

Conference Paper

Massive Religiosity in Indonesian Poetry vs. Scarce Divinity in American Poetry

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Abstract

As revealed by earlier research (Kadarisman 2008 and 2016), Indonesian poetry strikingly differs from American poetry in terms of massive divine presence in the former vs. divine absence in the latter. The present research moves on further to find out (1) how Indonesian poets express their religiosity, and (2) whether or not, with newly collected data, God is truly absent in today's American poetry. Upon closer examination of Indonesian and American poetry, the research has come up with the following findings. First, most Indonesian poets express their religious experience with reverence and solemnity, although a few of them do so with complaint and humor. Secondly, it is true that there is no divinity in American poetry in today's academia; but religious poems keep surviving in church communities. Briefly, religiosity is always there in poetry; but it differs across both countries in terms of degree, as determined by different socio-political systems and cultural beliefs.

Keywords: massive religiosity, scarce divinity, Indonesian poetry, American poetry

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1. Introduction

In Indonesia divine presence is taken for granted because divinity is explicitly mentioned in the first principle of *Pancasila*¹, which serves as the basic philosophical foundation for the country. Religion is considered both individual and socio-political affairs, and hence taken care of by the government via the ministry of religious affairs. On the other hand, in the United States as a secular country, where the state and the church are politically separated, religion is not officially there in the socio-political domain. Religion and its related matters are purely individual affairs.

What is the significance of relating divinity to poetry? Religious experience is an *intense* individual experience; and poetry is “a kind of language that says *more* and says it *more intensely* than does ordinary language” (Perrine and Arp 1984: 3). It is something central to human existence. Linguistically, it is the meaning of the adjective *intense* that relates religiosity to poetry. In their religious experience, individuals relate themselves in a profound way to the Divine. In poetry, the poets express meanings

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through deep thoughts and feelings. It is said that a poet is one who has tasted the bliss of every heaven and the pang of every hell.

Previous research (Kadarisman 2008 and 2016) has found out contrasting facts: a huge presence of religiosity in Indonesian poetry vs. obvious absence of divinity in American poetry. The booklet *101 Great American Poems*, published by the American and Literary Project in 1998, contains—as the title indicates—101 American poems, written by 39 poets, covering a historical period of more than three centuries. Surprisingly, none of the poems deals with divinity, much less religiosity. It is “surprising” because, as noted in *American Grace* by Putnam and Campbell (2010: 21-28), religiosity in the United States is relatively high. Weekly attendance on religious services is 36%, twice as much than that in Britain: 18%. Religious traditions across the population are much higher: 53% among Evangelical, Mainline, and Black Protestants and 23% among Catholics. In contrast, the “None” (i.e., atheists and agnostics) make up only 17%.

Accordingly, this research intends to pursue these curious phenomena further by raising two questions. First, with respect to religiosity in Indonesian poetry, how do poets relate themselves to God as a Supreme Being? Secondly, concerning the absence of divinity in American poetry, is it true that God is totally absent there—even among religious communities? Answers to both research questions are presented in order.

2. Massive Divinity and Religiosity in Indonesian Poetry

Divine presence in Indonesian poetry apparently goes far back to religiosity in divine poems by great mystics. Manguwidjaya (1982: 11) makes a blunt statement on the relationship between literature and religiosity, “In the beginning, all literature is religious in nature.” He points out that doing routine religious services is different from religiosity. The former simply means fulfilling religious obligations, whereas the latter refers to intense religious feelings, culminating in unbearable longing for and love with the Divine, as best illustrated by poetic expressions by the Islamic mystic Adawiyya (717-801): *O my God, the best of Thy gifts within my heart is the hope of Thee and the sweetest word upon my tongue is Thy praise, and the hours which I love best are those in which I meet with Thee ... O my Lord, my plaint to Thee is that I am but a stranger in Thy country, and lonely among Thy worshippers* (quoted from Margaret Smith 1928).

Along this line of reasoning, Saryono (2009) agrees that literature, especially poetry, is the most appropriate means of expressing profound religious experience. Besides Adawiyya, other great Islamic mystics such as Abu Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922) and Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) also express their pain of longing for God through poetry.

Listen to the following musing by Rumi: *There is loneliness more precious than life. There is freedom more precious than the world. Infinitely more precious than life and the world is that moment when one is alone with God.*²

Islamic mysticism is imbued with excessive divine love and thus sometimes attributed to the influence of Persian and Indian mysticism. However, the origin of mysticism is in fact available in the Qur'an (50: 16) itself, "We created man. We know the promptings of his soul, and we are closer to him than his jugular vein."³ In trying to arrive at the realm of divine affection, great mystics of the past seemed to have taken varied individual and esoteric ways; and thus in their state of spiritual intemperance they occasionally produced poems of ecstasy.

Divine presence in modern Indonesian poetry is not a new phenomenon. It is quite likely that formal religions (such Islam and Christianity) and mysticism of the past bring along significant influence. Holy books are well-known for their literary quality. The Qur'an, linguistically speaking, is entirely a collection of outstanding Arabic poetry; and part of the Holy Bible, such as the Book of Psalm, is also exemplary poetry. Thus Indonesian poets affiliated to both religions occasionally express religious experience in their poems.

How do they convey divinity in their verbal artistry? In most cases, they "talk" directly to God in a solemn manner with great reverence. Devout Muslim poets such as Emha Ainun Nadjib (born in 1953) and A. Musthofa Bisri (born in 1944) each have published a collection of divine poems. Emha (the nickname of the former) published *99 untuk Tuhanku* (99 for my Almighty God) in 1983; and Gus Mus (the nickname of the latter) published *Tadarrus* (literally, Reading and Studying the Qur'an) in 1993. Notice that in Islam "99" represents the number of *al-Asmaa' al-Husnaa*, or Allah's 99 Beautiful Names. Let us take a close look at the first half of the first poem (titled "0" [Zero]) in Emha's collection. (An English translation is given on the right column.)

*Tuhanku,
kususun 99-ku
agar sampai pada 0
dan kulahirkan kembali 1-ku
sampai 99-ku yang baru.*

*Tuhanku,
kususun 99 napasku
untuk meniru-Mu
mendekati watak-Mu
dan menjadi hati-Mu*

My Lord,
I put my 99 in order
to arrive back at 0
and give a rebirth to my-1
till I reach my new 99 again.

My Lord,
I put my 99 breaths in order
to imitate You
to get close to Your character
and to become Your heart

Looking at the English translation, the first thing attracting our attention is the missing rhyme. This reminds us that “poetry is by definition untranslatable” (Jakobson (1959 [1992]: 151). In spite of the ‘defect’ in form, the translation reveals to us that the poet is in total devotion to God. He is trying to grasp the significance of each of His 99 Beautiful Names, so that he may finally get closer to Him in Character and in Heart.

A similar devotion to Allah with touching humility shows up in “*Puisi Islam*” (Islam Poem) by Gus Mus. The last few lines of this poem read as follows.

*Islam kausku
Islam pentasku
Islam seminarku, membahas semua
Islam upacaraku, menyambut segala
Islam puisiku, menyayikan apa
Tuhan, Islamkah aku?*

My T-shirt is Islam
My performance is Islam
My seminar is Islam, discussing everything
My ceremony is Islam, celebrating everything
My poetry is Islam, singing out what?
Lord, am I a Muslim?

Gus Mus is a *Kyai* (Leader of a *pesantren* or Islamic boarding school) and a notable Islamic scholar. And yet, after mentioning all his Islamic identities—in clothing as well as in academic, artistic, and literary activities—he asks a doubtful question: *Lord, am I a Muslim?* It is neither a factual nor a rhetorical question; but it is a humble admission. The quality of being a true Muslim is known only to Allah, the All-Knowing. Every Muslim is supposed to go along this way: while trying to become a devout believer and practitioner of Islam, they should remain humble in front of God the Almighty and before other fellow humans.

While *Tadarrus* is “dedicated to Him, up there” (p. iv), it contains not only religious poems but also poems of socio-political protest—against dehumanization and totalitarianism in Indonesia. The booklet was published in 1993, when Soeharto was in power and the whole country was in “silence” for fear of threat and jail.

Among poets who believe in Christianity, reverence and devotion to God are equally strong, as shown in the last stanza of “Prologue” in *DukaMu Abadi* (Your Grief, for Eternity), the first collection of poetry by Sapardi Djoko Damono (born in 1940), published in 1969

*Kusapa dukaMu jua, yang dahulu
yang meniupkan zarah ruang dan
waktu
yang capai menyusun Huruf. Dan
terbaca:
sepi manusia, jelaga*

I say hi to Your grief, Your old grief
that blows up atoms of space and
time,
that feels fatigued to arrange Words.
They read:
human loneliness, pitch-black

God’s eternal grief in this poem seems to be a reverberation of the ancestral sin in Christian belief, referring to the “fall of man”. It was due to Adam and Eve’s rebellion in Eden by consuming the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.⁴

Besides conversing with the Divine with reverence and solemnity, other poets also show frustration and fury. In “*Padamu Jua*” (To You too), Amir Hamzah (1911-1846) moans, *Engkau marah / Engkau ganas / Mangsa aku dalam cakarmu*⁵ (You are outraged / You are wild / Do destroy me in your claws). By contrast, in his poem “*Celana Ibu*”⁶ (Pants Made by Mother), Joko Pinurbo (born in 1962) plays around with the semantics of *paskah*, resulting in light humor. In this poem, Mary was sad to see his son dead on the cross, almost naked, covered only with a torn robe full of blood. Three days later, Jesus rose from death. Mary came to the grave, carrying new pants she made with her own hands.

*“Paskah?” tanya Maria
“Pas sekali, Bu,” jawab Yesus gembira

Mengenakan celana buatan ibunya,
Yesus naik ke surga*

“Does it fit you well?” asked Mary
“It does,” replied Jesus happily.

Wearing new pants made by his mother,
Jesus rose up to heaven.

The pun here is of course language-specific; it gets lost in the English translation. The mono-morphemic Indonesian word *Paskah* (Easter) is broken down into two morphemes: *pas-kah*—*pas* means ‘fit well’ and *-kah* is a question particle. Thus the religious event *Paskah* (Easter) is celebrated in the poem by the question “*Paskah?*” (Does it fit you well?)

3. Absence and Presence of Divinity in American Poetry

As noted earlier, God is totally absent in the booklet *101 Great American Poems*. Even in the topic such as “death”, there is no mention of the Divine. Two poems “Because I Could not Stop for Death” and “I Died for Beauty” by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) are well-known in American poetry. The first poem relates death to eternity; but neither poem relates death to God. But in another booklet, *Carl Sandburg: Chicago Poems*, God shows up in “The Junk Man”, a poem on death.

I am glad God saw Death

And gave Death a job taking care of all who are tired of living:

When all the wheels in a clock are worn and slow and the connections loose

And the clock goes on ticking and telling the wrong time from hour to hour

And people around the house joke about what a bum clock it is,

How glad the clock is when the big Junk Man drives his wagon

Up to the house and puts his arms around the clock and says:

“You don’t belong here,

You gotta come

Along with me.”

How glad the clock is then, when it feels the arms of the Junk Man

close around it and carry it away

The poem uses interesting metaphors: the big Junk Man for Death and a bum clock for an ailing old person, whose physical organs no longer work properly. He is happy when he is taken away by Death to eternity. This *Chicago Poems* collection by Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) also contains another divine poem, “Out Prayer of Thanks”, showing profound religiosity. This poem is not included in *101 Great American Poems* because it already contains his other three popular poems: “Chicago”, “Fog”, and “I am the People, the Mob”.

Moving along, the newly obtained data are interesting to examine. They are three books of *The Best American Poetry 2014, 2015, and 2017*. (I failed to obtain the 2016 collection.) The 2014 collection contains 75 poems; 3 of them sound like divine poems: “These Hands, if Not Gods”, “To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian”, and “You Cannot Go to the God You Love with your Two Legs”. But upon close scrutiny, none of them show divine reverence or intimacy. The 2015 collection contains 77 poems, one of which, “Bodisattva”, seems promising. But again, there is nothing divine in this poem. The 2017 collection also contains 77 poems; one poem “Given to These Proclivities, by God” is truly engaged in divine discourse. But, instead of showing reverence or intimacy, it spills out protest: ... *I prayed, “Take this sin from me” ... / ... why place my sin upon another? So I ate my sin...* It is obvious that the persona in the poem is doubtful about the Christian belief in ancestral sin. By “eating his own sin” he stands against the doctrine of salvation.

All the 2014, 2015, and 2017 collections contain a total of 229 poems; and only one poem cares about religious belief—though in disagreement with it. So, it can be concluded that divine presence amounts to 0.44% (=1/229) in the latest American poetry. This reminds us of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who stated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ([1978]: 13, 90), “God is dead”. But is he?

Another set of data obtained from the church communities needs further examination. Among “cheap books of Christian poetry” published since 2010, one of them stands out as an excellent collection. It is *Seasons of Faith: Religious and Spiritual Poetry*, by Peter Menkin (2010). The poems in this book are put under four sub-headings: Summer, Fall, Winter, and Spring—comprising 14, 8, 12, and 17 poems, respectively. The four sub-heading seasons suggest the cycle of life: full growth, old age, death, and rebirth. The “Introduction” by Richard E. Helmer, the priest in the Mill Valley church community, begins by quoting Menkin’s poem in this collection “On Retreat”. *There is quiet, no hard sound—strong silence of solitude and work. This earthly strength reveals heaven. Christ’s spirit rests on this place.* These quoted lines surprise the reader with their suggestive literary power. Helmer further states that “the blend of humor, personality, poignancy, spiritual reflection, and popular culture makes Peter Menkin’s poetry moving and distinctive” (p.12). On the vast dry desert of spirituality in today’s American poetry, *Seasons of Faith* looks like an oasis for thirsty life-travellers.

4. Closing Remarks

Religiosity and poetry seem to be inseparable from each other; for they share intense human experience. However, since poets do not live in a social vacuum, the degree

of divine presence in poetry is to a considerable extent socio-politically and culturally determined. In Indonesian poetry, religiosity is very high in degree, probably for two reasons: the explicit mention of divinity in *Pancasila* and ages of continuing genealogy of Islamic mysticism. On the contrary, in present-day American poetry divinity goes down almost to zero within the percentage scale. This probably owes to massive spread of secularism both as a social ideology and personal belief. Religion has been pushed to the secluded corner, making divinity survive only in spiritual poetry belonging to the church community.

End-Notes and Online Sources

¹*Pancasila*, literally meaning five principles, consists of, in brief, divinity, humanity, nationalism, democracy, and social welfare.

²www.goodreads.com

³The English translation of the Qur'an (50: 16) is cited from N. J. Dawood (1990: 518).

⁴en.m.wikipedia.org

⁵brainly.co.id

⁶medium.com

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