The (Im)Possibilities of Public Atheism in Indonesia: Legal Perspectives and Social Practices

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Indonesian society is, in large part, deeply religious. The notion of a divine entity (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*) is the first principle of the Pancasila, Indonesia's founding philosophy, also referred to as *philosofische grondslag* (philosophical basis) by Sukarno or *Staatsfundamentalnorm* (fundamental norm of the state) by the Indonesian Constitutional Court. While a limited religious pluralism characterizes Indonesian society, atheism has often been portrayed as something alien or as a threat to the state and society, especially in the so-called New Order era (1967–1998). While studies stress that Indonesia's society has become increasingly conservative in recent years, cases of public atheism have also emerged. This article sheds light on these cases and demonstrates that this controversial issue has been normalized in social media groups, or in other public forums, where people approach atheism with serious, educational debates or humor and irony. As Indonesia's state and society can be described with analytical concepts, like 'godly nationalism', 'religious harmony state', and 'plural society', public atheism can illuminate how these concepts are challenged but also, to a certain extent, incorporate atheism as their antithesis. How atheism is publicly debated demonstrates how Indonesia's religious plural society in its post-*Reformasi* era has reconceptualized atheism from a latent threat to an at least partially accepted social phenomenon.

Keywords: Atheism; Freedom of Belief; Indonesia; Religious Plural Society; Pancasila

INTRODUCTION

In academic research, many societies in South- and Southeast Asia are depicted and investigated in religious terms. Only recently has the issue of non-religion and atheism in these countries sparked some interest (Blechschmidt, 2018; Duile, 2020; Schäfer, 2016). By studying the phenomena of non-religiosity in otherwise mainly religious societies, we not only become able to challenge the scholarly understanding of secularism developed in the Western tradition (Kleine & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2020) but also to enhance our understanding of how religious societies function and how they deal with non-religion and atheism.

While José Casanova (1994, p. 5) has argued that in the West a deprivatization of religion has taken place after a period of secularization, the question is whether in overwhelmingly religious – and even increasingly conservative societies like Indonesia – a similar process can be found with regard to secularism and even atheism. That is, a deprivatization of secularism and the appearance of atheism as a phenomenon antagonistic yet complementary to increasing conservatism and religiosity. In his book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor (2007) developed the argument that in many societies, being religious has developed from the default option to a choice. In Western societies, people are now confronted with a range of opinions and occupy disengaged standpoints when it comes to these opinions. In a certain sense, for Charles Taylor, secularity can mean "a condition in which it is possible to not believe" (Künckler & Schankar, 2018, p. 3). Taylor (2007, p. 12) also acknowledges that there is always a default option of being either religious or atheist. In religious societies, such as Indonesia, being religious is not only the default *option* but, usually, the default *stance,* and an engaged standpoint regarding the religious prevails. Hence, becoming irreligious or even atheist is a choice that individuals do not view as a usual choice, as the secular condition in which it is possible to not believe is not a hegemonic stance. Yet some people nonetheless not only become atheists but argue for a disengaged standpoint regarding religion that makes atheism at least a comprehensible option within public spheres.

This article investigates the circumstances under which it is possible in Indonesia to publicly debate and express atheism. We understand the notion of 'public' in the sense of Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere as a realm of social life where public opinion is negotiated. This public sphere emerges when private individuals come together to form a public body (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). This can be a discussion among a few individuals on- or offline but also a general public debate facilitated by mainstream media. We thus understand the notion of public in the sense of the *forum externum* in contrast to the *forum internum* (Lindsey & Butt, 2016, p. 25) – a distinction that mirrors the distinction between public and private. The notion of 'public' is, therefore, more specific than the notion of 'open' atheism as the former points toward some kind of exchange and debate. For the same reason, it is also more than 'discovered' atheism. Public atheism is expressed atheism, but it can also be simply discussion about atheism without an openly atheist participant.

By investigating the circumstances under which it is possible in Indonesia to publicly debate atheism, this article also engages with the more general question of how Indonesia's religious society and state function regarding identities that challenge their constitutive consensus of religiosity. Conceptualizing Indonesian identity as "godly nationalism" (Menchik, 2016) and as a religious harmony state of a religious plural society, cases of public atheism are analyzed to understand how the overwhelmingly religious framework can or cannot accommodate non-religious public expressions. Using the term atheism, we mean all convictions that there is no God or Gods, that is, the absence of theistic beliefs (Bullivant, 2015, pp. 11-21). Atheism can mean both the belief that there is no God, or – as is usually the case in a religious society like Indonesia – "a principled and informed decision to *reject* the belief in God" (McGrath, 2004, p. 175), that is, to reject a fundamental norm of society itself and what it means to be part of that very society. In other words, it is precisely this rejection that makes the phenomenon of atheism such a controversial one in Indonesia.

Indonesia applies notions of religion, religiosity, and belief to its national identity. In the following, the notion of religiosity is understood as a reference to the Indonesian concept of religion as *agama*, namely, as an affirmative, positive attitude toward a set of formalized, acknowledged religions as monotheist faiths and to the *sila* of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* that is important in discourses on Indonesian national identity (Ropi, 2016, pp. 147-151). The Sanskrit term *agama*, referring to tradition and sets of rules, is closely connected to this concept as it strongly indicates its social dimension. *Agama*, originally meaning guidelines, worldviews, and practices handed down as tradition, has become in the Indonesian context a term for civil religion (Picard, 2011, pp. 3-7).

Religiosity thus encompasses spirituality but is much broader and emphasizes the public dimension of religion and its public formalization. Being religious has thus become a benchmark for Indonesian society, which is highly diverse in terms of religions, ethnic groups, and languages. Indonesia has often been defined as a plural society, that is, as a society with distinct segments living under one political unit (Furnivall, 1939). When Indonesia declared its independence in 1945, religion and religiosity became important unifying factors. While John Furnivall has argued in his study on the plural society in the late colonial order that the plural society lacks a common will and is thus unable to form a coherent society, Indonesia has successfully found a consensus shared by both secular nationalists and religious leaders and political groups (Elson, 2008, pp. 106-111). This consensus is expressed in Indonesia's national philosophy Pancasila, which consists of five principles. The first principle reads *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* and is often translated as belief in one God, despite the fact that the notion of belief is not mentioned and the noun *Ketuhanan* just denotes an abstract divine entity. Religion, or being religious in general, is thus a unifying concept that may not only contribute to social cohesion but also constitute an idea of society by simultaneously constructing its outside, namely non-belief.

However, the question of whether atheism and atheist expressions are or should be punishable is subject to debate. As we will show, public expressions of atheism that occur in Indonesia are usually not sanctioned. Therefore, we analyze the circumstances under which such expressions and debates are possible and when they are sanctioned. We understand Indonesia as a religious harmony state that provides an oppressive frame for non-religious expressions (Duile, 2020, pp. 453-456). By stressing the notion of social harmony – and the very concept of Indonesian society – with reference to religiosity as a prime value, the religious harmony state constitutes the social universality of society by simultaneously excluding the non-religious. This is, for instance, relevant in the legal realm where the right not to have a religion is not acknowledged against the backdrop of the Pancasila (Iskandar, 2016, p. 731). While there is no legal provision that explicitly prohibits atheism, Art. 28E of the Indonesian Constitution that guarantees freedom *of* belief is often interpreted in a way that also suggests that every citizen must be a theist, that is, it does not guarantee freedom *from* belief (Hasani, 2016, p. 201).

This discursive and legal framework of exclusion is, in practice, however, more complex and nuanced, and as a matter of fact, atheist expressions in public are incorporated into the realm of public reasoning and debate in various ways. Jeremy Menchik (2016, pp. 65-92) has suggested understanding Indonesian nationalism – especially as

proposed by the country's largest Muslim organizations – as a "godly nationalism", that is, a we-feeling that is nonetheless predicated on theological exclusion.

This is why there is, for instance, a widespread consensus against Ahmadiyya but not so much against Shiism (Fealy, 2016, pp. 123-128). One can easily see how atheism opposes this godly nationalism. However, unlike in the case of Ahmadiyya, there have so far been no larger controversies against atheism, even though, as we demonstrate, there are forms of public expression of atheism in Indonesia.

The discussion on openly embracing atheism in Indonesia is rapidly gaining momentum on the internet and in public discourse due to people's ability to freely disseminate information. Old documents mentioning non-believers, such as then-President Sukarno's speech at the UN-General Assembly, or articles by figures like Kiai Haji Agoes Salim advocating for freedom of religion that includes atheists (e.g., Yasir, 2021), are becoming available to the public. This has sparked a new trend in debating Indonesia's constitution and Pancasila, which focuses on understanding the constitution based on its original intent. Of course, this trend is not solely caused by the intellectual works of the educated elites. Growing acceptance and normalization of atheism also stems from popular sub-cultures, such as stand-up comedy or movies that portray religions in a less sacred light, from the rising popularity of comedians like Coki Pardede and his colleagues, who make jokes at the expense of religion, to the increasing fame of public intellectual Rocky Gerung who some also consider an atheist. This became especially vibrant after the conservative 212 movement of 2016/2017 in which conservative Muslim groups protested against the then-governor of Jakarta, whom they accused of blasphemy, fostering conservative forms of Islamic tribal nationalism (Lim, 2017). As a reaction to this and generally as a reaction to what Martin van Bruinessen (2013) has called the "conservative turn in Indonesian Islam" (a trend that started around the mid-2000s), some parts of society have become increasingly secular and, in parts, even atheist. While atheists have organized in social media groups since at least 2008 (Schäfer, 2016, p. 260), the new developments of Islamic mass mobilization, on the one hand, and pluralist-secular rejection of conservativism, on the other, have also made atheism a relevant topic.

In a first step, this article explores on the legal framework and its interpretation when it comes to atheism, and problematizes the notion of public atheism with regard to Indonesian laws. In the main part, we analyze cases of public atheism, that is, cases where atheism has been discussed between people who do not personally know each other in settings that are generally open to the public. Analyzing these cases helps to understand how the religious plural society deals with public atheism in practice. While atheism is, without doubt, a sensitive topic, we demonstrate not only that reasoned debates on the issue are possible but also that irony and humor sometimes help to reduce prejudices and hatred against non-believers. The main argument is that public atheism is possible even in a society where secularity – as a predominant cultural condition, where not believing in God is not simply one option among others (Taylor, 2007, p. 3) – is not established. This is possible as long as the notion of social harmony, with its reference to religiosity, is not challenged, for instance through blasphemy. Within this framework of possibility, different approaches are present: Atheism can be discussed under the hegemonic notion of religious harmony, or, as in some online groups, as a matter of personal conviction that is performatively debated

to enhance theist or atheist subject positions. Paradoxically, public atheism has to acknowledge religious hegemony first in order to challenge it, at least, when it wants to transcend online enclaves that are especially designed as spaces where the notion of religious harmony does not apply.

For this article, the first author conducted fieldwork with Indonesian atheists from 2015 onwards both on- and offline. In 2016/17 the author was in Jakarta for five months and interviewed not only atheists but also stakeholders from religious and state institutions. Since then, the author has kept in touch with many atheists and has conducted subsequent interviews. The co-author is a secular Indonesian citizen who wants to counter stereotypes and misrepresentations of atheism in Indonesia and has, through his engagement with Indonesian atheists, further insights into atheists' lives and has observed Indonesian public discourse on this matter since the 2012 Alexander Aan case, especially from a legal perspective.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDONESIA: *KETUHANAN* VS. ATHEISM?

Academic debates have often revolved around the question of the degree of secularism one can observe and measure in the Indonesian state, law, and society. Indonesia has been termed "not fully secular" (Otto, 2010, p. 456), "quasi secular", "pseudo secularist" (Elson, 2010, p. 329), or "semi-secular" (Butt, 2010, p. 299), and the relation between Islam and a secular state (Assyaukanie, 2009) has been the subject of investigation. Mahfud MD, the former chairman of the Indonesian Constitutional Court, has characterized Indonesia as neither secular nor religious but as a godly nation. This characterization raises complex questions: What defines a godly state that neither aligns with specific religions nor adheres to secular principles? Such ambiguity can lead to varied interpretations and challenges in reconciling this concept with the constitution's guarantee of freedom of belief and the protection of all its citizens. However, as John Bowen (2005) has stressed, in Indonesia, the absence of a shared normative starting point puts society in a mode where there is rather a "convergence" or "reasoned modus vivendi" (p. 169) prevailing. Stewart Fenwick (2016, p. 87) thus concluded that, in terms of governance, the dichotomy between religious and secular modes is false, and this might be extended to the way Indonesia's society functions in general. Describing Indonesia as religious state means, on the one hand, that it is non-secular and non-atheist as, for instance, the Indonesian Constitutional Court has stressed (Mahkamah Konstitusi, 2009, p. 273). This also refers to secularism in the sense of a cultural condition, where not believing in God is not simply one option among others (Taylor, 2007, p. 3), and, as we will argue in the following, the legal and foundational framework of the Indonesian state is in this sense non-secular.

This complex relation between religion (or religiosity) and secularism is displayed in laws and in Indonesia's foundational philosophy of Pancasila (or, more precisely, how the first *sila* of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* is interpreted), and how this contrasts with atheism. Two laws are highly relevant for public atheism, namely Art. 156 a(b) of the Indonesian Criminal Code (*Kitab Undang-Undang Pidana*, KUHP) of 1965 and the 2008 Law No. 11 on Electronic Information and Transaction (EIT). Whereas Art. 156 a(b) is specifically about blasphemy, the 2008 law is generally about disturbing the ideal of a harmonious public life through online expressions. Art. 156 of the KUHP,

also known as the blasphemy law, was introduced under the Sukarno government at a time when religious groups feared the rise of communism. While some leading communists were probably atheists, the Communist Party of Indonesia emphasized that they were not against religion and even stressed common goals between Islam and communism. However, tensions between these camps grew strong during the early 1960s and erupted in mass violence against and the killings of hundreds of thousands of communists who were then said to be atheists and therefore a threat to the nation (Duile, 2018, pp. 164-165; Hiorth, 1998; Mortimer, 2006, pp. 93-94). The law was subject to a judicial review in 2010, when human rights activists criticized that the law severely limits freedom of belief and expression and that the law was a product of the authoritarian 'guided democracy' of Sukarno which did not uphold democratic standards (Yonesta et al., 2014, pp. 1-10). However, the Constitutional Court found the law to be in line with the Indonesian Constitution (Iskandar, 2016, p. 732).

According to the law, someone can be sentenced to imprisonment for a maximum of five years if they deliberately express atheist sentiment in public or commit an act with the intention of encouraging people not to adhere to a religion which can be subsumed under the concept of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*, as found in the foundational state philosophy of Pancasila. In their decision, the Constitutional Court also stressed that the protected right to freedom of religion in Indonesia is only a private right in the *forum internum*, and that the state can restrict individuals' rights when belief – or, in the case of atheism, disbelief – is publicly expressed in a *forum externum* (Lindsey & Butt, 2016, p. 25). This was adopted in paragraph 302 of the new criminal code that was passed in 2023. Two years in prison or a fine of up to IDR 50 million can be the punishment for people who publicly incite others not to have a religion. The fine is up to IDR 200 million (about USD 22,200) or 4 years in prison for those who use violence or threats of violence in order to make someone an atheist. In 2008, Law No. 11 on Electronic Information and Transaction was passed. Art 28(2) reads that it is forbidden to electronically spread information that can incite hatred and hostility based on ethnic identity, religion, or race. This affects public atheism insofar as many atheists exchange their atheist thoughts online, usually among each other but sometimes also with theists, which can lead to emotional responses and indignation.

However, most importantly, Pancasila has a strong normative notion in Indonesia. It was referred to by Sukarno as a *philosofische grondslag*, philosophical base, or fundamental philosophy (Elson, 2008, p. 107) and as a *Staatsfundamentalnorm* (fundamental norm of the state) rather than simply a *Grundnorm* (basic norm) by the Indonesian Institutional Court (Sinn, 2014, p. 231). While this pivotal position for Pancasila has received some criticism, suggesting that the role of Pancasila maintains a problematic Indonesian exceptionalism not in line with democratic principles (Iskandar, 2016), others have stressed Pancasila's inclusive features and democratic potential even in light of further challenges (e.g., Magnis-Suseno, 2022). The first pillar of Pancasila is usually translated as one (almighty) God, but the noun *ketuhanan* indicates an abstract notion that might more accurately be translated as "the divine" (Damshäuser, 2022, pp. 15-22). However, in practice, the first pillar is often connoted as a monotheistic principle or as the "belief in one God", despite the fact that "belief" is not mentioned. Based on this interpretation, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are formally equally recognized in Indonesia

and all are conceptualized as monotheist beliefs. The question of how this abstract principle in the Pancasila relates to atheism is crucial.

According to Article 2 of Law No. 12 of 2011 on the Formation of Statutory Law in Indonesia, Pancasila is recognized as the source of all legal principles in the state, obligating lawmakers to ensure that all laws align with Pancasila. However, this law is paradoxical because Law No. 12 of 2011 is subordinate to the Indonesian Constitution, and Pancasila is already enshrined in the constitution's preamble. The preamble, particularly paragraph four, outlines the Republic of Indonesia's core objectives: establishing a government that protects all Indonesians and their territorial integrity, promotes public welfare, educates the populace, and contributes to a global order based on freedom, perpetual peace, and social justice. Therefore, Pancasila should be viewed as a guiding principle designed to achieve these goals and should not be interpreted in a way that contradicts or undermines these foundational objectives, including the protection of all Indonesians without exclusion.

Whether people can or cannot be atheists is therefore a matter of interpretation, influenced by political events or various interpretative approaches, whether textualist, originalist, or pragmatic approach. Ismail Hasani (2016, p. 201) argues, for instance, that according to former Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court Mahfud MD, there are no legal provisions in the criminal code that prohibit atheism. Since Indonesian Criminal Code upholds the legality principle (*nullum crimen, nulla poena sine lege*), atheism as a personal belief within the *forum internum* is allowed. What can be on trial is the *forum externum*, thoughts made public, and therefore atheism is an issue of freedom of expression rather than an issue of freedom of belief. A similar argument was presented by the Catholic public intellectual Magnis-Suseno with one of the authors. Magnis-Suseno even said that state officials could privately be atheists as long as they hold on to the Pancasila, which would mean that, in their function as officials, they must facilitate religion and religiosity.

However, although these arguments do not outlaw atheism per se, they say little about the extent to which atheism can be voiced publicly in a state that is based on *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*. Moreover, there are even interpretations suggesting that the notion of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* is in general incompatible with all kinds of atheist convictions. Contrary to the interpretation of Magnis-Suseno, Iskandar (2016, pp. 730-731) mentions several other interpretations: Asshiddiqie, chairman of the Indonesian Constitutional Court between 2003 and 2008, said that the bureaucracy and the officials who work for the government cannot be atheist as they have a clear mandate to believe in and trust the one almighty God. Arif Hidayat, who was Chief Justice of the Indonesian Constitutional Court from 2013 to 2018, emphasized that Indonesia is a religious nation, and that any discussion of religious freedom should not be about whether Indonesians may be atheists. In his opinion, all Indonesians should believe in God. However, Arif's opinion contradicts that of his predecessor, Mahfud MD, a Chief Justice of the Indonesian Constitutional Court between 2008 and 2013, who emphasized that atheists and communists also have the right to live freely in Indonesia as long as they respect the religious freedom of other citizens.

The Muslim scholar, economist, and human rights activist Dawam Rahardjo supports Pancasila as an "open ideology" that would welcome atheism only in the form of scientific discourse, by which he probably means naturalist scientific operations,

but not as a discourse against religion or God. The latter should be banned by the state. These notions express what Jeremy Menchik has termed godly nationalism – a religious nationalism supported by mainstream Muslim organizations and many Indonesians. However, from an atheist perspective, godly nationalism is deeply repressive as "[n]o religious belief (or unbelief) disqualifies anyone from obtaining or keeping citizenship" (Menchik, 2016, pp. 161-162). In the next part, we shed some light on public atheism. Contrary to what one might expect against the backdrop of godly nationalism, especially in times of the conservative turn of Indonesian Islam, there are examples of atheist expressions and dialogues between believers and unbelievers that did not cause public controversies.

PUBLIC ATHEISM IN INDONESIA

Even the rather liberal interpretations of what the notion of a state and a nation based upon *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* means for atheism are highly cautious when it comes to public expressions of atheism. What seems to be at stake is the core of Indonesian identity as a religious nation, as this religiosity is, apparently, defined against atheism and views atheism in public as a threat to its very foundation. However, the question then is to what extent public atheism is actually sanctioned and rejected. In other words, what does the social practice of public atheism looks like? By public atheism, we mean atheism that trespasses the *forum internum* and expresses itself in a setting where it is subject to debate between people who do not personally know each other. In the following, we analyze three cases and argue that social practices might be more open than the arguments mentioned above. However, some crucial precautions have to be fulfilled in order to avoid being excluded from public discourse when debating this controversial issue.

The most famous case of atheism in Indonesia is probably that of Alexander Aan. His case demonstrates the limits of atheism as his atheism was on trial as a blasphemous expression. The case shows that atheism cannot be accepted when it comes in the form of expressions that are interpreted by the public or the courts as blasphemous and therefore against the notion of religious harmony. Aan was a civil servant in West Sumatra who was sentenced to jail for 2.5 years after the prosecution had demanded 3.5 years. Additionally, the Muaro District Court in Sijunjung regency also fined him IDR 100 million (or USD 11,100) and failure to pay would result in another two months in prison (Bachyul, 2012). Previously, Aan had declared on the Facebook-page *Minang Atheis* that there is no God and had posted content that people in his neighborhood found highly offensive. One meme depicting Mohammed read that he had sex with his wife's maid, while another read "Prophet Mohammed interested in his own in-law". Aan was attacked by a mob and brought to the local police station. He was accused of spreading information that incited hatred, pursuant to the EIT law. Furthermore, he faced a charge based on Art. 156 of the KUHP, namely that he had performed an act hostile to a religion recognized in Indonesia (Art. 156 a(a)), and that his act was committed with the intention of drawing people away from belief in God (Art. 156 a(b)). However, he was only found guilty under the EIT law (Hasani, 2016, p. 197). In other words, his atheist expressions on Facebook were, according to the judges, punishable because they incited hatred against Islam. It is not clear

whether this was because of his simple declaration that God does not exist or because of the pictures insulting the Prophet Mohammed, but it is likely that the second caused the indignation. In contrast, the case was often mentioned as an example of restricted freedom of expression and/or belief in Western media (e.g., Brown, 2015; Schonhardt, 2013).

Today, Aan lives near Jakarta as he feels that living in West Sumatra has become too dangerous. He works as a teacher and is still a convinced atheist. In a conversation with one of the authors, he declared that it was wrong to make believers upset, although he does not regret criticizing Islam and religion in general. But instead of provocative, his atheism has become rather private. Even when visiting his family, the topic is not discussed as he wants to maintain good relations, especially to his religious mother. An interesting detail can be found in the court file where Alexander Aan's religious affiliation is recorded. Court officials wrote "atheist, wants to convert to Islam" ("*atheis, mau masuk Islam*"). Alexander Aan never declared this intention, so it can be assumed that this was simply written by the officials. While this might simply indicate ignorance or a patronizing legal system, it could also be analyzed as a practice of the religious harmony state that aims to ensure social integration through the shared social value of being religious.

Alexander Aan's case happened when the phenomenon of atheism emerged in Indonesia, mostly in social media, where people express their atheism and also engage in debates with fellow atheists as well as with theists. These cases reveal different ways in which public atheism can be accepted. This can be through the establishment of public enclaves in which participants agree to certain rules. While in some cases of public atheism social integrity is key, we argue that some Facebook groups are designed to undermine the notion of social harmony that is upheld by the principle of religiosity. They do so by not only allowing but even encouraging the expression of fundamental differences between theism and atheism, and that this kind of opposition between theism and atheism contributes to identity formation. Both theists and atheists can rely on their respective other in the performance of debates that serve their own identity rather than convincing others.

These public spaces developed from atheist online engagement that was initially restricted to atheists as internal support groups. By 2008, a larger Facebook group of Indonesian atheists had already been established, along with other groups like *Dialog Ateis Indonesia* or *Komunitas Indonesia*. Some pages were restricted to atheists only, but some had the aim of facilitating dialogue between atheists and believers. These pages are somewhere in between online activism and platforms that serve the formation of the in-group, namely the atheist identities of their members (Schäfer, 2016). The most well-known blog in this regard is probably the *Anda Bertanya Ateis Menyawab* (You Ask, Atheists Answer), or ABAM blog and Facebook page which was set up in 2011. In 2016, it had 55,000 likes (Schäfer, 2016, p. 261) and about 22,000 members in 2024. Today, the page is still maintained and offers discussion within a moderation regime that bans all kinds of hate speech and insults, although the blog was originally inspired, among other things, by a discussion thread in a then-popular online forum *Kaskus*. There was a discussion thread called "fight club", where people could debate without any rules or boundaries. As this sparked the idea to start discussions about a taboo topic, it quickly became clear to the administrators that such a project could

not continue without rules and moderation. Indeed, the Facebook page was shut down twice by Facebook due to complaints from people who themselves had been banned from the page. However, as the administrators had good contacts with Karl Karnadi, an Indonesian atheist who at that time worked at Facebook, they always managed to persuade Facebook that hate speech and insults were not allowed and that they could ensure that all discussions were according to Facebook's community standards. It was indeed the main goal to initiate civil discussions about atheism, as some atheists found that there are many misperceptions and peculiar stereotypes about atheists in Indonesia. Not only are they often perceived as either extremely intelligent and only concerned with science, or stupid as they failed to acknowledge the 'obvious' truth about religion, atheists also still carry the stigma of being communists as accused by the authoritarian Suharto regime. On the other hand, the page was met with criticism from the atheist community as well, as some Indonesian atheists found it pointless to debate with believers. However, the administrators are convinced that they are able to facilitate meaningful dialogues which can change believers' perceptions of atheists (Valbiant, 2020).

The crucial point here is that this page was never meant to draw others away from their belief in God but rather to counteract misperceptions about atheists and atheism with civilized forms of discussion. As Karl Karnadi explained in an online interview, the point is that atheists just answer questions from believers. In other words, they remain passive and do not actively draw others away from their belief. The fact that this blog has not attracted any legal cases in over 12 years makes it a successful example of public atheism in Indonesia. Today, discussions on the page are sometimes serious and deal with moral and political issues (like, for instance, abortion, parenting and religious education, and social justice), but occasionally they are also funny and ironic, and make visible contradictions in official religious morals (like the brutal and revealing scenes in the religious movie which make it through the Indonesian censor agency). This balance of entertaining and serious topics as well as moderation makes it a successful page in terms of membership. Currently (March, 2024), the page has over 15,800 members.

Another discussion group on Facebook worth mentioning is *Debat Islam Versus Atheisme* (DIVA) which currently has more than 17,000 members. Interestingly, it is written in the rules that Muslims are allowed to try to convince atheists of the Muslim faith and make them Muslims: "*Member muslim di ijinkan* [sic] *untuk berdakwah dan meyakin kan* [sic]*Ateis*[sic] *akan ajaran islam*[sic]." On the other hand, the rules read that atheists are allowed to criticize Islamic teachings: "*di ijinkan*[sic] *untuk mengkritik ajaran islam*[sic]". This avoids the accusation that atheists are being allowed to convert Muslims, which indeed could be potentially punishable under Indonesian law. The rules close with a warning that people who enter this group must be ready to expose their views to sharp critique (*kritik tajam*) and if they do not feel mentally ready then they better not join. According to some members the first author of this article has interviewed, there had never been, unlike in ABAM, instances of the group being shut down due to complaints. This was, in their view, due to the fact that people who want to join have to agree to the rules first. Although discussion sometimes becomes quite harsh, members seem to accept the framework for debate.

One can also find public expressions of atheism on YouTube. For instance, the co-author of this article, the content creator Vincent Ricardo, made a video on "becoming atheist in Indonesia" wherein atheism in general is explained. The video also explains the stigmas atheists face in Indonesia and is meant as an educational video so that religious people do not feel threatened by atheists. Within six years, the video was watched more than 520,000 times. The video has become a notable reference point regarding the existence of atheism in Indonesia. As a result of this video, Vincent has had the opportunity to connect with individuals who now feel less isolated as atheists in Indonesia and have begun seeking out like-minded individuals or even publicly acknowledging their atheism to friends and family. The primary objective behind creating and releasing this mini-documentary was to explain about the lives of Indonesian atheists, aiming to dispel the stigma and misconceptions surrounding atheism within the country. This initiative, in Vincent's view, was particularly crucial due to various factors, including the prevalent propaganda during the New Order era associating atheism with communism, which falsely claimed that atheists violated the first principle of Pancasila by not believing in the existence of God. However, in the post-New Order era, there has been a growing realization that communism and atheism are distinct concepts and that Pancasila does not prohibit someone from being an atheist. More people, especially Millennials and Gen Z who have grown up in the internet era, increasingly understand the difference between communism (a socio-political ideology) and atheism (disbelief in god or gods). This evolving trend toward openness and tolerance has led to an increasing number of public figures openly expressing their disbelief or skepticism of religions or gods or, at least, that they are associated with atheism and do not actively deny these accusations. Notable individuals in this regard include neurosurgeon Ryu Hasan, philosopher Rocky Gerung, and comedian Coki Pardede as well as other celebrities (e.g., Kurniawan, 2024; Nabilla, 2021).

From reactions to his video, Vincent concluded that many people are pragmatically religious, which he stresses as a crucial feature of Indonesian religiosity. Vincent illustrates this with regard to the coronation of the new Javanese Duke and controversies surrounding the succession. Public concerns arose due to speculation that the new ruler of Mataram Islam might be non-Muslim, given that the Empress's oldest son was known to be Catholic. Shortly after the coronation, it was announced to the public that he had converted to Islam (Sushmita, 2022). This occurrence reflects the pragmatic approach of Indonesian elites toward religion as they often adopt religious practices for power and business reasons.

This pragmatic attitude toward religion is something Vincent encountered after publishing the mini-documentary on YouTube (Ricardo, 2018). Not only did non-believers reach out to him, but also people who self-identified as believers expressed that their views on religion were mostly pragmatic. They acknowledged the irrationality and contradictions of religious beliefs but found personal spiritual comfort in religion, as well as relief from existential anxiety. This kind of mindset or approach, in which people adhere to religious beliefs and practices because they find them beneficial in their everyday life rather than solely based on deep spiritual or philosophical convictions, is quite common among many privately atheist individuals. They might only reveal their identity to their friends or those who they assume will accept them.

Vincent's video is important to them as they realize that their objections to and rejection of religious beliefs are not uncommon.

Videos are a convenient tool for individual atheists to express themselves and explain why they became atheists. For example, about three years ago, Greg Latupeirissa made a YouTube video series about his atheism. He engaged in online discussions and was interviewed by the first author of this article. His videos received between 3,000 and 10,000 views, but Greg eventually decided to make them private, while he left only one video online where he explains his view on atheism (Chada, 2021). Greg clarified that he did not restrict the videos' availability because he received threats. In fact, most of the comments he received were encouraging and supportive. He simply was not satisfied with the way he talked and appeared in the videos. While Greg had wanted to create these videos for a long time, he was only able to make them after some religious friends encouraged and helped him. He was also not afraid that the videos would cause problems, as he had good personal experiences of being open about his atheism. While his family is religious and still hopes that he will become a Protestant again one day, they nonetheless accept his atheism. Greg stresses that he has a close friend who is a pious Muslim and was even a member of the now-outlawed FPI (*Front Pembela Islam*, Front of the Defenders of Islam), an infamous vigilante organization that not only had close ties to the political elite (Petrů, 2015) but also played a leading role in the 2016 protests against the Christian governor of Jakarta, whom they accused of blasphemy (Fealy & White, 2021). In our interview, Greg emphasized that it is important for atheists to develop a respectful attitude. This was not a matter of performance in public, he said, respect must be real. If religious people were addressed as stupid and ignorant, dialogue would not be possible. He also stresses that, in his opinion, the question of whether there is or is not a God would be less relevant than the question of whether religion is still useful as a social device. In Greg's view, religion is useful, as many people would need it as a means of orientation to decide what was good and bad. In terms of its social function, he endorses religion, even though he does not believe in it. The problem for Greg is that many atheists would only insist on the question of God's existence and many would just exchange the dogma of religion for the dogma of atheism. This dogmatic perspective could make public dialog difficult, especially if people were not ready for heated debates, like in DIVA. Atheism, for Greg, is an outcome of a process of reasoning, not an identity. He does not simply want his friends to think of him as 'Greg the atheist', but as 'Greg, my friend'.

Another interesting case of public atheism was a discussion held in early 2017 at Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta Islamic State University. Known as a campus embracing religious pluralism, the religious studies program has incited curiosity among most of its students about different religions, and even atheism became a topic of discussion. As we outline in the following, this event also demonstrates that discussing atheism in a public space is possible if it is framed in a manner that does not contradict the notion of religious harmony. The event was organized by a libertarian[1] group concerned with freedom of expression. As Indonesia had seen serious violations of these

1 Libertarian here means a radically liberal political ideology stressing the importance of individual and economic freedom. Members of the group emphasized the importance of libertarianism in Indonesia as they argued that many flaws of the Indonesian society derive from a widespread disregard for individual rights.

rights by vigilante Islamic groups, such as the FPI, and also by state authorities, the activists aimed to engage in dialogue in a manner that could bring their messages about atheism to Muslims willing to discuss the controversial issue. They translated the autobiographical book *The Atheist Muslim* by Ali Rizvi (2017) into Indonesian and launched it at the Islamic State University. On that occasion, the general topic of atheism was discussed. While libertarian activists are either atheists themselves or sympathetic to atheism as they uphold the right of expression, the large majority of the participants in the discussion were Muslims. The thrust of the book was that Muslims who abandon their faith can still be Muslims in a cultural sense, for instance, they can celebrate Islamic holidays with friends and families. This was to counteract the image of atheists as entirely hostile toward religion. By presenting the content of the book, the activists also talked about reasons why people might abandon their faith and argued against the widespread perception that one cannot have morals without religion.

Overall, the discussion was controversial but caused no indignation or emotional uproar. The activists explained to one of the authors of this article that it would not have been possible to organize such an event at a non-Islamic university. The very fact that it was held at the Islamic State University was necessary to counteract any suspicion that the event would be promoting atheism and could draw others away from religion. Instead, the discussion was framed as an academic event in a religious environment. A common prayer and a reading of Quranic verses by an *uztad* as well as the obligatory singing of the Indonesian national anthem at the beginning of the event set the frame of acknowledged social norms. While almost nobody declared that they were atheist, some participants expressed their understanding and recognition of atheism. The libertarian activists made their case not by declaring atheism as right and religion as wrong but rather by referring to individual rights of expression and religion which, they hoped, could be widely acknowledged when religious people did not feel threatened by non-believers. Nonetheless, one participant in the audience made anti-religious remarks and declared his disbelief in God. He mentioned that he had written an atheist manifesto and argued strongly against theism. While he was able to deliver his outspoken, anti-theist views, both liberal activists and religious scholars did not respond to him. After the discussion, some participants in the audience told one of the authors of this article that the participant who made the anti-religious remarks was mentally unstable or insane. Regardless of whether that is true or not, this incident shows that, in this particular setting, it was crucial to maintain social integrity and the content of what it means to be atheist had to be delivered indirectly by referring to non-Indonesian cases. While it was tacitly understood by the audience that this was of relevance for Indonesia as well, it had to be approached this way in order to secure harmony.

CONCLUSION

While atheism emerges as a constitutive outside of the religious harmony state and its society, its implications have drastically changed. During the New Order regime, it was connoted with communism which was said to be a latent threat to Indonesia and its religious values. While the Communist Party had enjoyed broad support from the popular classes, the new regime had to find narratives to delegitimize communism.

Even though the leadership of the party was eager not to criticize religion, the New Order regime successfully promulgated a conceptualization of the Communist Party as atheist and anti-theist, and therefore as a threat that had to be eradicated in order to save the nation (Duile, 2018, pp. 164-165). In contrast, today, the narrative of communism as a threat and atheism as synonymous with communism has lost much of its relevance, especially for younger Indonesians less affected by the New Order propaganda. Anticommunist indoctrination, for instance through the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* screened in schools, is now less common, and occasionally alternative and even contrasting narratives are discussed (Pratama, 2022). When one of the authors was teaching at Universitas Nasional in Jakarta in early 2023 and asked what the students thought of when they heard the term *ateis*, not a single one mentioned communism or the PKI. Atheism was rather seen as a personal issue.

While Indonesian society has, in large part, become more conservative after *Reformasi* and Indonesian politics have turned toward an Islamic nationalism (Bourchier, 2019, pp. 718-730), secular identities have formed as a reaction against religious conservativism, and atheism has become an expression of oppositional or rebellious stances. Generally, we can conclude from our cases that the only way atheism is legally and discursively made impossible is when it comes with blasphemy (as in the case of Alexander Aan) or as an anti-religious stance (as in the case of the participant in the discussion at Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta Islamic State University). In social media, some groups have even established controversial and harsh discussions. While in official events, like the discussion at the Islamic State University, or even in YouTube videos, social integrity is key, the DIVA Facebook group has been designed to challenge the notion of social harmony by allowing and encouraging the expression of differences, challenging both theist and atheist worldviews. One could argue that DIVA and ABAM are exceptions to the religious harmony state, as the common ground for what it means to be part of Indonesian society – namely, to be religious – is missing. However, this kind of opposition between theism and atheism serves the purpose of identity formation, as both theists and atheists might need a respective other to argue against.

Public atheism represents a challenge for Indonesia where secularity – as a cultural condition in which not believing in God is not simply one option among others (Taylor, 2007, p. 3) – is not established. While this limits the ways atheism can be publicly expressed and discussed, we have seen that challenging religious hegemony through atheism is, paradoxically, possible if expressions of atheism acknowledge religious hegemony in first place. Not acknowledging religious hegemony and directly attacking religiosity is considered blasphemy and inevitably positions atheist expressions outside the social order. Public atheism in Indonesia is in a more difficult position than in other predominantly religious societies where atheism is also a controversial issue but where atheists can organize in public (Blechschmidt, 2018; Quack, 2012). When it comes to the public sphere, atheism in Indonesia is not organized, and depends on the engagement of individual atheists. However, despite the non-secular nature of the Indonesian state, the relative openness of Pancasila makes public atheism more acceptable than in other countries in which Islam retains a supreme position, like in Malaysia (e.g., Ramli et al., 2022)

Having investigated the circumstances under which it is possible in Indonesia to publicly debate and express atheism, we conclude that these public debates are debates

about Indonesian identity. Atheism, as the outside of Indonesian society, is simultaneously within it, both as a matter of fact (because there are atheist Indonesians) and as a possibility within public discourses. On the one hand, the religious harmony state claims to encompass the whole Indonesian people and is therefore inclusive. On the other hand, it defines itself upon the exclusion of deviant elements within itself. The social harmony state is thus set upon a paradoxical relation between inclusion and exclusion when it comes to 'deviant' interpretations of its officially recognized religions (fe.g., Fealy 2016), or the recognition of social norms that contrast religious standards, such as in the case of LGBTIQ (Thajib, 2021) or atheism. In the case of growing conservativism, scholarship stresses that the dominant group or the majority are those who increasingly decide what is included in and what is excluded from society and thus identified as a disrupter of harmony (Suaedy, 2016, p. 159). But as social media provides public spaces for atheists, even though their influence is limited, atheism can have a voice without challenging social cohesion.

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