Christian-Muslim Relationships in Medan

and Dalihan na tolu –

A Social Capital Study

of The Batak Cultural Values

and Their Effect on Interreligious Encounters

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by

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Abstract

Interreligious disharmony between Christians and Muslims seems prevalent in the world. Indonesia, one of the democratic nations in the globe, offers no exception. In the last two decades, disharmonious encounters have been escalating in the country to a point where people commit violence towards adherents of other religions. Despite this phenomenon, few studies have addressed the issue. The literature suggests that the problems are related to three distinct areas: the history of the country, the method of evangelizing and socio-economic and political issues. The current study was conducted in the framework of the theory of multiculturalism – a contemporary social theory which has been developed by Amitai Etzioni and Bikhu Parekh – not only to address the issue of interreligious disharmony but also to promote interreligious encounters when a society is divided. The participants in this study were Batak married people in Medan City, North Sumatera – Indonesia. The value of the kinship system among the Bataks in Medan, called Dalihan na tolul was regarded as their social capital and the impact of this culture on interreligious encounters was investigated, along with the values of religion. Using concurrent mixed methods, a model of interreligious encounter in Medan City was created and analyzed based on the quantitative data from 1,539 respondents. From the quantitative analysis, the study has found cultural influences to be stronger than religious influences in promoting interreligious encounters among the Christian and Muslim Bataks in Medan. This finding suggests that the social capital of Dalihan na tolul plays a greater role than religious influences in promoting harmony. The qualitative analysis affirmed this finding. Dalihan na tolul promotes harmonious relationships between those of different religions indirectly by reminding the Bataks of the cultural
values which put respect, love and harmony first in the kinship system. While some religious teachings could be a barrier to interactions, the value of the kinship system appears to transcend the values of a particular religion. Overall, this study proposes the use of communal values to promote interreligious encounters in Indonesia or in particular in Medan and thus, to create a more harmonious society which pulls together otherwise disengaged members through shared values.
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