

# Religion and Television in Indonesia

## Ethics Surrounding Dakwahtainment

Dicky Sofjan (with Mega Hidayati)

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## FOREWORD

This monograph stems from a research project entitled Religion and Gender in Indonesia, which was supported by the Netherlands-based Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development Aid (Cordaid). The grant was derived from carry-over funds from the conference on the Resurgence of Religions in Southeast Asia hosted by the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) in January 2011. The project started in February 2012 and officially ended in December the same year. However, with much support from like-minded institutions, namely the Geneva-based Globethics.net and the Faculty of Dakwah of the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, the research team was able to extend the lifespan of the project.

While this manuscript was being completed, ICRS was planning ahead for an international conference, to be held in Jakarta, with an almost similar theme – Religion and Television in Indonesia: Ethics and Problematics of *Dakwahtainment*. The conference will be held jointly by ICRS and Globethics.net, in collaboration with the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, and with participation from the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI), the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The idea behind the international conference was largely an extension of the action research upon which the study was predicated. Action research is a method that transforms knowledge into action. Thus, with the participation of the various stakeholders in the conference, previous discussions and commitments can be further strengthened or even formalised, and collective action can be undertaken to bring about some positive and effective changes.



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This monograph can also be seen as an expansion of two articles I wrote. The first was a journal article entitled “Gender Construction in *Dakwahtainment*: A Case Study of Heart to Heart with Mamah Dedeh”, published in late 2012 by *Al-Jamiah*, an international journal based in the Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta. The other was a paper presented at an international conference in Qum, Iran, entitled “*Dakwahtainment* and its Discontent: Ethical Considerations in Islamic Televangelism”. The conference took place on 27-28 February 2013 and tackled the intricate theme of *Akhlaak-e va Aadian* [ethics and religions]. With scholars invited from almost ten countries, it was sponsored by the Qum-based Esra Foundation for Divine Sciences, under the auspices of H. E. Grand Ayatullah Javadi Amuli.

Like many projects of their kind, the action research, conference and monograph could not have been accomplished without assistance, support and advice from many individuals and agencies. Unfortunately, not everyone who provided help can be named. Two people need to be singled out for special mention because without them, the project and monograph would not have materialised. They are Siti Syamsiyatun, the incumbent ICRS Director, and Wening Udasmoro, currently the Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Humanities in *Universitas Gadjah Mada* (UGM). They are probably the country’s finest gender specialists. With their tacit knowledge, field research experience and inspiring leadership in the focus group discussions in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, the research team was able to do what they had intended to do, and derive full benefits from their intellectual insights and contributions.

Three people were engaged for in-depth interviews, namely Mamah Dedeh, Aa Abdel and the ANTV producer, Desy, who had been in charge of the programme *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh* [heart to heart with Mamah Dedeh]. The author would also like to thank Yusuf Mansyur, founder of *Wisata Hati* [tourism of the heart], a network of Islamic boarding schools for the memorisers of the Quran (*Tahfidz*).

These individuals provided many useful leads, insights and views from the inside, contributing to a critical assessment of the *dakwahtainment* industry.

The author would like to extend his gratitude to the KPI commissioners, Mochamad Riyanto (chair), Ezky Suyanto, Nina Mutmainnah Armando and Dadang Rahmat Hidayat, who guided our team into new aspects of *dakwahtainment*, especially complaints by the public about these programmes and warnings and sanctions imposed by KPI. Abdul Cholik from KPI's West Java chapter deserves my gratitude for his immense support and the long conversations we had. Much material evidence from KPI was gathered, compiled and shared with the research team, enabling us to access information and data that otherwise would not have been so easily available.

From the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the research team is indebted to Professor M. Machasin, who at the time of the interview served as head of the Ministry's Research, Development, Education and Training. Machasin is an influential figure in the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), Indonesia's largest and perhaps most powerful Islamic organisation, which in itself testifies to his vast knowledge on Islam. Professor Amin Abdullah, who serves as expert staff in the Minister of Religious Affairs, provided the research team with guidance and tactical advice throughout the research. Also deserving of mention is Sinansari Ecip, one of the heads of the Indonesian Council of Ulamas (MUI), who oversees affairs pertaining to information and communication. All three contributed their precious time, deep insights and creative ideas as to how to the research team can move forward in thinking about the ethical issues that surround *dakwahtainment*.

Some individuals made themselves available as facilitators, resource persons, and informants and contributed significantly to the focus groups. They included: Edi Safitri of the Indonesian Islamic University (UII), Budy Wahyuni of UGM, Kiyai Haji Hussein Muhammad and

Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir from *Fahmina* Institute in Cirebon, Riri Kharirah of *Fatayat* NU, and Sutimun of *Lembaga Bantuan Hukum* [legal aid institute] APIK.

From ICRS, Mega Hidayati, Elis Zuliati Anis and Faishol Adib provided tremendous assistance in setting up and conducting interviews, field observations, data entry and report writing. Collectively, they aided the author, who acted as the principal investigator, in organising the data used in this monograph. Erich Kaunang, ICRS Communication and Media Officer, also helped in numerous ways from the beginning of the project. To all of them, I owe much respect and gratitude for their assistance, collegiality and emotional support. I thoroughly enjoyed having late-night conversations with them, discussing theories of religion, the media and critical discourse analysis, or simply staring at the mountain of detailed information and data derived from our field observations.

On the side of Globethics.net, I would like to thank Christoph Stükelberger, Siti Syamsiyatun and Nina Mariani for kindly encouraging and endorsing the publication of this monograph, and for their support for the international conference. Your contribution to Indonesia and the world is evident in your efforts to spread the goodness of ethics and to deepen awareness of the need to uphold ethics amid the moral confusion and decline in the respect for human dignity and intercivilisational dialogue.

*Dicky Sofjan, PhD, Yogyakarta, 15 February 2013*

## Abbreviations & Acronyms

- AJI: *Aliansi Jurnalis Independen* [Alliance of Independent Journalists]  
ANTV: *Andalas Television (Cakrawala Andalas)*  
BNI: Bank Negara Indonesia  
*Dakwahtainment*: “*Dakwah-*” [from religious propagation] and “*-tainment*” [from entertainment]  
Cordaid: Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development Aid  
FGD: Focused group discussion  
ICRS: Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies  
IPTN: *Industri Pesawat Terbang Nasional* [national aeronautics industry]  
Infotainment: “Info” [from information] and “*-tainment*” [from Entertainment]  
KPAI: *Komisi Perlindungan Anak se-Indonesia* [Indonesian Child Protection Commission]  
KPI: *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* [Indonesian Broadcasting Commission]  
KR: *Kedaulatan Rakyat* [literally, sovereignty of the people] daily newspaper  
LBH: *Lembaga Bantuan Hukum* [legal aid institute]  
MNC: *Media Nusantara Citra Television*  
MUI: *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* [Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars]  
MQTV: *Manajemen Qalbu Television*  
NU: *Nahdlatul Ulama* [literally, revival of the ulama]  
P3: *Pedoman Perilaku Penyiaran* [broadcasting code of conduct]  
PSW: *Pusat Studi Wanita* [Centre for Women’s Studies]  
PWI: *Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia* [Indonesian Journalists’ Association]  
RBTV: *Reksa Birama Televisi*  
RCTI: *Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia*  
SCTV: *Surya Citra Televisi*  
*Sinetron*: *Sinema Elektronik* [literally, electronic cinema]  
SPS: *Standar Programme Siaran* [broadcasting programmatic standard]  
TPI: *Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia* [Indonesian educational television]  
TVRI: *Televisi Republik Indonesia* [Republic of Indonesia Television]  
UGM: *Universitas Gadjah Mada*  
UII: *Universitas Islam Indonesia*  
UIN: *Universitas Islam Negeri* [State Islamic University]  
UU: *Undang-Undang* [law]  
UUD: *Undang-Undang Dasar* [constitution]



# INTRODUCTION

## ACTION RESEARCH: TRANSFORMING KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION

This monograph provides a critical overview and assessment of the new and rising phenomenon of *dakwahtainment* or Islamic televangelism in post-*reformasi* Indonesia. This phenomenon feeds on the increasing materialist, consumerist, nihilistic and voyeuristic culture of celebrity that is currently engulfing Indonesia. It is set against a context where democratisation and media liberalisation are taking root in the Indonesian state and society.

This work stems from action research conducted throughout 2012. By action research, I mean the act of inquiry intended to bring about social change. Inherent in its method is the urgency to transform knowledge – derived from research – into action. This knowledge-into-action principle implies that the main output of this research is not necessarily academic; nor should it be geared towards scientific discoveries or breakthroughs. Rather, the aim of action research is to learn from the process or events, make the necessary inferences from the findings, and transform them into actionable measures to serve society at large. Thus, the problem in action research is dissimilar from pure science and always connotes the things that the researcher intends to change. Intentionality in transformation is therefore crucial for action research.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on action research, see Greenwood and Levin (1998); Quigley and Kuhne (1997); and Reason and Bradbury (2001).

Like other action research projects, this endeavour was therefore not primarily for the sake of doing cutting-edge research or attaining state-of-the-art science. Rather, it seeks to promote change for the betterment of society. Action research stands in between scientific endeavour and social activism and blurs the line traditionally separating intellectual rigour and efficacious forms of social engagement. By its very nature, action research is widely employed by non-governmental organisations and frequently shunned by university-based academics, who often charge that this method is unqualified as far as scientific rigour is concerned. Such an assertion may to a certain extent be true. On the other hand, it is common to hear criticisms from the activists, who tend to argue that the fixation on positivism and scientism by academics has resulted in research that is far removed from society and the complexity of reality.

Thus, social activists lament that academics mostly engage in areas of research that are less than useful or even irrelevant, with a remote sense of urgency to respond to the basic needs of society. Coming out from this tussle have been disparaging terms such as “armchair researcher”, a pejorative for academicians and scientists with special preference in engaging in research in air-conditioned “ivory towers”, while habitually and tragically disregarding the unfolding reality on the ground. Action-oriented scholars and academicians would no doubt find this to be reprehensible and unacceptable, even unethical. They would contend unreservedly that all disciplines under social science should serve society, and that those falling under the humanities should indeed serve the intended beneficiary, which is the public or, at its very best, humanity at large.

One of the major strengths of action research is its intrinsic transformative powers to develop plans of action based on qualitative, scientific or quasi-scientific inferences. Thus, unlike pure and basic research, it has the intrinsic ability to push for social change by using

new data, knowledge and scientific discoveries, which can be transformed into action, movement or state policies. The transformative power of action research, however, remains latent and merely potential unless and until the research findings can be proven, beyond reasonable doubt, to be manageable and politically feasible. The litmus test therefore resides in its capacity to deliver the desired and expected social changes and the ability to limit excesses and control unintended consequences.

The set of recommendations proposed in this study stems from the action document produced as one of the outputs of this project, which was previously discussed with a number of parties, including the KPI, the MUI, television executives, the preachers, officials in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and our reference group. The recommendations should thus be viewed as an attempt to rectify, where possible, some of the social and industrial practices that are in line with the general ethical principles of the mass media, public education and religious propagation, where the latter has entered the private realm through the medium of television.

When the research team initiated this project, we had a sense of apprehension. A barrage of practical questions flooded our minds: how relevant are our criticisms? How do we convey these criticisms to the research subjects involved? Would they accept our assessments? Are our recommendations feasible? What would be our strategy if they were to ignore our prescribed solutions? Can we really impose these changes we desire? These are not the kinds of questions we would normally encounter or take seriously when we conduct scientific research. Some would maintain that these practical questions and reality checks are irrelevant or insignificant.

In relation to the above, this monograph was written stylistically in a semi-academic form in the hope that this deliberate strategy would ensure greater accessibility and comprehensibility for readers interested



in the subject matter. Hence, the monograph has been ‘translated’ into a more readable and accessible format for the benefit of non-academic readers. Elaboration on the relevant theories was also sparingly applied in order to capture the essence of the ethical problems and recommendations, without entering into the vast impenetrable forest of scientific arguments and moral philosophical reasoning. This was balanced with the need to offer sufficient analytical depth and explanation of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The author will not venture into deploying flimsy evidence or rely on hearsay or dubious datasets. On the contrary, the monograph will shed light on hard case evidences that are expected to be generalisable, replicable and falsifiable, the three most basic requirements for a good logic of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the author is fully aware that any and all social inquiries – whatever research method one deploys – must fulfil the minimum qualifications of scientific validity and reliability.

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<sup>2</sup> See King et. al. (1994), *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*.

## DEMOCRACY AND POPULAR CULTURE

### Democratisation and Media Liberalisation

For almost 15 years, Indonesia has been undergoing a transition from authoritarianism to democracy. After the New Order, which controlled the state for 32 years (c.1966-1998), Indonesia is now embarking on a journey to consolidate its democracy by institutionalising rotational government based on multiparty coalitions, which for the most part, however, have contributed to political instability and at times deadlock. By and large, the tedium of democratic governance has been due to the wide spectrum of politico-religious ideologies and glaring discrepancies in economic status and welfare in the population.

Successive governments have ruled Indonesia since the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998, ushering in a constant political battle among those who desire to capture the state and those who think they have the right to govern or at least deserve better representation in government in the *reformasi* era. Four presidents have governed Indonesia since the reform period, each with a different political orientation and style of leadership. President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, a German-trained aeronautics engineer, who was previously Suharto's protégé and vice-president, laid the foundations for a democratic Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> One of the

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<sup>3</sup> Indonesia has had six presidents since independence, namely Sukarno (1945-1965), Suharto (1966-1998), Habibie (1998-1999), Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-

efforts made by Habibie was to liberalise the media in 1999, which forced the nation to no longer assume the state as the main stakeholder of the media industry and monopoliser of information in the country.

The national parliament also rode on the wave of democratisation and decentralisation throughout the country, and quickly ratified the new Law No. 40/1999 on the media, which effectively annulled the long-held policy of government censorship and media licensing. The new law sees the government as a mere facilitator and regulator to ensure a healthy exchange of information and communication as well as dissemination of public education. The central government was effectively stripped of its right to monitor and scrutinise what is published, aired or broadcast to the public. The reformed media law together with the regulation on regional autonomy facilitated the growth and development of local media and television networks at provincial and district levels, further complicating government control over media content. Despite the overwhelming political victory and sense of triumph on the part of democracy activists and media professionals, a number of problems emerged as by-products of this abrupt change, which many observers have described as being *kebablasan* [over the top].

In the Indonesian print media, yellow journalism arose to challenge the mainstream conservative media, which were already struggling to keep afloat after the regional financial crisis that took a serious toll on the industry. The decline of newspapers in Indonesia during the late 1990s was due to two main factors. The first was the sudden price increase in imported paper, caused largely by the decrease in the exchange rate of the Indonesian rupiah to the dollar. The other was the arrival of the internet, which democratised information and made communication across the world much less costly and restricted.

For the Indonesian newspaper barons, these developments proved to be an opportunity not to be missed. With media liberalisation high on the agenda, they figured that they could market sensationalism to the hungry Indonesian consumers, who were beginning to get accustomed to the consumerist, nihilistic and voyeuristic culture of celebrity. With this, yellow journalism began to appear in the most sensationalist forms.

This is not to say that yellow journalism did not have its precedents. During the New Order period, *Pos Kota* was one of the tabloids closely resembling the kind of yellow journalism that depended on sensationalism and sexploitation, with scantily-clad women featured on its front pages. Still today, *Pos Kota* caters primarily to urban dwellers with low income and a low educational level. Ironically, this Jakarta-based newspaper is owned by Suharto's political stooge and former minister of information, Harmoko.

As with yellow journalism anywhere in the world, these Jakarta-based newspapers feed on sensationalist coverage, which verges on "sex, lies and videotapes", of celebrities, politicians and public figures. It relies on sexploitation and divulgence of the dark private affairs of Indonesia's rich and famous. One such sensationalist newspaper currently in print is the Jakarta-based *Lampu Merah* [literally, red light]. Pictures of women in miniskirts and tight dresses, frequently captioned with bold and suggestive titles, accompany graphic descriptions of the latest sex scandals involving well-known and not so well-known figures of society. Cases of rape and sexual harassment, often involving minors, are also reported without due consideration for the well-being of the victims.

## **Revival of Indonesian Popular Culture**

Before any elaboration of the revival of popular culture in Indonesia, it may be best to first define what is meant by the term. In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Storey (2001) maintains that "popular

culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working class culture, etc”. He writes that:

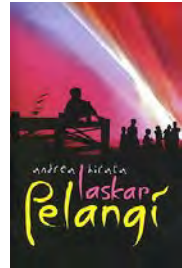
... popular culture is mass-produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of creation. The latter, therefore, deserves only a moral and aesthetic response; the former requires only a fleeting sociological inspection to unlock what little it has to offer. Whatever the method deployed, those who wish to make the case for the division between high and popular culture generally insist that the division between the two is absolutely clear. Moreover, not only is this division clear, it is trans-historical – fixed for all time. (2001: 6)

Clearly, popular culture has many facets and is considered a loaded concept, often lending itself to obscurity. In examining *Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics*, Heryanto (2008: 6-8) defines the somewhat slippery term as “a product of an industrialised society, where both the signifying practices and their observable products (i.e. culture) are produced or performed in a great number, often with the assistance of technologies of mass-production, distribution and duplication, making them highly accessible to the populace”, hence it is also “a resource-rich venue for the study of various aspects of contemporary society”.

In both definitions, popular culture points to the presence of the masses as both the primary target of cultural production and the agent of consumption. At the same time, in Indonesia, the so-called *massa* has always played an unambiguously negative and passive role as the undecided or unthinking public. This connotation is encapsulated and reflected in the idea of *massa mengambang* [the floating mass] during the reign of the New Order politics or the reference to a quasi-mob mentality that is often used to describe *massa yang mengamuk* [the angry mob] in any uncontrollable demonstration or disorderly protest.

With democratisation and media liberalisation in place, Indonesia saw a revival of popular culture, which for more than three decades had been subjected to government censure and state restriction in the name of security, political stability and economic development. The reform era thus inadvertently provided a major thrust in the realm of *Sastra Wangi* [adult novels] and *Sastra Islam* [Islamic popular literature]. This created a lucrative new cottage industry for Indonesian publishers, old and new, vying for the huge and insatiable body of Indonesian Muslim consumers.

Islamic popular cultural products include *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* [woman with a turban] in 2001; *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* [the love verses] in 2004, *Laskar Pelangi* [rainbow troops] in 2005, and the more recent *Negeri Lima Menara* [the land of five towers] in 2009. All four novels were later made into movies, inadvertently prompting a comeback of Indonesian cinema, which had been brought near to collapse by New Order government restrictions and centralist management of culture.



*Woman with a Turban* was written by Abidah El Khalieqy, who comes from Jombang, East Java, a staunch traditionalist Muslim province. The novel revolves around life in a *Pesantren* [Islamic traditional boarding school] community and tells the complex story of love intermingling with religious conservatism and its struggle with the demands of modernity. The novel was adapted for the screen in 2009 by Hanung Bramantyo, an award-winning Indonesian director. The movie, won seven nominations for the most prestigious awards in Indonesian cinema, the *Citra FFI* awards.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The movie also won seven nominations in the 2009 Festival Film Bandung and nine in the Indonesian Movie Awards in the same year.



The main character in the novel and movie, Annisa, was an intelligent, courageous and steadfast girl living in a traditional, conservative Muslim community in East Java. Knowledge, in such an environment, was confined to the understanding of the Quran (Islam's holy book) and *Sunnah* (the prophetic tradition). All other things were considered as “modern” and hence unnecessarily secular, un-Islamic and therefore to be shunned.

In the *Pesantren*, Annisa was systematically taught to submit to male chauvinism, which made her believe that Islam was propagating gender inequality, and promoting social injustice. Her eagerness to further her studies away from her paternalistic community was also hampered by her father's earnest attempt at protecting her chastity, loss of which he thought could potentially create *fitnah* [chaos or strife].

Annisa was later forced to marry Samsudin, a son of a *Kiyai* [Javanese traditional religious scholar-teacher], who turned out to be a wife-batterer and polygamist. As the story went, Annisa was then reunited with her true love and became an advocate for women's rights in her traditional, conservative Muslim community. No doubt, such a storyline was deemed controversial by some in the Indonesian Muslim community. In fact, the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI) called for the movie to be banned for giving a negative impression of Islam and its teachings.

The phenomenal rise of Indonesian popular culture post-*reformasi* also partly contributed to the publication of *The Love Verses*, written by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy, a graduate of the prestigious Al-Azhar

University in Cairo, Egypt. *The Love Verses* became an Islamic pop sensation, notably among the Muslim young generation. Situated in Egypt, the story tells of hardship and steadfastness in carrying out the Muslim way of life by a young, smart, good-looking and pious protagonist, named Fahri, who had to deal with the complexities of living overseas as a student on scholarship.

One problematic, if not contentious, issue in the storyline stems from the way polygamy was seemingly justified as a religious practice among pious Muslims. Gender activists – both Muslim and



non-Muslim alike – had reservations about the novel and its adaptation to the movie screen in early 2008, notably in the way the two women characters were seemingly subsumed in the storyline as being emotionally dependent on the devout male protagonist. The “tragedy” of polygamy here was depicted as a necessity, drawn out of a dilemma to save the hopelessly sick female friend, whose life can only be salvaged through the touch of pure love shown by the pious Fahri. The dramatisation of the story in the movie was fixated on the depiction of the two female protagonists: Aisha is a pretty, petite girl with mixed German and Indonesian blood, who mostly dons the *abaya* while covering everything part of her body from top to bottom, except for her stunningly beautiful eyes, which keep rolling and teasing Fahri and the audience. The other is a beautiful Coptic Egyptian girl, Noura, who lives in the same apartment building as Fahri and his friends. She is made to marry Fahri on her hospital bed after she suffers a comma.

Despite the controversies, both novels were well received by the Indonesian market. The movies also made a successful debut in Indonesia and neighbouring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia.



Since then, both movies have been shown frequently on Indonesian television, especially during the holy month of Ramadhan or other Islamic feasts.

It seems clear that democratisation in Indonesia has ushered in an era where traditional boundaries of culture and religious values are questioned and challenged. In line with the spirit of *reformasi* and the growing power of the citizens, the state has suffered a significant decrease in its capacity to restrict or limit such popular developments. New interpretations have entered the public domain to essentially redefine what constitutes Islamic or culturally accepted norms of society, leaving little room for the kind of state-sponsored cultural products and practices we saw during the New Order regime.

## **Infotainment Explosion**

As a direct result of the *keterbukaan* [political opening] in the 1990s,<sup>5</sup> a number of private television stations appeared on the scene – *RCTI*, *SCTV*, *Indosiar*, *ANTV*, *TPI* and *Indosiar*. Most if not all of these television channels are owned either by Suharto's sons, daughters and cronies or by Indonesian Chinese tycoons. With *reformasi* and democratisation, the push for media freedom and the opening of the information floodgates in Indonesia became irresistible. Upon the ratification of the 1999 media laws, the lively Indonesian broadcasting scene experienced an unprecedented vibrancy, with many new private television stations springing up, which proved a formidable challenge to the apparently lethargic, moribund state-owned television. Soon after the *reformasi*, other national-based broadcasting companies appeared on the stage, such as *Lativi* (later to become *TVOne*), *MetroTV*, *TransTV*, *Trans7* and *MNCTV*.

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<sup>5</sup> *Keterbukaan* occurred as a response and corollary to the fall of the Berlin Wall and defeat of Communism through Soviet Union President Gorbachev's *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, which finally brought democracy to Russia.

Throughout the 32-year reign of the New Order, the state monopolised the broadcasting system with its *Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI)*, which relayed government propaganda relentlessly and focused on covering official events to perpetuate the myth of Suharto's commitment to national development. News coverage mostly portrayed Suharto, his obedient ministers and high-ranking officials cutting ribbons to inaugurate newly established state enterprises or government-sponsored industries and plants belonging to the autocrat's family members and cronies. President Suharto was pictured *ad nauseam* as the *Bapak Pembangunan* [father of development] who came from a distinctly modest farming background. One particularly longstanding programme was the *Kelompencapir (Kelompok Pendengar Pembaca Pemirsa)*, or the association of hearers, readers and viewers among farmers. Here, Suharto was depicted as the wise, fatherly figure of a farmer engaging regular villagers in earnest discussions about varieties of paddy or how to manage irrigation for rice fields. The programme was clearly intended to build the image that the father of development was well in touch with the daily concerns of farmers and villagers, who constituted the majority of the Indonesian population.

Suharto's authoritarian regime used television effectively as part of the machinery to legitimise its grip on power, while keeping its detractors and opposition at bay by controlling information and centralising development throughout Indonesia. The message of hope, optimism and support for the developmental state was the mainstay of state television broadcasting, with a noticeable absence of any form of criticism of the authoritarian regime or political system. Thus, television news became part and parcel of what became known as "developmental journalism", where the media geared their work primarily towards perpetuating the authoritarian political system for the sake of sustaining state-led economic growth.

Throughout the New Order, religion – as with many other things – was tightly controlled. *Pancasila* [the five main principles],<sup>6</sup> the state's formal ideology, took precedence over all other things. Religious interpretations were strictly imposed by the *ulama-zuama*, or state-sanctioned religious officials, who made up the influential body of the MUI and reigned over the Ministry of Religious Affairs. On television, the teaching and preaching of religion was pre-determined, scrutinised and censored by state apparatuses such as the Ministry of Information and military intelligence, through an all-sweeping policy based on what was known as *pendekatan keamanan* [security approach].

Preachers and scholars engaging in Islamic *dakwah* programmes on television were handpicked by the regime. One well-known television preacher, Qasim Nurseha, was an army chaplain whose preaching was popular among the *ibu-ibu* [literally, mothers] or homemakers. Religious programmes on *TVRI* would invite such *ulama-zuama* from MUI to deliver legal opinions and support the government's stance on virtually all matters of Islam, which again was based on its own logic and interpretation.

After intense nationwide student protest and humungous public pressure in 1997, Suharto stepped down as president of Indonesia, ending the overlong period of authoritarianism that had stifled the broadcasting industry through monopoly, media licensing and government censorship. With democratisation, a new phenomenon arose as a consequence of media liberalisation – infotainment, a television-based industry combining information and entertainment. It signalled in part the Indonesians' desire to be liberated from the harsh restrictions long imposed by Suharto's militarist regime. Broadcast by virtually all private television channels, such infotainment programmes are shown throughout the day, with some as early as 6.30 a.m.

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<sup>6</sup> *Pancasila* comprises: 1. Belief in the oneness of God; 2. Just and civilised humanity; 3. Unity of Indonesia; 4. Democracy by consensus and collective wisdom; and 5. Social justice for all Indonesians.

The formula of these infotainment programmes is simplistic and surprisingly one-dimensional. They focus on the daily, highly mundane activities of the rich and famous, notably celebrities and public figures, including politicians, lawyers and sportsmen. They mostly cover celebrity match-ups and break-ups, marriages and divorces, infidelities, abnormal conduct, and even criminal behaviour, including drug abuse by past and present artists and public figures. They blow up and sensationalise public spats between and among celebrities, which often enough end up with exchanges of summons by the police and the convening of court proceedings. Inevitably, lawyers from each side exploit the situation by making stern and unyielding statements. The infotainment programmes jump onto the bandwagon to get sound bites and juicy comments from both sides about the mishaps in relationship.

The “big five” popular infotainment programmes are *Silet (RCTI)*, *Cek and Ricek (RCTI)*, *Insert (Informasi Seputar Selebriti)* on *TransTV*, *Go Spot (RCTI)*, *KISS (Kisah Seputar Selebriti)* on *Indosiar* and *Obsesi (Obrolan Seputar Selebriti)* on *GlobalTV*. All these programmes have a similar pattern in content and presentation. They feed on sensationalism and are nourished by the celebrity culture, which fans materialist, consumerist, nihilistic and voyeuristic ways of living. Ironically, these programmes come equipped with a peculiar façade of celebrity wisdom, in the form of advice on modesty and restraint in the commentaries by the hosts.

The formula is accentuated during the fasting month of Ramadhan, when religious fervour is high and Indonesian politicians, public figures and celebrities vie in showing their religiosity and piety. Typical activities during the holy month are where these public figures invite orphans for a *pengajian* [literally, recitation of the Quran] to their grand luxury residences. Unlike non-Ramadhan months, when scantily clad female celebrities are sprinkled on television, during the holy month many celebrities – both male and female – compete in donning the

latest, most expensive Muslim fashion designer clothes, equipped with the latest models of *jilbab* or *kerudung* [head cover]. These designer clothes are produced by Islamic boutique shops, which regularly sponsor *dakwah*-related television programmes.

With a mixture of truths, half-truths and untruths, these infotainments are no doubt appealing and in some cases highly addictive. The personalities involved, the storylines showcased and the way these programmes are presented raise the question of how far – of how low – they can go. A more formal question is whether these infotainment programmes fall under the category of journalism as we know it.

On the development of infotainment programmes in Australia, Stockwell (2004: 7-8) argues that it “produce[s] not only a dilution of traditional information programmes but also a counter-trend where entertainment programmes are reaching for a more serious, informative purpose”.

This relates to the main function of television and its content, which is to inform, educate and entertain. From the legal perspective,<sup>7</sup> the *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* (KPI) or Indonesian broadcasting commission recognises three main categories for television programmes:

- a) commercials
- b) regular content
- c) journalism

For commercials or infomercials, the definition is straightforward. They are produced mostly by companies or firms that have an interest in marketing their products. Restrictions, however, abound when it comes to what products are marketed to viewers and how they are depicted. For instance, depicting cigarette smoking is disallowed on Indonesian

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<sup>7</sup> See UU No. 40/1999 and *Pedoman Perilaku Penyiaran* (P3) or Broadcasting Code of Conduct and *Standar Programme Siaran* (SPS) or Standard Broadcasting Programme. For a full list of the legal framework on the television industry, see Annex 2.

television, although the commercials themselves are not prohibited. Thus, unlike previously, no individuals smoke in any cigarette commercials in Indonesia. Any depiction of people smoking in films and movies shown on television must also be blurred, a rule that has been generally well observed. To get around the regulations, the industry has focused on showcasing themes for cigarette commercials that depict young, healthy people engaging in adventure, courageous acts, passionate hobbies such as rock-climbing, hang-gliding, wild safari, etc. The aim is to turn negativity subliminally into positive values acceptable to the general audience, both young and old.

Regular content is defined as programmes that are solely for entertainment purposes. Films, talk shows and *sinetrons* [literally, electronic cinema] fall under this vague category.<sup>8</sup> Works of journalism are those that contain news or reportage about an occurrence or event, involving people or communities.

This is where the blurring of the lines becomes conspicuous. Problematic is the boundary that separates journalism and other types of programme. Indeed, media owners, executives and the producers of these infotainment programmes would have the public believe that their product is a work of journalism, in which case the public has the right to know. On this matter, media stakeholders seem to be odds with one another. The quandary resides in the way state agencies and relevant organisations view these programmes. The *Dewan Pers* [Press Council] and *Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia* (PWI) or Indonesian Association of Journalists view infotainment programmes as journalism; thus, they fall under their jurisdiction. However, the *Aliansi Jurnalis Indonesia* (AJI) [Indonesian Independent Journalists] does not agree. AJI perceives infotainment programmes as *not* journalism, since they do not abide by the regular journalistic standards and code of ethics.

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<sup>8</sup> In the Indonesian context, *sinetrons* are similar to soap operas elsewhere, catering to various segmented audiences such as adults, teenagers, and secondary school students.

As an independent state body serving as a watchdog for nation-wide television, KPI too seems to be confronted with a dilemma in determining the category for infotainment programmes. Abdul Cholik, a KPI commissioner from the West Java chapter, opines that:

The infotainment programmes seem like journalism because they are presented live and give an impression as though they are providing news. The problem, however, is that they do not seem to follow the basic principles of journalism. They focus mostly on the people i.e. the celebrities and public figures and not the events. Most of these programmes do not abide by the principle of covering both sides of the stories and therefore are unqualified to be considered as a work of journalism. What is most important for KPI is that when these programmes enter television, they automatically become our business.<sup>9</sup>

Irrespective of the debate on categorisation, the explosion of infotainment programmes apparently flows from what seems to be market demand. The *Dewan Pers* [Press Council] conducted a survey in 2006 that found that all infotainment programmes combined occupy a startling 14 hours of daily broadcasting in Indonesian television. It also found that there are at least 125 such programmes per week.<sup>10</sup> A 2010 study conducted by *Lembaga Pemerhati Kebijakan Publik* (LPKP) *Sinergi Yogya*, a non-governmental organisation that studies public policies, reveals that infotainment programmes shown in prime time rank second in all television programmes.<sup>11</sup> According to Sony Adi Setyawan, a communication lecturer and television executive, 75% of the infotainment programmes are produced through outsourcing and normally operate under the production division, not the editorial

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Commissioner Cholik on December 31, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Information derived from Public Discussion held by KPI Yogyakarta on the “Pro and Contra of Infotainment” on August 25, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*.

newsroom.<sup>12</sup> What is more, the production houses that create these programmes have neither licences nor the capacity and experience to produce news, resulting in the emphasis on controversies surrounding the life of Indonesian celebrities and top public figures. To ensure longevity and market share, these production houses have to solicit built-in commercials, which in turn will maintain their access to television broadcasting. In this way, the market – represented by the power of industrial advertising – determines what goes in and out of television.

Controversy over infotainment programmes have been brewing since they began to air in the early days of *reformasi*. However, the controversy came to a head in 2006, when the MUI issued a *fatwa* [legal opinion], arguing that from the Islamic juridical standpoint, these infotainment programmes are undoubtedly *haram* [forbidden]. The MUI considered that the content of infotainment programmes fall under the category of *ghibah* [Arabic, gossip or back-biting] and *namimah* [Arabic, tale-bearing], which are un-Islamic by nature and hence unwarranted and reprehensible. The problem of infotainment also caught the attention of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), as the issue loomed large in the run-up to its National Congress on 27-30 July 2006 in Surabaya, East Java. The NU issued a strong statement against infotainment programmes but stopped short of banning them or even considering them to be *haram* or impermissible.

In many of these infotainments, religion is regularly infused to spice up the coverage of celebrities and make them more intriguing. They are peppered with interviews with *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* [male and female religious teachers] to give an impression that religion matters and that religious opinions are important and being accommodated. In most cases, these celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* are sought after for their opinions, judgments and perspectives on issues pertaining to *fiqh*

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<sup>12</sup> Idem.



[Islamic jurisprudence] or when religious fervour is highest, during the Islamic holy month of *Ramadhan* or specific feasts such as *Iedhul Fitri*, *Iedhul Adha* and others.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Iedhul Fitri* marks the end of the fasting month of *Ramadhan*; *Iedhul Adha* is the day of sacrifice, which commemorates Prophet Abraham's historic 'sacrifice' of his beloved child. Both Islamic feasts are celebrated throughout the country and the Islamic world.

## RELIGION IN THE AGE OF MEDIA

### A Functional Perspective

In the discussion on religion and television, two concepts are relevant: “mediation” and “mediatisation” of religion. While the former concerns how the medium, in this case television, mediates the distance between the object of viewership (religion) and the viewers, the latter relates to how religion is mediatised to the extent of reducing its essence to suit the needs of the viewers as consumers.

Accepting the necessity of a theological starting point, Walter Davis *et al.* (2001) propose a way to examine television “through the lens of faith.” They argue that television acts the same way in society as religion. A religion consists of four elements: a world view composed of a web of mutually reinforcing beliefs and values; a moral code; periodic public rituals; and a community of believers who practice these rituals. Television provides all four (Davis *et al.*, 2001: xii).

The instantaneous live coverage of the crumbling Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 testified to the importance and relevance of religion in the age of media, with live television at the forefront. Sadly, religion here was represented by what Juergensmayer (2001) calls “religious terrorism”. The spectacle impressed on viewers in real time the immediacy and urgency of the so-called “Islamic menace” and intimated that the United States of America

–the primary victim of the terror attack – would rise to the occasion by launching a devastating counter-attack against Afghanistan and Iraq, where the supposed Muslim terrorists were supposedly based.

The tragic 9/11 episode informed television viewers around the world that religion remained to be a force to be reckoned with and that the media (specifically, television) will continually cover any gruesome news. The old adage that “good news is bad news, and bad news is good news” is still engrained in the mind-set of both the producers and to a lesser degree the consumers of news.

Hoover (2002) argues that scholars should no longer treat media and religion as separate spheres or entities that influence one another, as they are intricately and inextricably connected. On *Practicing Religion in the Age of Media*, he writes:

A good deal of what goes on in the multiple relationships between religion and the media involves layered interconnections between religious symbols, interests, and meanings and the modern media sphere within which much of contemporary culture is made known (Hoover 2002: 5).

It is thus conceivable to think that religion and television, being a popular platform for the cultivation of culture, are natural partners. In his book entitled *Television Culture: Popular Pleasures and Politics*, Fiske (1987) argues that television is a “cultural agent” that serves as “a provoker and circulator of meanings”. He explains that:

Culture is concerned with meanings and pleasures: our culture consists of the meanings we make of our social experience and of our social relations, and therefore the sense we have of our “selves”. It also situates those meanings within the social system, for a social system can only be held in place by the meanings that people make of it. Culture is deeply inscribed in the differential distribution of power within a society, for power relations can only be stabilised or destabilised by the meanings that people

make of them. Culture is a struggle for meanings as society is a struggle for power (Fiske 1987: 20).

Here, religion and television are mediated by cultural meaning projected onto the screen and controlled by the gatekeepers, who serve as agents of the “dominant ideology”. Furthermore, Fiske (1987: 21) contends that television is “made to appear as the result of natural rather than cultural processes, it is taken away from the realm of history and culture and moved towards that of universal truth ... [In short,] television produces ‘reality’ rather than reflects it.”

The dominant ideological outlook of Indonesia after *reformasi* clearly points to the neo-liberal tendencies of the state, which puts forward the market as the primary mechanism to distribute culture and the values entrenched in it. This logic leads to the functional utilisation of religion in Indonesian television.

It is functional in the sense that religion in Indonesia is seen by and large in a good and positive light and that devout or religious individuals play a strategic role in guiding humanity in matters pertaining to both this world and the hereafter. Such constructive functionality, however, is then used by media owners, executives and producers to boost their programme ratings through mass predilection, which in turn dictates the Indonesian viewers’ market preference. Hence, the functional utilisation of religion in infotainment programmes provides a veneer of morality to what can be considered essentially as glamorising immorality and celebrating socially reprehensible behaviour and misconduct.

The function of religion in television, however, does not stop at infotainment programmes. Many other programmes indicate a perfectly harmonious relationship between religion and television. They include religiously-oriented films, movies, *sinetrons* [electronic cinema] akin to soap operas elsewhere, reality shows, docu-dramas, game shows and other genres that blatantly propagate religion, namely Islam, in

Indonesia. Below we elaborate on some of the genres and programmes that clearly infuse religion into their system of programming.

### Films and Sinetrons



As mentioned in the previous chapter, the most glaring development in religion and television in Indonesia post-reformasi is the proliferation of Islamic-oriented television movies, films and soap operas. Aside from Islamic movies adapted from novels such as *Woman with A Turban*, *The Love Verses* and *The Land of Five Towers*, numerous *sinetrons* have inundated Indonesian television. Their titles are extremely suggestive of their nature, orientation and content: *Para Pencari Tuhan* [the God-seekers], *Rahasia Ilahi* [divine secrets], *Hidayah* [Arabic, divine guidance], *Astagfirullah* [Arabic, taking refuge from Allah], *Takdir Ilahi* [divine destiny], *Khadijah* [name of the Prophet Muhammad's wife], *Cinta Fitri* [pure love], *Tukang Bubur Naik Haji* [porridge seller goes on pilgrimage], *Ustadz Foto Copy* [xeroxed religious teacher], *Pesantren & Rock & Roll*, *Sampeyan Muslim* [you're Muslims], etc. Many of these



*sinetrons* can afford to produce 300 sequels or more. Thematically, they frequently run along the lines of submission or resignation to God's will, patience and grace under pressure, repentance and

salvation from religiously unlawful ways of living, and dilemmas in Islamic-sanctioned love and marriages. One noticeable element in most of these *sinetrons* is an often excessive reliance on displaying the latest fashionable Islamic garb, apparel and accessories by the performing actors and actresses.

### Mystic Docudramas

The upsurge of religious content in television includes an intensification of (if not an obsession for) all things mystical and superstitious that takes the viewers on an excursion into the world of the unseen.



If such programmes were banned during the New Order, they have received a new lease of life in the *reformasi* era. They include programmes entitled *Dunia Ghaib* [the world of the unseen], *Dunia Lain* [the other world] and most dramatic of all, the *Pemburu Hantu* [ghost busters]. They almost always involve one *ustadz* or *kiyai* or more, who is supposed to know the ways of the mystics and can see, communicate and engage, often very dramatically, with beings from the other world. The dramatisation of the documentary programme comes from the interpretation of what are purported to be mysterious, unexplained and mystical events.

In the case of *Dunia Lain*, the programme involves an *ustadz* who facilitates intercession with the spirits, which is subsequently followed with a dialogue between a medium – a person possessed by the spirits – and the host or the *ustadz*. The dialogue predictably touches on the past

lives of people in haunted buildings or neighbourhoods. *Pemburu Hantu* involves less dialogue but much more acrobatic, martial arts movements on the part of the ghost busters, comprising five *ustadzs* donning all-white garb and turbans. Typically, the scenario concerns *roh-roh pengganggu* [disturbing spirits] that inhabit a house, where the owners or residents have encountered strange, unexplained phenomena such as lost items or moving objects. Complaints from the owners or residents can also take a more subtle or psychological form, where they complain of extraordinarily high emotions running in the family and causing friction, conflict and discord in the house. The foremost challenge for the *Pemburu Hantu* team is to confront and apprehend the spirits through a mixture of *doa*' [incantations, largely deriving from the Quran] and *Pencak Silat* [Indonesian traditional form of martial arts] that combines dances and breathing exercises to bring out the *tenaga dalam* [literally, inner strength]. Once apprehended, these evil spirits are then forced into readily available transparent bottles. Either in the middle of the programme or upon successfully putting all the spirits into the bottle, the host of the programme then interviews the already sweating members of the *Pemburu Hantu* to provide an interpretation of



events. At times, to heighten the dramatisation, one of the *Pemburu Hantu* team members or the crew would be shown to be attacked or temporarily possessed by the spirits, who seek to avenge the intervention made by the ghost busters.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Due to viewers' criticisms and the superstitious nature of the programme, *Pemburu Hantu* was banned from being broadcast on Indonesian television after a few years of broadcast.

### **Islamic Reality Game Shows**

The television executives have not forgotten to infuse religion into reality game shows on television. One example is the *Pemilihan Da'i Kecil* (abbreviated as *Pildacil*) currently on ANTV, a programme that has everything a reality game show can offer. It is set up as a competition among contestants, whose talents are demonstrated before a live audience in real time before a panel of judges, normally comprising rich and famous artists and celebrity preachers, who in turn provide comments, feedback and assessment on each contestant. What makes *Pildacil* unique is that the talent being shown, tested and assessed is the contestant's ability to preach Islam and become an effective religious preacher. To a certain extent, the talent game show is to show off the young contestants' proficiency in reciting and memorising the Quran, *hadist* [Arabic, Prophetic tradition] and prayers in Arabic, with which the panel of judges may or may not be all too familiar. The scoring is therefore standardised to suit the "expertise" of the judges and the SMSs (text messages) that favour one contestant over the other. The scoring system looks mostly at the contestants' linguistic and rhetorical proficiency, as well as the ability to move the audience or entertain them through well-rehearsed cries, jokes and laughter.

### **Infomercials on Alternative Healing**

Another element of religion in television relates to the proliferation of "health and wealth" programmes, which take the form of infomercials (information and commercials). They are mostly geared towards promoting an alternative way of healing to achieve happiness through health and wealth. The alternative healing is purportedly done through metaphysical means for "patients" who come to the "clinics" or *Padepokan* [Javanese traditional martial art schools], seeking answers to their failure to achieve health and wealth. Patients who come, or call in



live, usually complain of tumours, breast cancer, stress, depression, sluggish business, and inability to concentrate in school or work. These infomercials usually involve, again, wise religious persons, acting as spiritual *gurus*, who can heal the masses of their miseries in life. Often, the spiritual *guru* is confronted by patients who either knowingly or unknowingly are possessed by evil spirits. The customary response is to conduct what is called the *ruqyah*, an Islamic form of exorcism, supposedly practised by the Prophet Muhammad. To make this practice seem valid from the Islamic viewpoint, it has recently been called *ruqyah syar'iyah* [exorcism based on the *syariah*]. Interestingly, whether confronted with physical, emotional or mental problems, the *guru's* answer seems to always involve *ruqyah* and traditional herbs. Often, the *ruqyah* is done not by the spiritual *guru* alone, but with the help of other *gurus* or his own students, who recite incantations throughout the session, allegedly inviting more powerful metaphysical powers from God. Other forms are done through a procession called *dzikr* [remembrance of God], conducted by the students of the spiritual



*guru*. One such *guru* is Haji Haryono, who claims to have the ability to transfer illnesses from patients to goats, which must be pre-purchased by the patients, who will in turn witness the dissection of the goat's stomach as proof of the transmission of whatever diseases infiltrated into the patients' bodies.

### **Islam in Commercials**

The commercialisation of products in television or other media in Indonesia has yet to escape the influence of religion. Many of the celebrity *ustadz*s and *ustadzah*s often participate in product endorsement, which typically represents their clearly defined and

segmented market. Mamah Dedeh, for instance, is associated with the product *Cap Kaki Tiga* [three legs brand], a transparent and crystal-clear herbal drink, which can supposedly help people suffering from body heatedness, *seriawan* [oral ulceration] and a multitude of other illnesses. The highly animated Ustadz Nur Maulana has been used by Telkomsel to endorse its telecommunication services, while depicting the setting as though he and



his congregation were on a pilgrimage in the holy land. The late Ustadz Jeffry al-Buchori (a.k.a. Uje) also became a star in at least two commercials for *Axis*, a telecommunication company, and *GM* motorcycle helmets.<sup>15</sup> The same is true of Ustadz Yusuf Mansyur, whose advertisement of *Fatigon Spirit*, a multi-

vitamin product, is rampantly broadcast, especially during the fasting month of Ramadhan. So, religion and religious figures are seen as effective tools of branding and marketing, especially if the appeal is targeted towards the



<sup>15</sup> Al-Buchori died in a motorcycle accident on Friday 26, 2013. At the time of the accident, he was heading home after preaching to a congregation at midnight using his powerful 650cc *Kawasaki* motorcycle. From his own confessions, Al-Buchori was known to be a preacher with a dark past (*sejarah kelam*) throughout his previous career as a model, musician and dancer, prior to becoming a famous preacher. His style of preaching was distinctive from the others, as he often used his eloquent, high-pitched recitation of the Quran. Tens of thousands of mourners prayed for Al-Buchori, and paid respect to the bereaved family.

largely Muslim body of consumers. As an effective platform for communicating with consumers, television clearly sees religion and religious figures as natural partners for the perpetuation of its own industry through advertisements and the effective functional utilisation of religion.<sup>16</sup>

### Call to Prayer



One of the remnants of the New Order practice of infusing religion in the media, specifically television, is the *adzan* [Islamic call to prayer], which is broadcast in all national channels at least twice a day: during the *subuh* [break of dawn] and *maghrib* [dusk] prayers. Both *adzans* are rendered in the standard Arabic form, complete with the original text and accompanied with an Indonesian translation. This is then transposed into a silent and short docu-drama depicting Muslims, sometimes involving celebrity *ustadz*s, going about their lives, which is then abruptly interrupted by the *adzan*, and the obligation for prayers. An alternative storyline revolves around the depiction of mosques with architectural magnificence, which then typically portrays ordinary Muslims heading towards a mosque, conducting the *wudhu* [ablution] and subsequently the *sholat* [prayers]. Apart from the two daily calls to prayer, some television channels inform viewers through the use of running texts of the arrival of the

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<sup>16</sup> Recent commercials such as *Sosis*, a sausage snack, and others have produced commercials with the endorsement of a prominent and high profile *Kiyai* in a *Pesantren*. The case of *Sosis*, for instance, had thousands of the *Pesantren* students singing the catchy phrase of *SMS* or “*Santri Makan Sosis*” (religious students eating *Sosis*), which in and unto itself is a clear evidence of associating religion (read: Islam) and a marketable industrial food product.

other three prayer times.<sup>17</sup> This is especially true during the month of Ramadhan. The intention underlying the broadcast of the *adzan* is primarily to remind Indonesian Muslims of their obligation to pray, hence supposedly enhancing the level of their religiosity. This is based on the common argument that the higher their level, the less likely they are to engage in evil conduct or misbehaviour. However, even the call to prayer has not been spared religious commodification. Time and again, calls to prayer serve the market, when the silent docu-drama depicts the brand of the cars driven by the religious family heading to the mosque or the laptops used by the supposedly religious Muslim students.

### **Religion of the Celebrities**

The flourishing of the infotainment industry and the ever so popular *dakwahtainment* programmes on television reveals the trend towards making Islam a celebrity religion. The realm of Islam is filled with spiritual *gurus* and preachers who have effectively become celebrities, with millions of religious congregational fans in support of their often shallow Islamic cause and spiritually driven marketing gimmicks. Some even have *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts to allow their “friends” and “followers” to shadow their activities.

However, to think that the functional utilisation of religion in Indonesian television has no precedents would be naïve and even disingenuous. During the New Order, aside from the more government-sanctioned *ustadz* such as Qasem Nurseha, the foremost celebrity *ustadz* was Zainuddin M.Z., otherwise known as the *Da'i Sejuta Ummat* [literally, the one million nation preacher], whose fame and fortune skyrocketed in the late 1980s and 1990s. His public career began with *Tabligh Akbars* [mass religious gatherings] in soccer fields, attended by tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of his keen followers. Being an

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<sup>17</sup> Muslims are required to pray five times daily: at *subuh* (dawn), *dzuhur* (afternoon), *ashar* (late afternoon), *maghrib* (dusk) and *isya* (night).

original resident of Jakarta, his Betawi accent and idiosyncratic outlook made others try to imitate him. However, Zainuddin M.Z. was most famous for his ability to mix religious preaching and political witticism at a time when Islam was still seen as a latent threat to the system.<sup>18</sup> One of the things that irked the Suharto government at the time was his active participation in the *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* [Islamic United Development Party], which was a fusion of a number of Muslim-based political parties and a regular contender in general elections under the New Order.

Beyond *Tabligh Akbars*, cassette recordings of his sermons were in high demand in the market, which was hungry for a fresh outlook on Islam originating and operating outside the state system. After successfully spreading his message through *Tabligh Akbars* and cassettes, Zainuddin M.Z. made his debut on television, where he continued on until his passing away in July 2011. A notable distinction between Zainuddin M.Z. and Qasem Nurseha was that the former transformed what used to be serious-minded religious preaching into a gathering filled with routine anecdotes and jokes, effectively resulting in a shift in the way the audience viewed Islamic religion and spirituality.

Following in Zainuddin M.Z.'s footsteps was another young and talented celebrity *ustadz* named Abdullah Gymnastiar, otherwise known as Aa Gym. His meteoric rise came about in the mid-1990s, after he had started out as a preacher in small mosques in and around Bandung and his small town of Cimahi, West Java. Unlike Zainuddin M.Z., Aa Gym is Sundanese, and comes from a military family background. He studied for a diploma in engineering in a secular, militaristic university called Jenderal Achmad Yani in Cimahi, a town located on the outskirts of the

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<sup>18</sup> During the first two decades of Suharto's militarist rule, fear of the 'Islamic menace' was persistently propagandised through the popular political phrase *ekstrem kanan* (the extreme right). The other threat came from the *bahaya laten* (latent danger) of communism, which was labelled *ekstrem kiri* (extreme left). This policy was consistent with the security approach of the New Order.

city of Bandung. Aa Gym's selling point was his hugely popular notion of *Manajemen Qalbu* [management of the heart], stemming principally from a generic Sufi tradition that revolves around maintaining wholesome and uncontaminated habits of the heart. The ethos and motto of *Manajemen Qalbu* are well represented by the tagline in a weekly tabloid he publishes: *Indahnya Hidup dengan Bening Hati* [the beauty of living with an untainted heart].

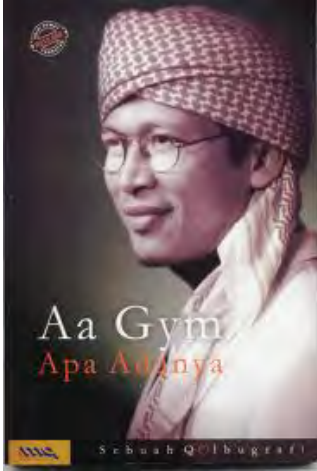
Aa Gym was able to pinpoint intelligently the needs and demands of Muslims after decades of intense politicisation of religion by the regime, which seemed to hinge on a fixed idea about keeping religion and religious development at bay. Aa Gym was able to break the mould by presenting Islam as a manner non-threatening to the regime through the functional utilisation of the pacifist Sufi tradition in the media.<sup>19</sup> Howell (2008) argues that such “electronically-mediated mass predication programmes” effectively promote and project “intense spiritual intimacy with God, which Muslims seek through Sufi devotions”. From the state's perspective, such a form of Islamic spirituality would not in any way threaten the stability of the regime.

Coming from a secular educational and family background, Aa Gym preached in a basic and simplistic form that nonetheless was evidently appealing to the Muslim masses and, to certain extent, also non-Muslim viewers. When asked what his formula of success was in preaching, Aa Gym said, “I only deliver materials that are uncomplicated [*tidak rumit-rumit*), the simple ones” (Hernowo and Ridwan 2003: 43). Knowing his own limitations in the traditional fields of Islamic sciences and his lack of proficiency in the Arabic language, Aa Gym would often shy away from deploying Quranic recitations, much less the Prophetic sayings of Muhammad. He was also careful not to delve too much into critical and complex discourses on theology or *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence], which

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<sup>19</sup> Sufism is a form of Islam that emphasises the internal struggle of the individual to approach God through mystic methods and transcendental religious experience.

could potentially lessen his appeal and create unnecessary polemics and socio-political complications. Instead, Aa Gym expounded the verses and Prophetic traditions and communicated them to his audience in modest and unpretentious language and deploying moralistic anecdotes with a clear predisposition towards Islamic ethical values as a means to approach God.



His headquarters in Bandung, *Pesantren Daarut Tauhid* [literally, the abode of monotheism],<sup>20</sup> used to be frequented by thousands of students, *ibu-ibu*, activists, public figures and politicians interested in attending the *pengajian* [religious classes] or signing up for the *Pesantren Kilat* [literally, lightning courses] on *Manajemen Qalbu*. The latter required participants to rent board and lodging, enabling various businesses to thrive in the surrounding area where the Pesantren is located.

Aa Gym's distinctive personal traits were his boyish appearance and the white turban wrapped around his head. This appearance seemed somewhat effective, at least in terms of projecting his non-threatening demeanour. In addition to his performative skill set, Aa Gym has been consistent in preaching a peaceful and tolerant form of Islam. Bakti (2006) argues that Aa Gym's approach to *dakwah* is through the

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<sup>20</sup> The term *Pesantren* in the Javanese/Indonesian lexicon usually denotes a traditional Muslim boarding school, which teaches classical Islamic sciences such as *Kalam* [theology], *Fiqh* [jurisprudence], *Ush al-Fiqh* [principles of jurisprudence], *Tashawwuf* [mysticism], using what is conventionally known as *Kitab Kuning* [literally, the yellow books], which refer to texts written by scholars. The use of the technical term *Pesantren* in *Daarut Tauhid* is somewhat misleading and inaccurate. Yet Aa Gym insisted on using it for various practical and promotional reasons.

promotion of peace, tolerance, civil society and pluralism. His main talent also resides in the way he manages his media relations and public image. According to Bakti's observation, Aa Gym distrusts the mass media but at the same seeks to seduce and influence them (2006: 9).

Coinciding with his meteoric rise as a public persona, Aa Gym's model of *dakwah* was geared towards motivational, self-help sessions, effectively reducing the message of Islam to a mere instrument for resolving the everyday dilemmas and absurdities confronted by ordinary Muslims. Aa Gym realised that not only do the masses have to train themselves in matters related to the management of the heart, but so do the city-dwellers, professionals and business people. With his growing popularity and reputation, Aa Gym initiated a business venture, the *Manajemen Qalbu* Corporation, which at the peak of his career grew rapidly, covering products from instant noodles, telecommunication, cellular Quran, and Islamic ringtones to human resources and outbound training for professionals. A number of Indonesian state-owned companies have engaged *Manajemen Qalbu* Corporation, namely PT *Telkom*, Bank *Negara* Indonesia (BNI), *Industri Pesawat Terbang Nusantara* (IPTN), PT *Kereta Api* and state-owned as well as private enterprises.

Unfortunately, Aa Gym met with an unexpected and abrupt fall from grace, rapidly downgrading his celebrity status. This came in 2006 when he self-assuredly decided to take a second wife, a widow with three children, raising the sword of Damocles against the *ibu-ibu* throughout Indonesia, who looked up to him as an '*alim* [wise, pious person]. Aa Gym's decision to engage in polygamy irritated his first wife, Ninih Muthmainnah Muhsin, whom he married in 1987. A granddaughter of the locally revered Kiyai Haji Muhammad Tasdiki,<sup>21</sup> head of the Pesantren Kalangsari in Ciamis, West Java, *Teh* [sister] Ninih had been

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<sup>21</sup> In the Javanese context, *Kiyai Haji* (often abbreviated as "KH") is a revered title given to religious scholar-teachers, whose lineage is often sought after by many who desire to receive *barakah* (Arabic, Divine blessings) in their lives.



an influential figure behind Aa Gym's success. The anger, however, did not come only from his wife. Aa Gym's legion of fans and followers, mostly female congregation members, saw his decision to take a second wife as ungrateful to his first wife Ninih, who not only bore him seven children but also guided him in many ways of the religion, and advised him profusely on the content of his preaching. Adding insult to injury, Aa Gym "divorced" his first wife in 2011, and later re-married her the following year.

It is noteworthy that the term *dakwahtainment* was first attributed to Aa Gym through his *Manajemen Qalbu* Television (MQTV). Initially established on 22 June 2002 as a production house to supply Islamic content to television stations, MQTV expanded to become a documentation centre to house all television programmes featuring Aa Gym based on "*dakwah* content that is entertaining", hence the term *dakwahtainment*.

### **The Problem with Dakwahtainment**

The notion of *dakwahtainment* may seem alien to English speakers, but is much less so for Indonesians. The reason for this is the nature of the term, which combines Arabic, Islamic lingo and English. The Indonesian term "*dakwah*" is derived from the Arabic root word, comprising three syllables of *dal-'ain-waw*, which connotes calling or invitation to Islam. In practice, *dakwah* is equivalent to Islamic propagation. From the religious perspective, *dakwah* is an obligation for all Muslims, as it is considered a noble cause to bring humanity into the fold of Allah's blessings. The latter part, "*-tainment*", is from the English word entertainment. In the pedagogical realm, use of such term is found in the term "edutainment", a concept combining education and entertainment, which connotes a form of education that incorporates play, performance or other pleasurable means normally enjoyed by children. Proponents of edutainment argue that such a pedagogic method

can help children to overcome their attention deficit, without sacrificing their need to learn.

Hence, *dakwahtainment* is defined as a concept amalgamating Islamic propagation and the innumerable forms of entertainment broadcast through the medium of television, allowing millions of home viewers to watch, receive and capture their messages. In its application, the notion of *dakwahtainment* is guided by a strict principle used by media executives, producers and creative teams, who apply and operationalise it in terms of *tuntunan* [spiritual guidance] and *tontonan* [entertainment viewing]. Behind the scenes, such programmes are tightly and directly observed, usually by the producers and creative teams, who follow a certain logic that operates within the supposed preference of the segmented market viewers. They claim to be catering to the demands of the larger body of Indonesian Muslim audience, which they assume prefer a combination of *tuntunan* and *tontonan* to just receiving *tuntunan* without the *tontonan*. In other words, the media industry assumes that Indonesian Muslims would rather get a regular dose of religion without losing any opportunity to do it with pleasure.

As a result, *dakwahtainment* blatantly suffers from lack of substance. It is woefully thin in imparting religious teachings, normative values and religious ethics. Many programmes in the *dakwahtainment* genre tackle issues that are trivial, irrelevant and inconsequential, while habitually deploying over-simplified methods to convey religious messages. What is more, the messages are more often than not repetitive and dreary. Interviewed on the subject, KPI Commissioner Ezky Suyanto lamented:

This is the exact reason why I don't watch *dakwah* programmes on television... because they are *ecek-ecek* [simplistic], and never provide anything substantive to the public. Is it true that the religious knowledge of Indonesian Muslims is *that* low? I look at the programmes during Ramadhan, and I wonder why the questions are always the same. For example, if I unintentionally

drink, shall I continue with my fasting? That kind of discussion was over during our primary school days. Can I engage in sexual activity with my spouse during the day while I am fasting? The answer is crystal clear. Or, what if I kiss my wife's cheeks during the holy month of Ramadhan, would that be permissible? Why is it that it is only such questions being posed over and over again, as though our collective religious knowledge has stagnated?<sup>22</sup>

Suyanto argued disparagingly that *dakwahtainment* programmes – with a few exceptions, including the likes of Professor Quraish Shihab or Professor Nasaruddin Umar – in effect decrease religiosity rather than increase its quality among the faithful viewers.<sup>23</sup> This phenomenon is not new in infotainment or other forms of television programme that involve a systematic “dumbing down” (Stockwell 2004) of the audience, which in many ways affects the way television programmes are produced and marketed.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview on October 13, 2012 at the KPI headquarters.

<sup>23</sup> Interview on October 13, 2012 at the KPI headquarters.

## RELIGION AND ETHICS

### **The Relevance of Ethics**

The term “ethics” has been deployed in various contexts, disciplines and fields, leading to some difficulties in knowing exactly what ethics implies and how it is applied in different circumstances. As Garret (1968: 2) wrote in *Problems and Perspectives in Ethics*, “The word ethics has almost as many meaning as it has users.” Most often, lay people assume an equivalence between “ethics” and “morality”, using them interchangeably in daily conversations. Although the two are different, ethics and morality are closely related to one another, which can potentially lead to misconceptions. Today, the terms “moral” or “morality” are more related to sexuality or “the human desire for the flesh”, where “immoral” or “immorality” contribute to such connotations (Garrett 1968: 2).

Thus, while morality focuses on standards of action, guides to action, choices in action, ethics is the study of those standards, guides and choices. For this reason, ethics is often construed as moral philosophy or the science of morals. The use of the term “science” to describe ethics, problematic though it may be, leads people to think that it merely deals with theories about what is good and bad or right and wrong. Here, Garrett (1968) argues for the “ultimate justification”, which is necessary to resolve the complex and concrete demands of society.

Singer (1994: 3-4) defines ethics as the science “about how people ought to live” and “the systematic studying of reasoning about how we ought to act”. He argues that the term often refers to a set of rules, principles, or way of thinking that guide, or claim authority to guide, the actions of a particular group. This way, ethics is often misconstrued as being similar to “law” for the plain reason that many believe ethics should be the guiding principle that serves as the foundation for society’s conception of good and bad or in deciding what constitutes right and wrong action or behaviour. The immediate problem emerging from this discourse is the subjective claims made on the determination of what is good and bad or right and wrong for society.

The question of the relevance of ethics to human life is both imperative and practical. It is imperative because the assumptions and foundations that lead to ethics may shift from time to time and from one place to another. It is practical because people need some assurance or firmness in their belief that what they are doing is good or right. However, the question of relevance relates more to the development of society as a whole and less to the individuals’ pursuit of their own happiness. Ethics is therefore relevant for the following reasons: first, either knowingly or unknowingly, most people have never stopped asking themselves about how to live in the present world. The propensity to persistently ask about principles and values is part of the nature of human beings as they navigate the different and difficult challenges in their daily life. The cumulative outcome of the social negotiation pertaining to these questions produces what conventionally is called culture.

Second, with the development of technology and access to mass transportation and telecommunication, people constantly face difficult moral dilemmas and ethical situations previously unfamiliar or even unknown to humankind. Ethical issues revolving around stem cell research, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, astrophysics and the

omnipresent media (i.e. television and the internet), for instance, call into question their utility and potential adverse effects on society at large. The recent rise of reality television or internet pornography has caused many to pose difficult ethical questions, related to privacy, appropriateness, sexual behaviour and mores in society. More often than not, religion finds it hard to provide ultimate justifications for either allowing or disallowing outright such contents.

Third, as society moves towards a more explicit division of labour, the varying professions have led to an inquiry about the expansion of ethical and moral problems generated by newly emerging interrelationships among humans, their activities and the values they hold. Without a continual search for new ethical principles and values, human beings will forever be dictated to and restricted by the Epicurean philosophy of “maximising pleasure and minimising pain”, which can easily lead people to the height of absurdity in life, while unable to confront the demands of their own existence and answer the ultimate and most essential question pertaining to the meaning of life.

This brings us to social ethics and its equally complex notion and application. In the classic text *Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society*, Winter (1968: 6) argues that “the subject matter of social ethics is moral rightness and goodness in the shaping of human society”. The scope, however, that Winter delineates does not at all help us to define the true nature of social ethics. Defining social ethics is in itself highly problematic partly because putting the term “social” as an adjective to the noun (ethics) pre-supposes that ethics in and of itself is *unsocial*, an individuated form of moral philosophy. This raises the question of whether or not an individual – living and flourishing in a given society – can escape from the ethics that govern the social relations surrounding him. Winter goes on to lament that “social ethics is, thus, the continuing and daily business of man in his social existence, it seeks universals but

works with the relativities of an historically conditioned situation” (Winter 1968: 8).

Going beyond definitional boundaries, social ethics hides a multitude of problems. Every culture or community has its own standards of what constitutes good and bad or what is socially acceptable and decent behaviour. Social ethics consequently deals mostly with the relativity of moral standards in a certain space-time context. Yet most people do not question whose opinions or perspectives matter most in determining these standards. Elsbernend (2005) argues that it is the majority that usually has the most say in setting the parameters for society. Moreover, she maintains that social ethics orbits around many disciplines such as economics, politics, environment, biology, ethnography, geography, even religion and spirituality. As a direct consequence, “credibility in social ethics increasingly requires competence and conversation with political, environmental, social, biological and economic scientists” (Elsbernd 2005: 141).

One can therefore maintain that social ethicists deal with evaluative meanings and society’s struggle to achieve some form of order based on the collective understanding and moral judgement of what is good and bad or right and wrong, regardless of whether they are derived from social conditions, prevailing norms or a particular religious worldview.

## **Four Approaches to Ethics**

The complexity of the study of ethics leads to variants in the way one approaches ethics. Based on focus and orientation, the study of ethics may be divided into four: meta-ethics, and normative, descriptive and applied ethics. As a branch of moral philosophy, meta-ethics delves into the nature and methodology of moral judgments. Gensler (1998) considers meta-ethics as the method for selecting moral principles and doing normative ethics. Meta-ethics or, as some would prefer, analytic ethics involves reasoning about the presuppositions behind the moral

systems developed under the category of normative ethics, which is all about questioning the validity of those premises about reality and human nature. In *Ethics as Social Science*, Yeager (2001: 16) argues that meta-ethical issues are really about morality and that they concern themselves with the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic or psychological aspects of ethics. Meta-ethics thus examines the coherence and rationale of the practical forms of ethics, which altogether form its subject matter, and assesses the logic of moral reasoning.

Normative ethics relates to the question: what principles ought we to live by, given the continuous and shifting challenges? Here, Yeager (2001) writes that there are two levels of normative ethics: one that looks for very general, comprehensive moral principles, such as that we ought always to do whatever maximises total pleasure for everyone. The other concerns moral questions such as abortion or lying (2001: 5). In short, it involves creating or evaluating moral standards and asks whether or not people's current moral behaviour is reasonable. Thus, the study of normative ethics places emphasis on values (moral judgments), norms (rules that govern an action) and virtues (traits that make a good person good) in society.

Descriptive ethics focuses on defining the existing morality or moral systems in society. It usually entails the description of how people behave and how this either conforms to the moral standards they claim or not. It also often denotes comparative perspectives on the different standards of ethics and morality that diverse societies hold to be true or have developed. The typical supposition usually follows the Epicurean philosophy that holds the opinion that people tend to make decisions that bring pleasure and avoid pain.

Frequently also dubbed prescriptive ethics, applied ethics concerns "precepts" and "maxims of behaviour" and critically reflects on them (Yeager 2001). Applied ethics condemns lying, cheating and stealing and exhorts benevolence in its practical application in daily life. But it



does not end there, according to Yeager (2001), because applied ethics also recommends what kinds of behaviour and traits of character to cultivate.

From these four approaches to the study of ethics, the author has taken a combination of two, i.e. normative and applied ethics. Combining these two approaches can help describe, analyse and assess the phenomenon of *dakwahtainment* in Indonesia.

Normative ethics lend its aid to portraying the idealism in Islam with respect to *dakwah* or Islamic propagation, while explaining why the actions and behaviours of the celebrity *ustadz*s and *ustadzah*s involved in *dakwahtainment* are in principle contradictory to the normative ethical values that Islam espouses. The normative ethical approach generates a comparative overview between *what ought to be* and *what is* in the modern-day model of *dakwah* or Islamic propagation in Indonesia.

Applied ethics can help in prescribing the kinds of ethical code that may be necessary to regulate the *dakwahtainment* programmes on Indonesian television, to make them more suitable, appropriate and fitting to the normative high standards of ethics that the Prophet of Islam Muhammad set forth as a precedent. Applied ethics may aid the author in thinking how *dakwahtainment* programmes can help generate or push for a morally robust socio-religious development in Indonesia.

## **Islam and Religious Ethics**

Religious ethics refers to the relationship between religion and ethics. As Winter (1968) pointed out, the correlation between religion or religious concerns and ethical valuation is more troubling than that between social science and ethics. This is in part because religion is perceived to be intimately connected to all things sacred and connotes the active participation of and interaction with the Divine, who holds absolute power and reigns over everything in the universe. The foremost

characteristic of religious ethics, Winter argues, is the moral imperative. Religious ethicists believe in the claim of justice and benevolence as imperative, originating from the notion that morality is “the ultimate order”, providing “good beyond human capabilities” (Winter 1968: 13).

This places faith and religious practice, i.e. rituals and devotion to the Divine, which, by nature and definition, are concomitantly personal and subjective, as a barrier to reaching a negotiated settlement on acceptable moral conduct and viable forms of behaviour in society. Religion and religious practice seem to be constantly at odds with the coming together of social ethics. Following the Enlightenment, secularised Europeans earnestly asked how religion could be at all relevant to ethics and social life.

In this study, religious ethics is defined as a method of understanding moral issues from the perspective of systematic faith and practice. It delves into the role of the Divine and how it interacts with the moral conduct and behaviour of both the individual and society. Al-Attar (undated) argues that the Divine origins of moral values and rulings are regarded by religionists as the only valid and genuine cause for acknowledging and retaining their legitimacy. They consider moral values almost synonymous with religious values and religion as the only guarantee of truthfulness in moral judgement. Furthermore, “religious texts are assumed to be the ultimate source of moral knowledge, and obedience to whatever is considered to be commanded by God would accordingly be the most highly regarded, basic virtue” (Al-Attar undated: xi).

For Muslims, Islamic ethics is embedded in the notion of the *akhlak al-karimah* [good pattern of conduct] that emanates from God’s Messenger and Prophet Muhammad, who has reached the level of *al-insan al-kamil* [the perfect being]. The Quran states: “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern of conduct for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise

of Allah.”<sup>24</sup> In a different verse, the Quran praises the Prophet Muhammad for occupying a high level of ethics by stating: “And thou [standest] on an exalted standard of character”.<sup>25</sup> In one reliable *hadist*, it was reported that the Prophet said, “Verily, Thou hath been sent down to perfect ethics among the believers”.<sup>26</sup> Only through rigorous personal mentorship in perfecting the ethics and conduct of the community of believers can Islam then assume the highest idealism of being the *rahmatan li'l 'aalamiin* [blessings for the universe], as stipulated in its Holy Book.

Weber’s dichotomy between “exemplary” and “ethical” prophets is relevant to the discussion.<sup>27</sup> According to Weber, Islam is distinctive from other religions because of its insistence on radically destabilising the *status quo* and building an ideal, perfect society, comprising perfect beings with a good pattern of conduct. As an extension, the Prophet Muhammad was seen by Weber as a radical social change agent, distinguishable from the more traditionalist figures found in the exemplary prophets.<sup>28</sup>

The most potent source from which the Prophet Muhammad derived his authority was the revelation (*wahy*) that was subsequently collated in what we now know as the Quran [Arabic, the recitation]. Through the Quran, perceived by Muslims as the verbatim word of God, the Prophet Muhammad manifested his radical movement and embarked on his ethical reconstruction of world society. Islam’s propensity to put forth its religious ethical principles and values, however, is not without its contradictions and adversaries, especially within the context of democracy and the power struggle based on material possession. In “Rethinking Islam Today”, Arkoun (2003: 37) argues:

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<sup>24</sup> The Quran 33:21.

<sup>25</sup> The Quran 68:4.

<sup>26</sup> This prophetic saying was said to be narrated by three prominent and reliable *hadist* scholars, namely Bukhari, Baihaqi and Hakim.

<sup>27</sup> Robin Gill, *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1996), 36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

Within this new value system, ethical thinking has less relevance than the technical regulations of the market and the efficient control of productive forces. Democracy limits the source of authority to the acquiescence expressed in different circumstances by various professional or political groups. There is no longer any reference to the transcendental origin of authority. The question of revelation is thus eliminated; it is neither solved intellectually nor maintained as a plausible truth according to the pragmatic reason prevailing in so-called modern thought. All relations are based on the respective power of nations, groups, and individuals; ethical principles, founded on metaphysical or religious visions, lose their appeal. I do not mean that we have to go back to the “revealed” truth according to *ishâhi* thinking. I am stressing a major difficulty of our time: the rupture between ethics and materialism. At the same time, social *imaginaire* is not more controlled or used in a better way by “scientific” knowledge. Rather, it is mobilised more than ever by ideologues who take advantage of the modern mass media to disseminate slogans taken from religious (in Muslim societies) or secular ideologies, or from a mixture of both (in the so-called socialist regimes).

For many scholars like Arkoun, it is conceivable to think about the diminishing influence of religious ethics amid the tide of modernisation, secularisation and materialism, which for all intent and purposes systematically work against any system of ethics that presupposes even the remotest sense of transcendental origin. Having said that, this line of argument fails to capture the overwhelming power and spirit of religious ethics entrenched in the doctrines stipulated in the sacred texts. In *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, the ethicist Hans Küng (2007: 66) wrote:

Indeed for all Muslims the Quran is the truth: the original source of the experience of God and piety and the mandatory criterion of

right faith; the way: the true possibility of coping with the world and the eternally valid standard for correct action (ethic); the life: the abiding foundation of Islamic law and the soul of Islamic prayer, already the material for the instruction of Muslim children, the inspiration of Islamic art and the all-permeating spirit of Islamic culture.

Küng (2007: 92) argued that Islam is “an ethically orientated religion” that embraces “a basic ethic of elementary humanity grounded in God’s word and will”. He maintains the centrality of the Quran by saying:

The Quran is concerned with ethical imperatives for human society, not all of which were new. However, on the new basis of faith these norms worked in favour of more justice, fairness, restraint, moderation, mediation, compassion and forgiveness, though this was not transposed into a legal structure of rights and responsibilities (Küng 2007: 149).

It should therefore be clear from the discussion above that Islam, more specifically the Quran and the Prophetic teachings, tends towards affirming that ethics and religion are not mutually exclusive, and that *wahy* was revealed to humankind to support a basic and credible framework for a universal system of ethics.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On this point, I am thankful to Professor Kevin Reinhart’s presentation during the *Akhlaak-e va Aadian* conference in Qum, Iran, which suggested that the notion of *ma’ruf* (good) in the Quran pertained to “something that you already know”, highlighting the universality and intrinsic knowledge of ethics.

## **ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN TELEVISION PROGRAMMES**

This chapter will first explore some ethical problems in contemporary Indonesian television programmes and problematise some of the negative approaches to what I call comedies of error. Subsequent to this will be a more nuanced elaboration of how religion is played out and instrumentalised to increase the entertainment value of such programmes. This will then be measured against normative Islamic religious ethics. The chapter delves into the many and various ways in which Indonesian television has persistently undermined some of the core principles and values entrenched in Islam's normative religious ethics. The second half will place emphasis on the ethical problems confronted by the numerous *dakwahtainment* programmes currently broadcast on Indonesian television.<sup>30</sup>

### **Comedies of Error**

As mentioned earlier, comedians have been an integral part of the Indonesian television industry for quite some time. The 1980s, however,

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<sup>30</sup> The dataset presented in this chapter is derived mainly from direct observation through recordings made with my research assistants throughout 2012. Other data were derived from KPI and MUI's documents on monitoring, warning and advisory letters.

saw the mushrooming of home-grown comedy shows such as *Ria Jenaka* – the Wayang Orang or Javanese traditional puppet characters<sup>31</sup> – *Jojo Cs*, and *Srimulat*, some of whom remain active until now in variety comedy shows and *sinetrons*. In the course of its journey, comedy in these television shows has been transformed from merely a form of entertainment for the public into major show business. In the increasing celebrity culture, there are no holds barred. Contemporary, post-reform Indonesian variety comedy shows, currently shown on numerous channels, are plagued with ethical problems, which have persistently irked the *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* (KPI) [Indonesian Broadcasting Commission], an independent state agency, which has been tasked by law to monitor and scrutinise programmes broadcast on radio and television throughout Indonesia.

During Suharto's New Order, television comedies were an outlet to escape from the intense securitisation, if not indeed militarisation, of society. The macho performances of men in military uniform, especially the army, parading with their rifles and artillery were a common feature on television. The prevalence of the military was also evident in weekly television musical performances such as *Aneka Safari* in which the venue more often than not was a military base. As if the location were not enough, it was common for the female hosts, obviously not military personnel, to don the military's official green camouflaged uniform together with its green, black or red beret, depending on which military unit sponsored the weekly programme.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ria Jenaka* was once a popular 15-minute televised comedy performance by then famous comedian Ateng and friends, who dressed up and played traditional Javanese puppet characters such as Bagong (by Ateng), Petruk (by Iskak), Gareng (by Suroto and Slamet Harto), Semar/Romo (by Sampan Hismanto) and, as a late addition to the group, Mono (by Teten). The formula for *Ria Jenaka*'s success usually entailed government propaganda, advising the audience on issues related to family planning, transmigration, maintaining law and order, mutual respect and tolerance for others.

Interestingly, during that period in the 1980s when state television seemed truly to cultivate the militarist culture, Indonesian comedies came to provide an alternative to, if not the antithesis of, the male chauvinistic culture by having male comedians dressing and performing as women with wigs or acting like *banci* [male effeminates]. Comedians such as Ucu and Ester in *Jojon Cs*, for instance, regularly performed as damsels in distress, minus the beauty, grace and elegance. From this, a certain pattern seemed to emerge, in which female and effeminate characters constantly were reduced to an *object penderita* [literally, object of suffering], the target of degradation and humiliation.

Unfortunately, this pattern has re-emerged on Indonesian television with much more vigour and rigor, often using religion as the basis for mortification. The pattern of mortification shows itself in the following manifestations: making fun of physical attributes, sexual innuendos, mocking underprivileged people, and undermining religion. Each will be elaborated below.

### *Physical Attributes*

Indonesian comedians appear to bar no holds in making fun of people's physical appearances. People who are short, fat, bald, small- or flat-nosed or buck-toothed seem to be the most convenient targets of insult. People's faces and bodily parts are often equated with shameful objects such as toilets, buckets, floor mats and even voodoo dolls. Animals too are habitually deployed as a spectre of comparison.

During one comedy programme aired on 7 August 2012, a comedian described the relationship of a man and woman sitting next to each other. He came up with a couplet associating the man with a *beruk* [short-tailed macaque]:<sup>32</sup>

*Barang antik dari kulit jeruk*  
*Orang cantik kok pacaran sama beruk?*

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<sup>32</sup> A macaque belongs to the family of monkeys.



[(There is) an antique item made up of orange peels

Why would a beautiful person go out with a macaque?]

Jarwo Kuat, a popular comedian, then cited a phrase saying, while directing his attention to his balding colleague:

*Allah bersama orang-orang yang sabar*<sup>33</sup>

*Setan bersama orang botak*

[Allah is with those who are patient

Satan is with those who are bald]

### *Sexual innuendos*

Many variety television shows and even some *dakwahtainment* programmes suffer from inappropriate content deemed suitable only for adults. This comes in various forms: sexually insinuating jokes and anecdotes, bodily gestures and facial expressions. Related to this is the tendency to degrade people with different sexual orientations and habits, who are often referred to as *banci* or *bencong* [male effeminates].

In a live comedy variety show, a rising stand-up comedian, Ustadz Taufiqurrahman from the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta, went on stage and engaged the hosts in comical conversation. He ventured to downgrade effeminates, transvestite homosexuals and queers by deploying rhythmic couplets with clear sexual overtones, such as:

*Ada panci dari Cibelati*

*Sesama banci jangan saling menyakiti*

[There is a frying pan from Cibelati]<sup>34</sup>

Being effeminates, you should not hurt one another]

This was immediately followed by another couplet:

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<sup>33</sup> This phrase is taken out of a well-known Quranic Chapter 8 entitled *Al-Anfal* (The Spoils of War), verse 46, which originally reads: *Inmallaaha ma'ash-shaabiriin* (For Allah is with those who patiently persevere).

<sup>34</sup> Cibelati is a small town in West Java.

*Makan arem-arem serasa anget*

*Ama banci mah serem amet*

[Eating *arem-arem* feels warm<sup>35</sup>

With an effeminate is very frightening]

He then asked the audience, and asked: “You know why it is so? Do you know why? I have been told that”:

*Jangan suka makan kwaci*

*Karena kwaci makanan kampret*

*Jangan suka godain banci*

*Karena banci dadanya karet*

[Do not eat too often *kwaci*<sup>36</sup>

Because *kwaci* is food for small bats<sup>37</sup>

Do not fool around with the effeminates

Because their breasts are made of plastic]

There are at least two points in this example worth noting. Ustadz Taufiqurrahman is seen as a religious figure, with the title *ustadz* before his name. This implies that the individual is more knowledgeable in religious sciences than the average person or audience, hence the venerated title *ustadz*. The other damaging aspect of his performance was that it was shown live during the holy month of Ramadhan.<sup>38</sup> This raises further questions about the appropriateness of such contemptuous statements made by the *ustadz*, in a month when he and the audience were supposed to be observing the ritual of fasting or abstinence from food, water and sexual activities during the day. As a consequence, SCTV received an “administrative sanction” from KPI.

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<sup>35</sup> *Arem-arem* is a traditional Indonesian food made up of sticky rice wrapped in banana leaf with meat or chicken inside.

<sup>36</sup> *Kwaci* is salted dried watermelon seeds usually eaten as a snack in Indonesia.

<sup>37</sup> The term *kampret* is a particularly derogatory term to characterise shady, untrustworthy people working under the cover of darkness, and engaging in illicit activities such as burglary and others.

<sup>38</sup> Aired on SCTV’s *Sabarr Tingkat 2* [patience level 2] on 24 July 2012 at 10:53 a.m.

*Mocking underprivileged people*

Judging from their communication patterns, some Indonesian television programmes have yet been sensitised to the most basic ethical principles about offending people with disabilities or learning difficulties, low-income earners, and the poor. Labels such as *gila* [crazy], *cacat* [handicapped], *orang susah* [literally, people with difficulty] or *miskin* [poor] are sprinkled in many programmes, notably comedies and variety shows.

On one occasion, after humiliating an audience member for his physical appearance, the hosts began a tirade about low-income earners, in this case bus drivers. The young teenager, named Rosi, was called onto the stage by the good-looking hosts. One host then yelled, “Hey audience!” “Hoy!” the audience shouted back. “Did you guys notice Rosi’s teeth? They are like gates to a zoo,” the host said. As though that were not bad enough, another male host called Rosi, and asked, “Rosi, is your dad a bus driver?” Rosi replied, “How would you know?” The host responded, “Because your face is flat, just like the front part [of the bus].” This was followed by an uproar of laughter from the live audience members.

In a programme called “John Lenong” broadcast on TransTV on 22-26 July 2012, one comedian host lamented to his colleague, “Oh, so you are a *tukang bakso* [meatball-soup seller], because your face is like coffee residue.”

*Undermining religion*

Religion too has been a target of ridicule by various television programmes. Although these ethical violations have seemingly tended to be unintentional or based on simple ignorance, the recurrences hardly seem to be innocuous and even suggest a systematic attempt at undermining religion and God.

A prominent and voluptuous singer Zaskia once conducted a stage performance, where she greeted the audience with the typical Muslim

religious greeting *Assalaamu 'alaykum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh* [peace be upon you all and I hope that you shall receive mercy and blessing from Allah]. The problem was not the greeting, which in the Islamic tradition is *sunnah* [a commendable act]. Rather, it was how Zaskia conducted her usual *itik* dance move as she greeted the audience, shaking her buttocks profusely and rotating in all directions. The MUI protested and urged the KPI to “request an assessment” [*Permintaan Penilaian*] of the programme. It made four statements:

- The phrase *Assalaamu 'alaykum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh* is a prayer derived from the holy Quran;
- The sexually suggestive act of shaking one’s buttocks while reciting the Quran in public is deemed unfitting and inappropriate;
- Viewers who watched the television programme are diverse and not restricted by age or educational level. What is more, the imitative effects of television programmes are very high.
- The MUI therefore urges the Central Office of the KPI to take an appropriate decision on this matter.

As a consequence, KPI imposed an “administrative sanction” on the programme and forced the television station to shorten the programme’s duration.

Indonesian television programmes are rife with such ethical violations. Some have even gone as far as name-calling, which undermines the elevated position that human beings occupy, based on Islamic religious precepts and ethical teachings.

### **Islamic Humour**

At its most superficial level, Islam seems to be somewhat ambivalent when it comes to humour and play. On the one hand, the sacred texts of Islam (i.e. the Quran and voluminous body of *hadists*) predominantly contain teachings that delve into serious subjects such as God, his divine will and plan, mysticism, martyrdom, cosmology, eschatology,

salvation, and the destiny of humankind. In fact, like all other religions, some of the most serious subjects propounded by religious zealots are the all-too-familiar stories of heaven and hell and the prospects for those who are on the side of belief or unbelief. For radical and militant Muslims, emphasis is placed on the teachings that clearly reinforce the demarcation between Muslims [literally, those who submit] and the *Kafirs* [infidels] and on the inescapable logic of war, conflict and Armageddon.

To support the seriousness of the subject matter, one famous Prophetic saying often cited by the depressed Sufis and Muslim mystics alike is that: "If only thou knowest what I know, thou wilt be in tears for fear of what is to come." This is reinforced by the legal opinion of one of the most celebrated theologians and philosophers of Islam, Hojjatoleslam Muhammad al-Ghazali. One of the harshest critics of comedians, he argued that people whose preoccupation is to make people laugh will only lead people astray and to forget the path of God.

On the other hand, the Prophet Muhammad, despite the heavy burden of responsibility placed on him, is depicted in many *hadists* as being playful and humorous with his companions and followers. One story recounts how a woman approached the Prophet of God and complained about her husband, who had been less than fair to her. The Prophet of God Muhammad responded by asking the woman whether or not her husband was the one with the white spots in his eyes. The woman felt perplexed and relayed the Prophet's saying to her husband. The husband explained that the Prophet was merely playing with her. He told her that every human being has white spots in their eyes. Her husband was no exception.

Another *hadist* related by Anas bin Malik relates an incident when a man came to the presence of Prophet Muhammad and sought to get a ride on a camel. The Prophet replied, "We should then give you a ride on a camel's baby then." The man was stunned and tried to confirm

what the Prophet had just said. “O Messenger of God, how can I ride on a camel’s baby?” With his usual warm smile, the Prophet responded, “Are not all camels the babies of a mother camel?” (*Abu Dawud*, On Ethics No. 92).

Such *hadists*, together with many others, suggest how even a prophet of God deploys playful humour to engage and interact with his followers. When asked about the Prophet’s playfulness with his companions, one of his followers said, “O Prophet Muhammad, yet you also joke with us!” He replied: “Yes, I do. But I only tell the truth.” In many ways, this attitude is consistent with what is revealed in the chapter *Al-Hujurat* (49:11), which states that:

O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: It may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): Nor let some women laugh at others: It may be that the (latter are better than the (former): Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used of one) after he has believed: And those who do not desist are (indeed) doing wrong.

A comparable kind of humour can be found in the extensive literature of popular Sufism, containing witty humour, counter-intuitive parables and countless tales of whimsical, if not quirky, behaviour on the part of Muslim mystics. One such celebrated Sufi was Mullah Nasruddin Hoya, whose refreshing jokes have inspired many of his ardent followers:

Being a popular figure in society, Nasruddin Hoya was one of the most sought-after *khatibs* [sermoners for the Friday congregational prayers]. However, owing to his genius, he was always successful in rejecting politely the people’s earnest and persistent offer. Until one day, he had run out of options and excuses. So he finally went up to the pulpit and asked the congregation: “My dear congregation, do you know what I am

about to say?” The congregation shouted back at Hoya by saying: “No! How could we know?” Hoya then responded by saying: “In that case, what is the use for me to say anything if you don’t know what I will be talking about?” He then stepped down from the pulpit, leaving members of the congregation all confused. The following week, the congregation members – wanting to desperately listen to Hoya’s sermon – agreed to respond affirmatively when asked the question. So when Hoya stepped up to the pulpit, he asked again: “My dear congregation, do you know what I am about to say?” Having agreed on the right kind of response beforehand, the congregation shouted back at Hoya by saying: “Yes, we do!” Hoya then said, “In that case, what is the use for me to say anything here if you already know what I am going to say?” The whole congregation became frustrated, and then conspired against Hoya, and planned a different response. So, in the following Friday prayers, Hoya again asked the same question. And as a response, one member of the congregation responded to Hoya by saying, “Some of us here know what you will say, while others do not.” Hoya stood still for a moment, and replied: “In that case, those who know what I am about to say should inform those who do not know,” as he climbed down from the pulpit with a victorious smile.

This witty tale shows how Islamic humour is normally played out. One of its characteristics is the absence of any tasteless, vulgar or offensive materials. As the examples above illustrate, there are no victims nor any cause for any casualties of the heart. It is characterised by refreshing ideas based largely on counter-intuitive religious logic, which has been a particular trademark of the Muslim mystics.

Contemporary Islamic humour in Indonesia was most perfectly illustrated by the late president Abdurrahman Wahid, otherwise known as Gus Dur, whose political witticisms habitually overlapped with self-

deprecating jokes. Gus Dur came from a blue-blood line. His grandfather was Syaikh Hasyim Ashari, founder of the influential *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) in the early 20th century. His father, Wahid Hasyim, was Indonesia's first Minister of Religious Affairs. Gus Dur's political victory over Megawati during the 1999 elections proved beyond doubt his cunning skills in politics, despite his party's loss to hers. In one political conference, Gus Dur joked about himself. He said:

All Indonesian presidents are crazy. Our first president, Sukarno, was crazy for women. Our second president, Suharto, was crazy for money. Our third president, Habibie, was crazy for aeroplanes. And the fourth president [Gus Dur himself] was truly crazy [*gila beneran*].

Such behaviour led many to find Gus Dur one of the most fascinating figures in Indonesian politics and the Muslim religious community. Sadly, his political enemies exploited such habits of Gus Dur to bring his presidency to an abrupt halt, arguing that his seemingly erratic style of leadership was unpresidential and counterproductive for Indonesia.<sup>39</sup>

In the United States, following the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, a similar phenomenon can be found in the Muslim and Arab community. Some have made headway in stand-up comedy by exploiting their problematic identity as the perpetually accused. Muslim comics from *Allah Made Me Funny* and the *Axis of Evil*, two of the most popular examples, also resort to self-deprecation to put forward their social criticisms, notably of the government's heavy-handed approach to the war on terror as well as the policy of racial profiling and stereotyping.

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<sup>39</sup> Gus Dur was voted out of office by parliamentary impeachment after serving less than two years. He was replaced by then Vice-President Megawati, who continued his presidential term until 2004, before she was defeated in an electoral landslide by the current President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.



Thus, in many ways, religion has not been so unfamiliar to comics and the world of entertainment. Religion has been part and parcel of the entertainment industry, providing its own self-serving justifications and rationale for their marriage of convenience.

## DAKWAHTAINMENT AND ITS DISCONTENTS

This chapter will critically examine the *dakwahtainment* industry and assess its implications and impacts within the framework of ethical discontent. The problems raised here include lack of meaningful substance in Islamic propagation, commodification of religion and ethical criticisms.

### The Dumbing Down Effect

*Dakwahtainment* or Islamic televangelism is a concept combining *dakwah* [or Islamic propagation] and entertainment in television broadcasts.<sup>40</sup> The phenomenon denotes the proliferation and amplification of popular Islam, where “fans”, “friends” and “followers” participate through the medium of television and transform themselves into a *jama'ah* [religious congregation]. It is through television that celebrity *ustadzs* gain their credibility and authority, challenging the conventional power, influence and charismatic appeal of the *kiyais*

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<sup>40</sup> The dataset presented in this chapter is mainly derived from direct observation through recordings made with my research assistants throughout 2012. Others were derived from KPI and MUI's documents on monitoring, warning and advisory letters.

[Javanese, religious scholar-teachers], whose base has been largely centred in and around the Pesantrens.

Discontent with *dakwahtainment* in Indonesia begins with the way it systematically mixes spiritual enlightenment and entertainment, which creates a dumbing-down effect. This is often at the expense of the substance of the religious message. As a concept and practice, dumbing down originated in American popular culture. It was seen as consistent with the way capitalism and the free market generally operate, focusing solely on the supply of the goods the consumers demand with very little consideration for making them smarter. It assumes that cultural products need not be intellectually heavy, if the intended goal is to achieve accessibility, comprehensibility and marketability. The notion of dumbing down in media and cultural studies denotes the deliberate de-intellectualisation of cultural contents to ensure mass acceptability. This line of argument is based on the assumption that the majority of television viewers – as consumers of culture – prefer to take pleasure in such mode of thinking. The idea suggests that the dumber a cultural product is the better. This is because the uncritical masses can relate to it more easily than they would otherwise.

Many *dakwahtainment* programmes deliberately deploy props, scripts and setups based on comedies of error to support Islamic propagation. Celebrity preachers such as the late Uje, Yusuf Mansyur and Mamah Dedeh are all partnered with comedians, who act as their host or programme counterpart. Such an industrial tactic is supposedly to lighten up, not enlighten, the usually all-too-serious Islamic *dakwah* messages, effectively giving the impression that religion is fun, cool, trendy and most importantly intellectually digestible. The *dakwahtainment* phenomenon has therefore transformed what used to be serious-minded *dakwah* programmes into religious preaching and gathering filled with routine anecdotes and jokes. This is combined with an array of performative skill sets employed by the celebrity *ustadz*s,

which ultimately results in a shift in the way the audience perceives and expects religion and spirituality to be.

The whole industrialisation of *dakwahtainment* with the range of props, scripts and setups has become a necessary evil for these programmes to flourish in Indonesian television, hence safeguarding the interest of the supposedly dumb and uncritical public. The previously famous preacher Aa Gym, whose fame skyrocketed from the late 1990s to 2006, had to succumb to such pressure and evidently tried hard to appeal to the audience by preaching anecdotes to the Muslim masses.

Mansyur too is unable to guard himself from similar industrial pressures. Being a celebrity *ustadz*, he once recounted to the author how a television producer insisted on him to have a “comedian looking like *ondel-ondel*” [traditional giant puppet from Jakarta] in his programme to infuse entertainment for the purposes of the audience.<sup>41</sup> Mansyur adamantly rejected the idea and left to sign a contract with another television network. “I have no problem with this. Besides, I never get paid anyway for my *dakwah*. I don’t need money. I am already rich. You can ask any of the television networks, I never ask compensation for what I do,” Mansyur confidently said.<sup>42</sup> Currently, Mansyur has two television programmes, namely *Wisata Hati* [tour of the heart] and *Chatting dengan YM* [chatting with Yusuf Mansyur] on ANTV. While *Wisata Hati* is more geared towards the study of the Quran and its *tafsir* [interpretation or hermeneutics], the latter is designed to be an informal talk show to discuss matters related to Islam or religious way of life with guests invited to talk about their experiences. Like other *dakwahtainment* programmes, such as *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh*, the host of the *Chatting dengan YM* is also a well-known comedian.

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Mansyur on October 11, 2012 in Daarul Qur’an, a boarding school for the memorisers of the Quran, located in Cikokol, Tangerang.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem*.

The inclusion of such comedians in the *dakwahtainment* programmes is indeed ironic. The problem begins with the dichotomy of the *tuntunan* and *tontonan* principle: spiritual guidance plus entertainment. *Dakwah* programmes succumb easily to the lure of the entertainment business model, reducing considerably the integrity and credibility of the religious message, as well as that of the preachers, who receive handsome amounts in return for the advertisements they invite to these programmes. This is not to mention the high income received by some of these celebrity preachers from the programme commercials and direct product endorsements in television advertisements.<sup>43</sup>

Hence, in the context of the Indonesian *dakwahtainment* programmes, the dumbing-down effect works both ways for the media executives – who conveniently exploit the viewers' naiveté – as well as the audience, who just want to cut to the chase, and get the tips and tricks on how to become a good Muslim, receive salvation and enter Paradise. The dumbing-down effect also psychologically affects the preachers engaged in this practice, as it provides a disincentive for them to dig deeper into the essence of the teachings of the religion and the method in which to preach it.

As a typical practice, dumbing-down in Indonesian *dakwahtainment* programmes takes the form of inviting comedians in the hope that they can instil lightness and offer entertainment to the viewers. In many cases, the producers and creative team members of the programme insist that the celebrity comedians engage in deliberate patterns of action: one is asking stupid questions; the other is muddling (*ngerekcoki*) the programme, which if ever effective would be perceived by the audience as a comedy of errors. In other cases, the comedians host the programme, which promotes the image that Islam is not a radical religion and that the teachings are accessible and enjoyable for ordinary Muslims to digest.

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<sup>43</sup> More discussion on this topic will be delved into in subsequent chapters.

Typical *dakwahtainment* programmes usually involve at least one religious preacher, called *ustadz* [male], *ustadzah* [female], *da'i* or simply *penceramah* [literally, one who gives sermons]. He or she is often accompanied by a celebrity comedian or former model or actress acting as the host of such programmes. In some programmes, the standard practice is to make clear when and how to infuse the *tuntunan* and when to bring forward the *tontonan*. Aa Abdel, a comedian and host for the daily programme entitled *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh* [heart to heart with Mother Dedeh] on ANTV, recalls how previously during the height of his popular programme in *Indosiar*,<sup>44</sup> the producer and creative team strictly followed a principle of 70% *tuntunan* and 30% *tontonan*, where the host becomes responsible for compliance with the principle.<sup>45</sup> This way, the entertainment aspect is never forgotten nor left out and is sure to lighten up the spirit of the programme. If the host happens to be a comedian, like Aa Abdel, the entertainment aspect is guaranteed through the habitual incorporation of witty comments and humour, which may or may not be to the benefit of the moral and religious messages being put forth.

Well-known actresses, models, and eminent MCs often serve as hosts to the more serious *dakwah* programmes with Muslim intellectuals such as Professor Quraish Shihab and Professor Nazaruddin



Umar. Utilising their renowned facial beauty and fully equipped with

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<sup>44</sup> The *Indosiar* programme entitled “*Mamah dan Aa*” (Mother and Brother) preceded the one in ANTV. While the latter has been broadcast for just one and a half years, the former one was broadcast consistently for six years, which attest to the popularity of the programme mostly among Indonesian women viewers.

<sup>45</sup> Interview held at ANTV studio in Jakarta on October 13, 2012.

their top-notch Muslim designer fashion, they serve as eye-candy to draw in viewers' attention and interest. Such a host is Inneke Kusherawati, a former model and famous actress, who now dons the *hijab* [veil], and frequently hosts Professor Shihab's Quranic *tafsir* [interpretation] programme *Tafsir Al-Mishbah* in *MetroTV*,<sup>46</sup> particularly during the month of Ramadhan.

In format and stage setting, *dakwahtainment* programmes apply a structured sequencing that allows for a free flow of questions to the *ustadz*s or *ustadzah*s. This is indeed a departure from the New Order period, when questions posed during *dakwah* programmes were screened and pre-conceived to prevent any sensitive discussions being openly aired or broadcast. *Dakwahtainment* programmes largely adopt the form of talk shows with an initial seven-minute *tawsiyah* [Arabic, spiritual advice], followed by a question-and-answer session, where the conversation between the *penceramah* [preacher] and *jamaah* [congregation] is regulated by the celebrity host and monitored closely by the producer and creative team members backstage, giving instructions and tactics on how to run the show. Such a system perpetuates the *dakwahtainment* industry, which in turn dictates the kind and quality of programmes shown on television and how religion functions so effectively so as to lure the television audience.

This is not to argue that no *dakwah* programmes on Indonesian television are of sufficient quality. There are *dakwah* programmes, such as *Indonesia Berdzikir* or *Indonesia Bangkit* on *TVOne*, which are normally set in major mosques in Indonesia and emphasise the core messages of the sermons, with little room for questions and answers. To lump these together with the regular *dakwahtainment* programmes is

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<sup>46</sup> A graduate of the reputable Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Shihab is a well-respected Islamic scholar, who authored a 15-volume series of *tafsir* of the entire Quran. For a short while during the tail end of Suharto's regime, he was appointed as Indonesia's Minister for Religious Affairs.

comparing apples with oranges. In these serious *dakwah* programmes, the preachers invited to give the sermons are earnest and solemn *ustadz*s concerned with contemporary problems of the Indonesian nation specifically or the Islamic *ummah* generally. Often these programmes touch upon sensitive political issues, such as corruption, abuse of power, and a lack of pro-poor policies in the country. The only drawback is that they do not share the same level of mass appeal as the *dakwahtainment* programmes, as the *ustadz*s or preachers unmistakably lack star quality compared to their more popular counterparts, consequently rendering their sermons less entertaining, especially among lower-middle-class Indonesian Muslims.

*Dakwahtainment* programmes have reached millions of viewers over a course of around 15 years and are followed by those who enjoy these programmes in the comfort of their homes. The key formula for success is maintaining a good balance between *tuntunan* and *tontonan*. In the words of Aa Gym's MQ Corp, the principle can be succinctly put as "*dakwah* content that is entertaining". This is done by amalgamating the religious fervour of the Muslim middle class with the functional utilisation of the profit-hungry media industry that constantly seeks for new and varied forms of entertainment.

For Mamah Dedeh, the popular female preacher who has been successful in both *Indosiar* and *ANTV*, the balanced formula of 70% *tuntunan* and 30% *tontonan* has been religiously observed. This way, the audience can receive the best of both worlds, where religion is deliberately mixed and entangled with the pleasures of entertainment. Similar to infotainment and variety comedy shows on Indonesian television, *dakwahtainment* also suffers from lack of substance and meaningfulness. The same trivial questions are asked over and over again in *dakwahtainment* programmes, prompting even Mamah Dedeh, who has been in the industry for at least eight years, to comment, "I get



tired of such questions being asked time and again.”<sup>47</sup> This has been one of the reasons why the producer of *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh* [heart to heart] once said, “The quality of the programme depends very much on the quality of the questions being posed during the programme.”<sup>48</sup> Being a live programme with real audiences indeed requires some form of engineering, especially when the programme entails a question and answer session, where improvisation is imperative. Thus, for *dakwahtainment* to maintain its relevance and audience retention, the producers and creative teams must constantly confront the challenge of formatting and reformatting the programmes.<sup>49</sup>

Related to this binary imperative of *tuntunan* and *tontonan*, *dakwahtainment* programmes also suffer from intentional dumbing down by the *penceramah* [preachers] and the *jamaah* [congregation]. On the side of the *penceramah*, it is crucial that the subject matter for discussion is deliberately simple and easy to understand. As with Aa Gym at his peak of career, simplicity is key to roping in as many audience members as possible. This is done through the choice of topics, the way in which the topics are discussed, and the infusion of jokes, poems and songs to lighten up the programme. In the case of Uje, his high-pitched voice, eloquent recitation of the Quran and good looks serve to inspire, guide and entertain the audience all at the same time.

On the part of the *jama'ah*, dumbing down comes in the form of indolence and the habit of asking uncritically about basic Islamic precepts, which most of the time are irrelevant or insignificant. When given the chance to pose questions, the congregation mostly raise trivial issues pertaining to *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence. At the superficial

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<sup>47</sup> Interview held with Mamah Dedeh on October 13, 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Interview held with Desy on October 13, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> During the time of the research, and after intensive conversations with the producer of *Heart to Heart*, the daily live programme now gives away goodie bags to the members of the audience who pose the best questions. This is one of the ways in which such *dakwahtainment* programmes adapt the format and adopt new ways to retain audience interest.

level, this may suggest that Indonesian Muslims are inclined to abide by the law (*mematuhi peraturan*), but it may signify a greater problem in understanding Islam: that religion is all about what is permissible (*halal*) and what is forbidden (*haram*). The most common questions pertain to *wudlu* [ablution], *shalat* [prayers], *haji* [pilgrimage], *munakahat* [marriage], and *ghibah* [gossiping]. Such a reductionist approach to Islam is reinforced by the persistent aversion towards issues that are relevant and pertinent to Indonesian society, such as social justice, corruption, governance, juvenile delinquency, leadership, environmental degradation, and many strategic issues of high importance.

This could be in part because the members of the *Majelis Ta'lim* or congregation are largely people, notably women, with a low educational background. When the team of researchers randomly analysed the socioeconomic demography of the studio audience in *Heart to Heart* in early 2012, it was apparent that most of the members of the *Majelis Ta'lim* were of low educational level, with most having only primary and secondary education. Only one person was a graduate of a tertiary level institution. Interviewed for the research, the former producer of *Heart to Heart*, Desy, said, "We have to be mindful that Mamah Dedeh's congregation is mostly *ibu-ibu* [mothers]. And when I tried to increase the theme's substance a bit, the *ibu-ibu* would often be stupefied. And so, we would just ask them to pose any question they like, even if they were outside of the theme of each episode."<sup>50</sup>

Apart from the deliberate lowering of the programme's substance, the case of Mamah Dedeh also provides insight into the cultural gulf between her traditional constituents and the others. Desy recounted to the author how on one occasion the programme received a *Majelis Ta'lim* comprising *ibu-ibu* from Pondok Indah, Jakarta.<sup>51</sup> As it turned out, the flow of discussion did not go very well. "There seems to be a

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<sup>50</sup> Interview held with the producer in ANTV on 26 April 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Pondok Indah is one among few posh and leafy residential areas in South Jakarta, where members of the country's elite society live.

disconnection [*gak nyambung*] between Mamah Dedeh and the congregation.” Here lies the imperative and rationalisation for the dumbing-down effect.

## **Religious Commodification**

Kitiarsa (2008) argues that religious commodification is a “complex historical and cultural construction” that does not necessitate the arrival of “religious malaise”, or even “produce new religious forms and movements that oppose the institutionalised beliefs and practices of religious organisations”, but requires “an understanding of cultural frameworks in order to unlock their symbolic and socio-economic significance”. According to Kitiarsa (2008: 3):

It is theoretically appropriate to situate religious commodification in Asia within a broad conceptual spectrum of secularisation and its counter-model. This commodification is deemed to turn religion into marketable goods, bringing them into various scales and modes of market transaction.

In the case of Indonesian *dakwahtainment*, it is wholly apparent that the commodity here is Islam, and that the targeted consumers are the burgeoning Indonesian Muslim middle class.

Undoubtedly, the trend seems to suggest that it is Muslim women who are the main target for these *dakwahtainment* programmes. The reason for this may be quite simply because many Muslim homemakers in Indonesia have time on their hands and, most importantly, power to purchase the derivative products that go along with the marketisation of religion. Casual observation of the good looks, charming personality and religious outlook of the male preachers suggests that the television executives also know what the female mass audience desires to see. There may be a different but similar effect when Muslim female audiences view the strong personality of Mamah Dedeh, who can inspire women to be emotionally strong and financial independent. All in all,

the audience is trapped in the logic of the television industry. As I have argued elsewhere:

The Indonesian audience – comprising mostly women homemakers sitting in the studio and in their homes – become addicted to such *dakwahtainment* programmes, and ultimately often get caught up in the web of industrial interests, conveniently wrapped in religious fervour (Sofjan 2012: 60-61).

Two of the most banal practices of religious commodification in *dakwahtainment* programmes can be seen in the tariffs set for the celebrity *ustads* and in the use of Islamic symbolism to market consumer products to targeted Muslim consumers. The tariff logic is that these preachers' only occupation is *dakwah*; therefore fees deriving from their services should be compensated. Hence, all *dakwahtainment* programmes in Indonesia normally apply such tariff systems. What seem abnormal are the phenomenal rates they set, dependent on the revenue generated from the corporate advertisements sponsoring each programme.

The assumption that religion affects consumers' preference to consume products positively and significantly is in no way universal. The logic follows that producers will use religious symbolism to help boost the marketability of their products. However, empirical evidence from the United States suggests otherwise. Weatherby and Pugh (2008) examine religious symbolism in television commercials in the U.S., using content analysis. Their findings suggest that television advertisers are reluctant to use religion to help sell their products. Only a small amount of advertisements "had religious or spiritual content".

Given such circumstances, responsibility cannot be wholly put on the shoulders of the media executives, who operate largely on a hyper-rationalist, materialist and capitalist basis, where profits dictate the longevity of a programme and even the career of a celebrity preacher.

Thus, part of the blame should go the facilitators and regulators, in this case the government. Ustadz Mansyur agrees. He argues:

The Ministry of Religious Affairs is partly to blame. They are part of the problem, not the solution. I was once invited to attend one of its meetings, and a high-ranking official said that the Ministry will strive to help the preachers to have similar incentives as the celebrities on television. We will guarantee that your rights are equal to the celebrities. Can you imagine?<sup>52</sup>

The problem posed by Ustadz Mansyur here relates to the incentive and wealth accumulation by the supposed celebrity preachers. Public cynicism towards them centres mostly on the tariffs set by the managers of these *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs*. One report mentioned a famous celebrity *ustadz*, whose tariff stands at Rp. 12-15 million (equivalent to US\$1200-1500) per hour. Another young *ustadz*, who was part of the *Pemburu Hantu* team, is said to own six extravagant houses amounting to tens of billions of rupiahs. Another young and handsome *ustadz*, who supposedly repented from living a life as a drug addict and womaniser, now earns around Rp. 40-50 million (equivalent to US\$4,000-5,000) for every hour of his televised series to call Muslims to the faith. For lesser events at the level of high schools or universities, the fee for one sermon is Rp. 20 million (around US\$2,200), where Rp. 10 million is said to be for charity at the *ustadz's* choosing, and the other Rp. 10 million for his travel expenses with family members and personal assistants.<sup>53</sup>

A recent case of tariff-setting involved Ustad Solmed, one of the most popular, or at least most visible, preachers on Indonesian television. A recent flood of news reported how he had allegedly turned down a *dakwah* invitation to Hong Kong in mid-2013 from the Indonesian Muslim community called the *Thoriqul Jannah* [the path to heaven]. The invitation supposedly included a fee of HK\$6,000 and

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<sup>52</sup> Idem.

<sup>53</sup> Information derived from one person who once invited Uje to his high school reunion.

return airfare for two. However, according to the organiser, who represents the thousands of Indonesian Muslim migrant workers in Hong Kong, Ustadz Solmed asked for more (US\$10,000), arguing that based on the plan the congregation would be asked to contribute money to take part in the event. In Ustadz Solmed's defence, it was said that he was willing to go to Hong Kong, even without pay, if the organiser would not ask for a contribution from the audience. Regardless of where the truth lies, the reputation of Ustadz Solmed has been negatively affected, and ever since the tariff-setting scheme among preachers has been debated in public. This is where the major discontent with *dakwahtainment* is found.



Nurul Yamin of *Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta* (UMY) argues:

*Dakwahtainment* hides a serious dualism. On the one hand, *dakwah* on television can be highly effective, but on the other hand, television is part and parcel of popular culture, which in it contains the ideology of capitalism ... [Thus], *dakwahtainment* becomes a challenge to the scholars of *dakwah* [Islamic propagation] because they are part of the construction that is very much influenced by the current mode of production and media people.<sup>54</sup>

On religious commodification, one high-ranking official from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Professor M. Machasin, said, "To resolve

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<sup>54</sup> "Dakwahtainment: Tantangan Bagi Sarjana Dakwah" in *Republika* daily (undated: p.12).

this issue, we must first determine whether *dakwah* originates from a ‘calling of the heart’ [*panggilan jiwa*] or a profession.” He argued that if *dakwah* were borne out of the sincere intention to spread the Word of Allah and the Message of Islam, then the tariff system may seem inappropriate and even unethical. However, if *dakwah* were to be regarded as a “profession”, then it would understandably require professional fees to be paid to the professional preachers, whose full-time occupation is to call people to the faith.

Another aspect of the commodification of religion is the use of celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* as instruments of the market. The commercialisation of products on television or other media in Indonesia has yet to escape the influence of religion. Many celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* lend themselves too much to the market and allow their public *personae* to be used by the corporate industry for branding and product promotion to the large Indonesian Muslim body of consumers.

Again, we see the serious effect of the mediatisation of Islam in reducing Islam to a form of entertainment viewing while turning the faithful into blind consumers of the products generated by the *dakwahtainment* industry. For the most part, *dakwahtainment* programmes provide huge economic benefits to television executives, as well as the celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs*, who have forsaken the needs of ordinary Muslims seeking religious advice and enlightenment or of those who try to pursue an authentic and ethical way of life consistent with Islamic values.

## **Ethical Shortcomings**

This section will discuss *dakwahtainment* within the ethical framework of Islam. It delves into the many ways in which Indonesian television has persistently undermined some of the core principles and values entrenched in Islam’s normative religious ethics.

As a matter of principle, Islam forbids the peddling of God's religion for worldly gain. This is unambiguously supported by the Quran, which stipulates: "And believe in what I reveal, confirming the revelation which is with you, and be not the first to reject Faith therein, nor sell My Signs for a small price; and fear Me, and Me alone." The portion of the verse that prohibits it – *wa laa tasytaruu bi aayaatii tsamanan qalilan* – refers to those who sell the Words of Allah for the purposes of gaining fame, fortune and other worldly pleasures such as influence, power and glory.

Other verses in the Quran, notably in the chapter on Huud, speak with a similar tone to that of the Prophet, who said: "And O my people! I ask you for no wealth in return: my reward is from none but Allah". In the same chapter, again, the Prophet Huud (SA) lamented, "O my people! I ask of you no reward for this (Message). My reward is from none but Him who created me: Will ye not then understand?" In another chapter of the Quran, the same sentiment against the sellers of religion is further emphasised: "No reward do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of the Worlds."

It is not only the Quran, however, that has pre-empted this negative habit among members of the religious class. Numerous Prophetic sayings point to such similar prohibition. One well-known *hadist* recalls how the Prophet Muhammad (SA) advised Muslims to beware of *ulama su'* [mischievous religious scholars]. He forewarned the Muslims, "Disaster will strike my community from the *ulama su'*, or those whose knowledge is utilised to gain worldly pleasures, prestige and position [in society]." Another famous and reliable *hadist* recounts one occasion when the Prophet Muhammad (SA) said, "Recite the Quran and intend it for Allah, before the arrival of a group of people who would recite the Quran and convert the Quran as a tool to seek wealth."

As the Prophet and Messenger of God, Muhammad is said always to surround himself with orphans, the poor and the destitute. This



inclination was most likely derived from his unfortunate childhood, when Muhammad was born and raised as an orphan and taken into custody by his loving uncle. And although the family of the young Muhammad held an outstanding position in Meccan society, and therefore was not nearly as destitute, Muhammad had more than his fair share of economic hardship, especially during the early part of the revelation, when the Meccan ruling class, some of which were his direct relatives, disowned him. Despite the hardship, he kept his noble attitudes, maintained fair dealings even with his enemies, and always spoke the truth. Hence, he was known in Mecca as *Al-Amin* [the trusted one]. Thus, during the early phase of Islamic propagation, Muhammad did not display any symptom of being a celebrity preacher in Mecca, much less requesting wealth for the universal message he was about to spread to the Arab world and beyond.<sup>55</sup>

Imam Ali ibn Abu Thalib (AS) too cautioned against “selling salvation”. In his word of advice to Kumayl bin Ziyad Nakha’i, the spiritual leader said:

Look Kumayl! Here I hold stores and treasures of knowledge. I wish I could find somebody to share it with me. Yes, I found a few, but one of them, though quite intelligent, was untrustworthy, he would sell his salvation to get hold of the world and its pleasures, he would make religion a pretence to grasp worldly power and wealth, he would make this Blessing of Allah (knowledge) serve him to get supremacy and control over friends of Allah and he would through knowledge exploit and suppress other human beings.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Muhammad’s steadfastness serves as a strong modality for Islam, considering that numerous worldly pleasures were offered by the Meccan ruling elite, who were worried that the religious teachings and the liberating message of the Prophet would ultimately destroy the existing *status quo* and render them equal to others, including the slaves.

<sup>56</sup> For all citations of Imam Ali, Jafery’s (undated) *Nahjul Balagha Hazrat Ali*.

On another occasion, Imam Ali also wrote to Qutham bin Abbas, the brother of Abdullah bin Abbas, who was governor of Imam Ali (AS) in the province of Hijaz:

These people have no eyes for truth and no ears for the Orders of Allah and sayings of the Holy Prophet(s). They are trying to reach the path of religion through wrong ways and to acquire worldly wealth and pleasure under the pretence of religious activities. Not only this, but they are also trying in various ways to persuade noble and pious persons to sell their salvation to the possession of pleasures of this life. They are serving their vicious ruler by sinning against Allah and man. (218)

From the above line of argument, it is clear that the Quran, Prophetic traditions and the teachings of spiritual leaders – as the primary sources of Islamic jurisprudence – consider teaching and preaching the Word of Allah in return for worldly gains as impermissible and even reprehensible. That the Prophet (SA) uses the term *ulama su'* in itself denotes his outright disapproval for such behaviour. The same holds true for the words of Imam Ali (AS) when he warns against selling salvation and religion for worldly pleasures and self-aggrandisement.

Indeed, this serves as a basic principle and an ethical framework for Islamic *dakwah*. For if Islamic propagation were to be based on structures of economic incentive or the Messenger were to derive compensation for teaching and preaching, it would have been extraordinarily difficult and perhaps impossible to spread the Message beyond those who could “purchase salvation” or those who sought worldly gains. This would undoubtedly have proven counterproductive for Islam, which prides itself on being a liberation movement for social justice, and constantly strives to defend the *mustadh'afiin* [the weak or the oppressed].

It is conceivable to think that there would be those who would criticise this line of thinking and see compensation for the preachers

within the framework of “helping one another”. The counter-argument would thus rationalise and justify such a proposition as being consistent with a part of the verse in the Quranic chapter entitled *Al-Ma'idah* (5: 2), which reads as follows: “Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour: fear Allah: for Allah is strict in punishment”.

The other related issue concerns the extravagant lifestyles of these celebrity *ustads*. Many engage in celebrity-like lifestyles and are habitually absorbed in a sense of self-grandeur, feeding directly their self-glorification and self-exaltation. Ustad Solmed, for instance, a rising star in the industry who recently married for the second time with a celebrity, is as much present in the *dakwah* scene as he is in the infotainment programmes. In the latter, much of the coverage is on his newly adopted lifestyle as a celebrity *ustad*, who often takes infotainment journalists on a tour of his luxury home, even as far as the comfort of his bedroom. The extravagance does not stop there. On the pretext of targeting young cosmopolitan Muslims, Aa Gym, Ustadz Solmed and Ustadz Jeffry, who died recently in a crash, have also been huge enthusiasts for Harley Davidsons and other such motorcycles.

Many of these celebrity *ustadz*s are thus prone to *riya'* [self-admiration], which in itself can destroy one's faith and sincerity. *Riya'* connotes good deeds that please God, but with the ulterior motive or intention of making those other than God admire the person engaging in the good deed. Here, the use of infotainment programmes and the mass media are strategic for these celebrity *ustads*. It is often found that these celebrity *ustads* will invite infotainment journalists to cover their charity work, giving food to the orphans, or preparing a spiritual journey for the *'umrah* [minor pilgrimage]. This is usually done with fanfare and pomp, inviting journalists, photographers, cameramen, celebrities and Jakarta socialites. When interviewed close up, they typically argue playfully that such events have been part of their lifelong habits and come purely from

their intention *untuk berbagi kebahagiaan* [to share their happiness with others].

*Riya'* in Islam, notably in *Irfan* [theosophical knowledge], clearly presents a grave problem, directly connected to the solemn affairs of the heart. The basic Islamic principle is that “when the right hand gives, the left hand shall not know”. Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini, for instance, in his famous book of ethics entitled *Chihil Hadist* [40 prophetic traditions], dealt with *riya'* as among the foremost evils committed by the human heart. Drawing on Yazid ibn Khalifah, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (AS) once said, “*Riya'* in any of its forms amounts to *shirk* [polytheism]; verily, one who works for the people, his reward lies with them, and one who works for God his reward lies with God.”<sup>57</sup> Imam Khomeini commented on the *hadist* on *riya'* as follows:

*Riya'* means to falsely make oneself appear to be virtuous, good natured or a true believer in God before the people for the sake of earning their respect and admiration, or with the purpose of gaining good reputation among them. The hypocrite feigns integrity, uprightness, virtue, honesty and piety without an authentic intention of acquiring these traits for the sake of God.

Furthermore, Khomeini believes that *riya'* can be tantamount to partnering Allah, which in effect could destroy one's good deeds and, over time, faith in God.

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<sup>57</sup> Ja'far al-Sadiq is the sixth imam in the lineage, according to the branch of Twelver Shia Islam (*Itsna Asyariyah*), which the predominant school in Iran and most of the Shia world.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The entanglement of Islamic propagation in the entertainment industry may seem to many a natural progression in a democratic country where religion holds sway. This is especially true when the democratic system has yet to reach the level of maturity, and when the stakeholders, namely the media executives, social and religious entrepreneurs and the lay public are still engulfed in euphoria, following the long and winding history of colonialism and autocracy. This democratic euphoria, which in Indonesian media parlance is dubbed “*democracy*”, subsequently results in socioeconomic, political and religious political experimentation.

As a socioeconomic experiment, *dakwahtainment* reveals an intricate, complex and multi-layered relationship between religion, the modern media (notably television), and the masses, involving diverse cultural systems that point to various tastes and preferences of people from different socioeconomic classes. Television as the provoker and circulator of meaning has a tendency to be more attuned to the dominant ideology, which is supported by the masses with preference for a certain religious lifestyle and range of consumer products.

*Dakwahtainment* programmes suffer from ethical shortcomings that beset religion’s engagement with the modern media and dictate the market association between the *penceramah* and the *jama’ah*. In the context of *dakwahtainment*, Islam thus becomes effectively the religion

of the market, where celebrity preachers dominate religious discourse amid the push and pull of Indonesia's market liberalisation, media freedom and fast-growing popular culture. *Dakwahtainment* programmes occupy a public space in which lower-middle-class Muslims can get a taste for religious fervour but still be in touch with their materialistic, consumerist, nihilistic and voyeuristic side.

Discontent with *dakwahtainment* arises from the trivialisation of religion, religious commodification and ethical shortcomings, all of which support modern materialistic, nihilist and consumerist ways of thinking and living. While the trivialisation of Islam necessitates the dumbing-down effect, religious commodification furnishes the Islamic community with a wide range of derivative products being promoted and advertised, ready to be consumed by the increasing number of Indonesian Muslim middle-class consumers. The ethical shortcomings, rife in many Indonesian television programmes, clearly show the great divide between the ideology or false consciousness (Karl Marx) of the media executives and those who dwell in the religious domain.

The current and amicable relationship between religion and television is sure to endure for a while, despite all the shortcomings and the questions over which of the two benefits more. The Muslim audience may still need *dakwahtainment* programmes to fill the spiritual void that the modern, secular and liberal lifestyle has been unable to satisfy. On the other hand, ethical considerations need to be taken into account to ensure that television programming suits the needs of both the profit-oriented media executives and the mass audience who wish to be enlightened and genuinely experience true joy in the comfort of religion.

### **Recommended actions**

Following the *reformasi* era, the KPI is confronted by a Herculean task of making broadcasting serve the public interest (*kemashlahatan*

*masyarakat*). It also aspires to encourage broadcasting companies to support national integration and essential character (*jati diri bangsa*) building, to educate the nation, to advance general social welfare and to help shape a society that is autonomous, democratic, just and prosperous. Based on the findings and insights deriving from the action research, this study therefore proposes a set of recommendations for the various stakeholders of *dakwahtainment* programmes:

1. Given its heavy mandate, there is a need for KPI to build stronger alliances with strategic stakeholders to scrutinise, and if possible put pressure on, television companies and broadcasting agencies to consider the various aspects of content, notably for *dakwahtainment* programmes and those related to religion. This recommendation includes closer collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, MUI and Islamic and other religious organisations.
2. Outreach programmes should be made to ensure greater cooperation with academic and research institutions. This way, KPI could potentially build upon knowledge, research and development to serve as policy inputs and recommendations. Studies could also involve evaluative research programmes to measure the performance and success of certain interventions or sanctions made by KPI.
3. There are currently many *dakwahtainment* and religiously oriented programmes in Indonesia that face ethical problems. It is recommended that KPI continue to hold direct consultations and negotiations with broadcasting agencies with the active participation and involvement of relevant stakeholders.
4. Scrutiny and monitoring of *dakwahtainment* programmes and religiously oriented programmes needs to be heightened to prevent further perversion and intensified commodification and to infuse better programming content and ethics to serve the public interest. This can be done by regular consultations with the stakeholders and experts to safeguard the key elements of the intended reform in

place, while staying clear of any market influence and politicisation by industry players.

5. If *dakwah* is considered a profession, whereby preachers justifiably receive incentives for their work, then such a line of work imperatively requires a code of ethics, just like other professional groups such as accountants, lawyers and doctors.



## ANNEX 1

### List of Partners and Contributors in the Action Research

List of organisations that were engaged or provided support and assistance to the Action Research project:

1. *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* (KPI) – Indonesian Broadcasting Commission
2. *Kementerian Agama* – Ministry of Religious Affairs
3. *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI) – Indonesian Council of *Ulama*
4. *Lembaga Bantuan Hukum* (LBH) APIK
5. *Fahmina* Institute
6. *Maarif* Institute
7. *Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU)
8. *Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia* (KPAI) – Indonesian Child Protection Commission
9. ANTV
10. RBTV
11. AdiTV
12. *Jogja TV*
13. *TVRI Jogja*
14. *Gatra*
15. *Republika*
16. *Kedaulatan Rakyat*
17. *Radar Jogja*
18. *Harian Jogja*
19. *Tribun Jogja*
20. *Swagama*
21. Ford Foundation
22. Postgraduate School of *Universitas Gadjah Mada*
23. Catholic Organisation for Development and Aid (Cordaid)

## ANNEX 2

### Government Laws and Regulations on Broadcasting

List of most relevant laws and regulations on broadcasting in Indonesia:

1. Law No. 20/1999 on Media
2. Regulation (*Peraturan*) No. 11/2005 on Formation of the Public Broadcasting Agency (State Document No. 28/2005)
3. Regulation No. 49/2005 on Code of Conduct on Reporting by Foreign Broadcasting Agency (State Document No. 126/2005 and Addendum No. 4565)
4. Regulation No. 50/2005 on the Conduct of Private Broadcasting Agency (State Document No. 127/2005 and Addendum No. 4566)
5. Regulation No. 51/2005 on Conduct of Community Broadcasting Agency (State Document No. 128/2005 and Addendum 4567)
6. Regulation No. 52/2005 on Conduct of Subscription-Based Broadcasting Agency state Document No. 129/2005 and Addendum No. 4568)
7. Presidential Decision No. 59/P/2010 on the Appointment of Members of the Central Office of the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission for the period of 2010-2013, etc.

### ANNEX 3

#### About KPI (Indonesian Broadcasting Commission)

KPI is an independent regulatory body based on Law No. 32/2002 on Broadcasting. The main basis for its establishment states that “the management of the broadcasting system belongs to the public domain (*ranah publik*) and must be managed by an independent body that is autonomous from the intervention of venture capitalists or from power interests”. The ratification of the recent Law was indeed a major departure from the previous Law No. 24/1997, ratified during the New Order, which states that “broadcasting is controlled by the state wherein the cultivation (*pembinaan*) and restraints (*pengendalian*) are done by the government”. This is a clear indication that Suharto saw the press as a convenient propaganda instrument of the state and government in essentially controlling what the public needs to know. Beginning on 5 May 2007, KPI has the following vision and mission:

*Vision:* An established national broadcasting system that is just and meaningful for the good of society’s welfare and prosperity.

*Mission:* To formulate policies on monitoring, controlling and development of broadcasting content.

Public complaints on television and radio broadcasting are usually channelled through *Facebook*, *Twitter*, email, or call centre, which, after some verification processes, are then relayed back to the public and published in the KPI website ([www.kpi.go.id](http://www.kpi.go.id)). On the website, follow-ups on complaints are reported to the public under the title of *Imbauan, Peringatan dan Sanksi* [appeals, warning and sanctions]. In it, KPI lists latest updated letters and actions undertaken against *agensi penyiaran* [broadcasting agencies] that violate the law, regulations or code of conduct.

One of the main points of the newly reformed broadcasting law on public service revolves around diversity. By this, it means two things:

1. diversity of content [*keberagaman isi*], which encourages broadcasting companies to provide differentiated programmes that are meaningful and inspiring for the viewers, both nationally and locally. For the latter, which is consistent with principle of decentralisation and regional autonomy, the Law hopes to provide incentive for local contents to equally have a share in the broadcasting scene.
2. diversity of ownership [*keberagaman kepemilikan*], which is akin to the anti-trust principle that could safeguard Indonesia from a monopoly in the media industry.

**ANNEX 4**  
**Pictures of Research Activities**











## ANNEX 5 Sampled Media Advocacy



**KUNJUNGAN ICRS** - Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) mengunjungi kantor *Tribun Jogja*, Selasa (10/7). Kunjungan ini bermaksud menyosialisasikan seminar yang akan diselenggarakan pada Selasa (17/7) di lantai tiga Gedung Sekolah Pascasarjana Universitas Gajah Mada (UGM) Yogyakarta.

### ICRS Gelar Workshop Religion and Gender in Indonesia

**INDONESIAN** Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS), sebuah program studi S3 Internasional di bidang studi agama dan budaya, akan menyelenggarakan *Workshop Religion and Gender in Indonesia* di Gedung Sekolah Pascasarjana UGM lantai tiga, Selasa (17/7).

*Workshop* ini memfokuskan pada hasil penelitian acara keagamaan "Hati ke Hati Bersama Marnah Dedeh" yang tayang di ANTV. Tujuannya, memvalidasi temuan awal dari penelitian yang telah dilakukan ICRS sejak Februari 2012.

Melalui fokus group discussion (FGD), peserta bersama-sama merumuskan rekomendasi yang akan disampaikan kepada pihak ANTV, terutama soal program televisi keagamaan pada umumnya.

*Workshop* ini kali pertama dilaksanakan di Jakarta pada 28 Juni lalu, dan dihadiri para akademisi, tokoh agama, aktivis LSM, aktivis gender dan praktisi media. *Workshop* menggunakan pendekatan konstruktivis, dimana setiap partisipan diharapkan mengeksplorasi, menemukan, menyimpulkan dan mengaplikasi pengetahuan dan

keterampilan yang mereka butuhkan.

*Workshop* juga didesain dengan keikutsertaan aktif partisipan di seluruh prosesnya, narasumber hanya memainkan perannya sebagai fasilitator untuk memberikan stimulus, motivasi dan informasi singkat kepada partisipan untuk berdiskusi.

*Workshop* ini merupakan forum terbuka dengan target 50 orang, peserta dari berbagai latar belakang keilmuan dan akan dihadiri pakar ilmu agama, mahasiswa, peneliti, dan aktivis keagamaan. (m1)

*Tribun Jogja*, Wednesday, July 11, 2012

## Berbahaya, Pemahaman Keagamaan Secara Instan

JOGJA—Maraknya *talkshow* interaktif di media yang membahas persoalan keagamaan secara instan, pada satu sisi memberikan dampak positif bagi masyarakat. Namun, bila pembahasan menyentuh persoalan substantif seperti gender, keyakinan dan hubungan sosial disampaikan secara instan, hal tersebut akan berbahaya.

Hal itu diungkapkan Direktur Indonesian Consortium for Religion Studies (ICRS) Sekolah Pascasarjana UGM, Siti Syamsiyatun kepada *Harian Jogja*, Selasa (17/7). Ia mengatakan, saat ini muncul fenomena masyarakat yang cenderung memahami masalah agama secara instan, spontan dan butuh kepastian jawaban tanpa memahami nilai-nilai yang dimaksud.

"Orang dalam dialog interaktif atau *talkshow* di televisi ingin mendapat jawaban spontan, iya atau tidak, haram atau halal, namun tidak disertai dengan penjelasan yang mendalam," jelas Atun Sapaan akrab Syamsiyatun, di ruang kerjanya, Selasa.

Dia mencermati maraknya *talkshow* dan dialog interaktif di media televisi, di mana banyak pertanyaan yang dihadapi masyarakat jawabannya cenderung disampaikan secara instan, terjebak hanya

pada dua jawaban iya atau tidak, halal atau haram. Menurut dia, satu sisi jawaban tersebut membantu masyarakat ketika membutuhkan kepastian agama dalam memberikan solusi yang dihadapi.

Tapi, jelas dia, bila jawaban terhadap hal-hal yang substantif juga diberikan secara spontan dan instan, hal tersebut justru akan berbahaya bagi pemahaman keagamaan masyarakat. Misalnya, masalah jihad, metode hisab dan rukyat untuk mengetahui awal bulan puasa dan Lebaran, poligami atau kewajiban menutup aurat bagi perempuan.

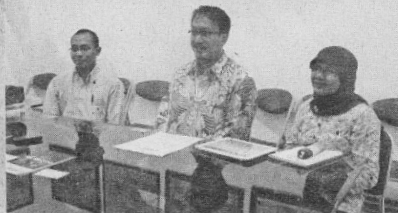
"Kalau jawaban itu hanya terjebak pada boleh atau tidak, maka akan sangat berbahaya. Itu hanya akan melahirkan masyarakat yang tidak menghormati perbedaan, berpandangan negatif terhadap perempuan yang tidak menutup aurat dan bisa berdampak pada kerukunan agama sendiri," jelas Atun.

Sementara, pada *workshop Religion and Gender in Indonesia*, yang digelar di Ruang 307 Sekolah Pascasarjana UGM, Tim peneliti ICRS mengambil fokus pada acara keagamaan *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dede*. *Workshop* sendiri diikuti oleh sekitar 50 orang aktivis gender di sejumlah lembaga,

baik Fatayat NU, PSW UGM, Suara Lintas Perempuan Indonesia, PSW UIN Sunan Kalijaga Dan Pusat Studi Islam UII Jogja.

Menurut Dicky Sofjan peneliti utama ICRS, *talkshow* Mamah Dede diambil karena sebagai pendakwa perempuan di televisi yang sangat fenomenal dan dikagumi penggemarnya. Di samping itu, katanya, rating di AC Nelson maupun iklan yang mendukung acara tersebut termasuk tinggi. "Untuk memvalidasi hasil temuan awal dan mendapatkan masukan dari berbagai pihak, Tim peneliti menggelar *workshop* di Jakarta dan Jogja," jelas Dicky.

Di antara temuan awal, lanjutnya, tim peneliti adalah tentang *nature of the program* di mana program tersebut merupakan program dakwah Islam di televisi yang dikemas dalam bentuk "curhat". Persoalan yang muncul kemudian, jelasnya, banyak *audience* Mamah Dede yang kemudian bertanya privasi hal-hal yang menyangkut pribadi dan mengarah pada penyebaran aib dan ghibah. "Misalnya, ibu-ibu anggota pengajian meminta solusi karena suaminya selingkuh, tetangganya sombong dan sebagainya. Itu menjadi salah satu masalah," jelasnya. (*Abdul Hamied Razak*)



*Harian Jogja/Holy Kartika N.S*

**Perwakilan** Indonesian Concoertium for Religious Studies (ICRS) saat berkunjung ke kantor Harian Jogja, Rabu (11/7).

### **ICRS Gelar *Workshop Religion and Gender* di Indonesia**

JOGJA—Indonesian Concoertium for Religious Studies (ICRS) akan menggelar serangkaian program *Religion and Gender in Indonesia*. Dalam audiensinya di Griya *Harian Jogja*, Rabu (11/7), salah satu programnya, Penelitian Aksi yang mengambil fokus pada salah satu acara keagamaan dari sebuah stasiun televisi swasta, *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh*.

Menurut Dicky Sofjan, Core Doctoral Faculty ICRS, program ini merupakan kerja sama tiga perguruan tinggi di Jogja, yakni Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga dan Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana.

"*Workshop* ini tidak ada semacam moderator atau apapun, di sini kami selaku peneliti nantinya akan mempresentasikan temuan-temuan kami tentang program yang dibawakan Mamah Dedeh dalam acara tersebut," kata Dicky.

Dari sisi manfaat yang diberikan dari program ini, sebanyak 70% lebih berfungsi sebagai tuntunan, sedangkan 30% sebagai tontonan. Faishol Adib selaku International scholar Host juga turut menambahkan melalui presentasi yang rencananya akan digelar Selasa (17/7) mendatang di sekolah Pasca Sarjana UGM nantinya akan ada tanggapan dari media dan masyarakat terkait segala sesuatu yang perlu diperbaiki dari acara tersebut. (*hon*)

*Harian Jogja*, Wednesday, July 11, 2012

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# Religion and Television in Indonesia: Ethics Surrounding Dakwahtainment

Dicky Sofjan (with Mega Hidayati)

This monograph provides a critical overview and assessment of *dakwahtainment* or Islamic televangelism in post-reform Indonesia. *Dakwah* is an Indonesian word based on Arabic that means propagation of Islam – a religious duty for all Muslims. This monograph looks at what happens to Islamic propagation when, against the background of an increasingly materialist, consumerist, nihilistic and voyeuristic culture of celebrity that is engulfing Indonesia, it is turned into media entertainment.

The monograph stems from an action research project on religion and gender in Indonesia, which was supported initially by the Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development Aid and extended with support from the Faculty of Dakwah of the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga and Globethics.net. It is written in a semi-academic style to make the research more accessible and comprehensible for readers.



Dicky Sofjan serves on the Core Doctoral Faculty in the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He is currently the principal investigator for a three-year programme on “Religion, Public Policy and Social Transformation in Southeast Asia” (2013-2016), supported by the Henry Luce Foundation. He has published books and journal articles on religion, and in particular Islam, in Indonesia, Iran and Malaysia.