

Religious studies in Islamic institutes

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The policy well-known as link-and-match in the national system of education, since it was first applied in the 1990s, has vastly inspired and prompted many high schools and higher learning institutions to set the programs of study that match and have direct links with demand in the job market.

It is therefore easy to understand why at present most parents prefer to send their children to universities and colleges that offer a better possibility of employment afterwards, as the educational institutions promise students applicable and relevant expertise.

Islamic studies are not able to offer dream jobs for the graduates. Just look at the UIN/IAIN/STAIN (Islamic State University/Institute of Islamic Studies). These institutes often find difficulties in recruiting students.

Of five fields of Islamic sciences taught at those institute Syarifah (Islamic law) Tarbiyah (education), Ushuluddin (fundamental of religion), Dakwah (religious propagation), and Adab (literature), the departments of Ushuluddin, Dakwah and Adab are increasingly enduring year-to-year low enrollment of freshmen.

What follows seems even more discouraging. The attempts of several Institutes of Islamic Studies (IAIN/STAIN) to transform their institute status into university level, for instance, IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah then becoming Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah (Islamic State University), IAIN Sunan Kalijaga becoming UIN Sunan Kalijaga, and STAIN Malang becoming UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim, are not very helpful to attracting more students.

Amid this academic predicament, meticulous but creative outlooks and solutions are absolutely needed in order to boost the academic appeal of Islamic studies and to figure out the imperative role that the field may play in the future. Islamic studies are different from religious studies. The latter is broader than the former in terms of the scope of

study, methodology, and epistemological assumptions.

Islamic studies mainly deal with and put emphasis exclusively on one specific religion that is Islam and all its dimensions, whereas religious studies, known too as *religionswissenschaft*, embrace and focus on all religions in general and also absorb and apply a variety of disciplines and approaches that belong to philosophy and social sciences.

Religious studies began to be installed into the system of curriculum of IAIN in the early 1970s. The late Harun Nasution and Mukti Ali played a historic role in introducing the subject at IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah and IAIN Sunan Kalijaga during their tenure as the rectors of the respective institutions.

Islamic state institutes' stakeholders seemed to have realized from the outset that religious studies are very helpful in enhancing Islamic studies' framework. No doubt, it is to religious studies that Islamic studies owe contemporary approaches and methodologies, through which the latter became able to unravel and decipher religious issues in the more open-minded ways of thinking. Religious studies bring about fundamental principles such as respect for humanity, inclusive religiosity, pluralism and tolerance.

In its June 29, 2009, newsletter, Muhammad Ali Al-Hazaa, the head of the University of Jazan in Saudi Arabia, a newly established higher learning institution, pointed out that Saudi no longer needs graduates in (Islamic) religious studies, in view of the country's job market being saturated with graduates in the field, on the one hand and the rising trend of extremist movements, which have in fact been supplied by those who graduated from Islamic studies department. Meanwhile, universities are more reluctant to open the faculty of Islamic studies.

Indeed concern over Islamic studies' vulnerability to being sources of religious extremism, as Al-Hazaa alluded to, cannot be thwarted unless the stakeholders of Islamic learning institutions, be it universities, institutes, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) and *madrasa*, show the openness to integrate Islamic studies with contemporary approaches and analysis in religious studies that highly respect the principles of in-

clusive religiosity, multicultural religious pluralism and diversity, toleration, and so forth.

With regard to the field of religious studies that has over three decades been thought in Islamic state institutes/universities, it has so been indubitably making tremendous contribution to promoting not only discourses but also actions in favor of interfaith dialogues, respect for religious pluralism and inclusion, and upholding of justice, equity, harmony and tolerance among people of different faiths. Not mention an enormous number of religiously open-minded graduates.

Related to that, for instance, the existence of the Center for Religious and Cultural Studies (CRC) for Masters' degree and the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) for doctoral level, with English used as the only medium teaching, jointly founded some years ago by three prominent universities in Jogjakarta (the University of Gadjah Mada, the Islamic State University of Sunan Kalijaga and the Christian University of Duta Wacana), is seen to some extent as offshoot of the long dedication Islamic state institutes/universities gave to flourishing religious studies in its more generic meaning, which refers not only to one but all religions on the whole.

In addition, despite the recent gloomy appeal of Islamic studies what the Department of Religious Affairs devotes to in the last four years by giving some of Islamic state institutes/universities special classes of Islamic studies, with all its subjects taught in either English or Arabic, offered with full scholarship for undergraduate level, appears to raise new hopes that Islamic studies will play an incredible role in generating, rather than men of working classes and religious extremists men of ideas and actions committed to earnestly breeding peace, harmony and justice in pluralistic society.

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Nevertheless requested daughter, Clara Shinta,

and green comfortable public parks where families and people can take

Along with that, the environmentally friendly towns and cities.

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