Social relations arising from such networks often offer participants comfort and support, which can strengthen them to navigate their university years operate effectively on the field of secular higher education.

Conclusion

- Members and officials of Christian fellowship and Campus Ministry are aware of the negative impacts the non-religious and religious minority students may experience as a result of the conflicts between the former's and the latter's values.
- These impacts may trigger problems and challenges that adversely affect the latter's social life and academic performance.
- The former does an effort to mitigate the negative impacts by ascribing a new meaning to the to the framework of the university's mission.
- The new meanings enable them to help the latter navigate the Christian imbued academic experience.

In this way, they hope that the non-religious and religious minority students can thrive in a Christian University.

- A faculty member: our Christian identity is not just reflected in preaching gospel. What is more important is helping students navigate the rigorous academic life. It is not easy for students, and it is even more difficult for religious minority students who often feel different from the rest, and they may also feel marginalized.
- Another faculty member: I believe that our Christian values can be applied in a number of ways, according to our profession. Our profession is also God's calling, isn't it? As a teacher, we should be able to make our students entrusted to us, regardless of their religious beliefs, successful.
- The act of loving kindness, which is fundamental in Christian value, serves as a vehicle for creating an atmosphere of biblical hospitality, in this case, a sense of belonging, interconnectedness, and a community of the university because Christian educational institutions have a theological responsibility to ensure all of their students are given the best possible opportunity to persist.
- The university functions as an "equalizer of opportunity and as a vehicle for social mobility" (Hossler et al, 2009:106).
- Thus, the university is an avenue where students, regardless of their religious affiliation, can bask in God's lights.

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