

RELIGIONIZING INDONESIAN INDIGENOUS BELIEFS

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Among the challenges faced by those involved in the struggle for justice and equality for adherents of indigenous beliefs in ‘religious countries’ such as Indonesia is, besides the political system of the country, the very definition of religion. There has been the view—and this is believed by some Indonesian religious authorities as well as government officials—that Indonesia’s indigenous beliefs (*aliran kepercayaan*) are not religion because they are not yet fulfilling the requirements to be considered religion, that is, having the idea of God, prophet-like founding figures, and scripture. In turn, due to this monotheism-biased paradigm in defining religion, Indonesia’s *aliran kepercayaan* are categorized merely as ‘culture’. As a result, the adherents of indigenous beliefs are regarded as not yet having any religion, causing their inability to get full civil rights as compared to the adherents of the officially recognized six religions. This paper challenges this paradigm and argues that considering those indigenous beliefs to be religion is, instead, theoretically valid. The main argument is that because the definition of religion is always evolving and politically contested and that the common understanding (including that which is embraced by the Indonesian government) of religion is actually “world religions”-biased and, thus, a modern construction, the word ‘religion’ is highly possible to be redefined in a way that can include the indigenous beliefs; and such a redefinition is scientifically legitimate.

Keywords: Aliran kepercayaan, Indigenous traditions, defining religion, Indonesian politics of religion

Introduction

Among the challenges faced by those involved in the struggle for justice and equality for adherents of ‘indigenous religions’ (Indonesia: *penghayat kepercayaan*) in ‘religious countries’ is, besides the political system of the respective countries, the very definition of religion. In today’s discourse, the term ‘religion’ has been very hegemonic; even too hegemonic to escape, or to detach the way social phenomena are categorized, from it. How religion is defined becomes one of the key debates not only among scholars but also politicians, since the definition of religion determines what kind of phenomena or

traditions can be considered religious and what cannot, and the state must choose one of the proposed definitions. Therefore, the definition of religion in the theoretical or epistemological level must be first clarified so that the way of ‘religionizing’¹⁷ indigenous traditions can be properly conducted.

The problem is—to take an example from Indonesia—that some of the religious authorities regard ‘indigenous traditions’¹⁸ not as religion, but rather as culture (in the sense of a human-made custom [Indonesia: *adat*]) or as *aliran kepercayaan* (literally, stream of belief; different from ‘religion as commonly understood’). In Indonesia, the term ‘religion’ has been translated as ‘*agama*’, a Sanskrit loanword. The word *agama* is commonly understood as that which has a combination of “a Christian view of what counts as a world religion with an Islamic understanding of what defines a proper religion—a prophet, a holy book, and a belief in the One and Only God.”¹⁹

That way of understanding what counts as religion is in fact embraced by some Indonesian Muslim leaders. In response to the recent public debate on leaving the religion column blank in the ID card for those whose religion/belief is not included in the six officially recognized religions, chairman of Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) Ma’ruf Amin, for instance, was once saying, “*Aliran kepercayaan* is not a religion.”²⁰ Another member of MUI was also similarly saying, “The proper is not to inventarize local religions in the cluster of the religions recognized by the government, but in the cluster of *aliran kepercayaan*.”²¹ These statements imply that indigenous traditions are not in equal footing with the officially recognized religions, politically speaking, and are seen as

¹⁷ What is meant by ‘religionizing’ in this article is considering indigenous traditions (including both beliefs and practices) to be religion. I borrow the term ‘religionization’ from Michel Picard in his preface of the book *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. xi.

¹⁸ Beliefs, worldviews, and ritual practices are regarded as included in the word ‘tradition’.

¹⁹ “Preface: The politics of *agama* in Java and Bali”, in Michel Picard and Remi Madinier et. al., *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. xi.

²⁰ <http://nasional.tempo.co/read/news/2014/11/13/078621695/mui-setuju-pengosongan-kolom-agama-di-ktp?view=fullsite>, accessed on May 23, 2015

²¹ <http://www.hidayatullah.com/berita/nasional/read/2014/09/22/29951/invetarisasi-agama-lokal-harus-digolongkan-sebagai-aliran-kepercayaan.html>, accessed on May 23, 2015. It is interesting that in this statement the informant was already using the term ‘local religions’ (*agama-agama lokal*). In other words, he already acknowledged that indigenous traditions are religion; he had ‘religionized’ indigenous traditions, even though it is not clear what the definition of religion the informant adopts.

not yet fulfilling the requirements for a tradition to be considered religion as the ‘world religions’ have done, epistemologically speaking.

That way of understanding religion has prevailed even in the history of the state policies, beginning in the mid of last century. Following the controversy related to the status of *penghayat kepercayaan* in 1959, the House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat) was requesting the Minister of Religion at that time, K.H. Wahib Wahab, to formulate an official definition of religion. He then came up with a definition stating that a tradition would be regarded as a religion if it could meet the following requirements: “the existence of revelation (*wahyu*) from God, the existence of a messenger(s) or prophet(s), a holy book, and having a guide and a system of law for its followers (Mulder 1978:4-6).”²² The *kebatinan* movements, so they were called at that time, could not fulfil these criteria so that they could not be officially recognized as religion. This view has been lasting until now and still embraced not only by the state, but also popularly by citizens. In fact, *aliran kepercayaan* in the history of Indonesian ministerial categorization is regulated under the ministry of culture and/or tourism, not under the ministry of religious affairs.²³

That view (namely, indigenous traditions are culture/custom rather than religion) can be problematic when it comes to state policy, especially in ‘religious countries’²⁴ where having a religion is one of the requirements for a citizen to have full civil rights before the state. In the case of Indonesia, it is now allowed according to the Law on Civil Administration for *penghayat kepercayaan* to leave their religion column in the ID card blank—this is actually an advance compared to that of the New Order era. Yet leaving religion column blank has some consequences in terms of civil rights, such as “difficulties in registering the marriage of couples belonging to a group with no clear religious designation; obtaining birth certificates for children born out of such marriages; registering these children in public schools; and determining what religious education the children can get in school since religious education is a compulsory subject.”²⁵ The problem in the ID card can

²² Zezen Zaenal Mutaqin, Indonesia and the Malay World (2014): Penghayat, orthodoxy and the legal politics of the state, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, DOI: 10.1080/13639811.2014.870771, p. 14.

²³ For further elaboration of the history of how post-independence Indonesian state treated *aliran kepercayaan*, see Michel Picard, “Introduction: ‘Agama’, ‘Adat’, and Pancasila”, in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia...*, pp. 11-19

²⁴ By ‘religious countries’ I mean the countries in which religion plays a very important role in influencing the state policies. Indonesia is included.

²⁵ Zainal Abidin Bagir, “Indonesia”, in *Keeping the Faith: A Study of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in ASEAN* (Human Rights Resource Center, 2015), p.

also have an impact in the fate of employment later in life and even funeral as exhibited in the recent cases of *penghayat kepercayaan* in Java. This administrative discrimination coming from the ID card stems inseparably from the way the state and society define religion.

With regard to the aforementioned problems, this paper aims to criticize and challenge the view that Indonesia's *aliran kepercayaan* or local beliefs are not religion. What is meant in this paper by *aliran kepercayaan*, local beliefs, or indigenous traditions (these three terms are used interchangeably) are simply those traditions throughout the world that are not included in the cluster of 'world religions' and regarded by some, particularly in Indonesia, as not religion because they are not yet fulfilling the requirements to be recognized as religion. In other words, this paper is aimed at 'religionizing' indigenous traditions mainly in, but not limited to, Indonesia. Also noteworthy is that the main focus of this paper is the theoretical aspect, without overlooking that the political challenges are also important to consider. This paper argues that considering indigenous traditions to be religion is theoretically valid, based on the arguments that will be outlined in the following sections. The main argument, in short, is that because the definition of religion is always evolving and contested and that the common understanding of religion is a modern construction, as today's scholars of the field would agree on, the word religion is highly possible, at least pragmatically, to be redefined and such a redefinition is valid. No less important is that this paper will also offer the "family resemblance" approach in tackling the problem of the 'undefinability' of the word 'religion' in religionizing indigenous traditions. At the end, this paper points out some challenges as the consequence of the offered arguments.

Arguments of the Religionization

In religionizing indigenous traditions, the first task to do is to deal with the question whether it is valid to include them in the meaning contained by the word 'religion'. This paper is arguing that it is valid, because those indigenous traditions are in the range of phenomena to which the word 'religion' applies. The arguments based on which

178. To take one example: In 1964, Bakor Pakem (a state institution that has a job to watch over *aliran kepercayaan*) of Kuningan was declaring that marriage based on Sunda Wiwitan tradition is illegal. There had been some of its adherents doing marriage using Sunda ritual who were arrested. Because of this policy of Bakor Pakem, no less than 5.000 adherents then converted to Catholicism for avoiding discrimination so that they can marry legally. See Human Rights Watch, *Atas Nama Agama* (2013), pp. 68-69.

redefining religion in order to include indigenous beliefs is valid are in the following points:

First: *There has not been a single definition of religion agreed upon by all scholars of the field and each proposed definition has been criticized as either not properly exclusive or not properly inclusive.*

To get an adequate definition of religion is difficult, if not impossible, because, in addition to the fact that there is no an agreement among all scholars on the definition of religion, it has an underlying paradigm that religion can be put in a definitive category separate from other phenomena such as economy, politics or culture. There has been a debate among scholars of religious studies on whether or not religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon, and they are divided and most of them say not. Definitions of religion that have come up are found problematic in some ways.

To put some examples indicating the problem, some of the already proposed definitions can be examined here: (1) James Martineau (1805-1900) says, “Religion is the belief in an ever-living God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the Universe and holding moral relations with mankind”; (2) Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) says, “The essence of religion consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence”; (3) Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) says, “Religion is that which grows out of, and gives expression to, experience of the holy in its various aspects”; (4) Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) says, “Religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands”; (5) John Dewey (1859-1952) says, “The religious is any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of its general and enduring values”; (6) Paul Tillich (1886-1965) says, “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life”; (7) John Hick (1922-2012) says, “Religion centers upon an awareness and response to a reality that transcends ourselves and our world whether the ‘direction’ of transcendence be beyond or within or both... this object is characterized more generally as a cosmic power, or more specifically as a personal God”,²⁶ (8) Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) defines religion as a “system of

²⁶ These 7 definitions are taken from James C. Livingston’s *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2009), p. 5. There are also some statements that are considered a kind of definition, such as that of Sigmund Freud (“Religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis”) and of Karl Marx (“Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature... It is the opium of the people”). Yet these kinds of definitions are more being decriptive rather than a proper definition; they are explanatory in intent; that is, to explain why and how religion came into being or why it persists. These kinds of definitions have been criticized by many scholars as

symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”²⁷

The aforementioned definitions are not yet encompassing even some of the phenomena that have been regarded as religion today. That which is proposed by James Martineau reduces religion into monotheism and as such excludes the Greek and Roman polytheistic religions. All the definitions of religion saying that religion must have an idea of personal-God is exclusively theistic or monotheist-biased and as such excluding such non-theistic religions as Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism. Schleiermacher’s and Otto’s definition emphasizes on the affective or emotional dimension of religious expression, yet it is still not covering belief and the ritually and ethically active dimensions of religion. The definition of Kant limits religion to the moral regulation function and still leaves out the ritualistic and affective dimensions of religious manifestation. The definitions of Dewey and Tillich are too inclusive: their definition of being religious as a quality of experience and as a “state of being grasped by an ultimate concern” can apply to political, aesthetic, or even scientific activity. Implied is that for Dewey and Tillich almost everything is capable of being religious.²⁸ The definition of Geertz is too broad as it can apply to any not-yet modern cultures; meaning those cultures that are not yet encountering religion-politics-culture categorization brought about by modernism. It even implies that the cultures within a society that has been modernized can be regarded as religion even though they are considered by the society merely as culture, not religion, as exhibited in the statement made by a MUI leader previously quoted in the introduction section.

One of the best defenders in saying that religion has a distinct character by which religion can be distinguished from any other social phenomena is Mircea Eliade, with his work entitled *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1961). The basic idea of religion as proposed by Mircea Eliade is that religion has an irreducible element, that is, the sacred, as opposed to the profane. This definition, however, needs another definition of what the sacred means, as well as other words that have similar meaning such as the transcendence and the supernatural.

essentially reductive; they reduce religion to either psychological processes or socioeconomic factors.

²⁷ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a cultural system,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Fontana Press, 1993), pp. 87-125.

²⁸ For further critiques of those definitions, see Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred...*, pp. 6-8.

Again, in the word ‘sacred’ itself lies the problem that happens to the word ‘religion’ as to its origins, epistemology and characteristics. The sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), for example, in his seminal book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) was defining religion as a “unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things”. Yet by sacred things Durkheim meant things that are “set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”—a definition that has the world-religion bias as it requires an institutionalized system of beliefs. In today’s discourse, what is commonly understood by religion is that which is brought up by the latter two scholars, that is, a system of belief having an idea of the sacred—a definition which is found in almost every dictionary. But still, it is not properly exclusive as most, it not all, ‘secular’ ideologies have a system of belief. Also, as much as the sacred is understood as, for instance, bearing an idea of the absolute truth, science can be included in this definition, since scientists believe that the truth lies in the empirical evidence. Or, if the sacred is considered to be the symbols that must be sanctified or can be considered ‘blasphemous’ if one mocks them, a national flag/symbol is sacred for the citizens who belongs to such nation. Another problem is that not every indigenous tradition has a local term equivalent to the word ‘sacred’.

That is the difficulty of defining religion. An adequate definition must avoid vagueness and narrowness; it must include both proper distinctiveness and generality. It should be distinctive enough in distinguishing religious phenomena from other forms of cultural expression, and yet it should be general enough to avoid being relevant to only one type of religion or religious life in one cultural setting or time period.²⁹ The point this section is trying to posit is that because there is no a comprehensively proper definition of religion yet, it is highly possible to come up with a new definition (eventhough not adequate enough) to include indigenous beliefs or *aliran kepercayaan*.

Second: *The commonly understood definitions of religion, particularly those applying to the ‘world religions’, are in service of political purposes and they are basically modern invention.*

Defining a social phenomenon means making a boundary; while a boundary excludes things that are not worth including and, thus, it creates an identity. When identity is shaped, the politics intervenes. Hence, defining religion has political power (King calls it “the politics of

²⁹ *Anatomy of the Sacred...*, p. 7.

knowledge”). In fact this is what has happened in the history of religions.³⁰

Scholars of religious studies have now come into a conclusion that ‘religion’ as popularly understood nowadays was invented in the West—the term ‘religion’ itself is already Western. It was, thus, rooted in the Western political context, particularly in the Enlightenment era in which religion and politics began to be separated. Before the Enlightenment, the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’ are not separate realms in reality.³¹ The Roman word *religio*, from which the word ‘religion’ originated, was appropriated by early Christian theologians who were uprooting its sense and reference from its ‘pagan’ framework; and for the Romans, “*religio* was what *traditio* is all about, a set of ancestral practices developed by a people and transmitted over generations.”³² After the religious and the political were separated, ‘religion’ began being ‘reified’³³, becoming an institutionalized phenomenon having characteristics supposed to be the opposite of the ‘secular’. The ‘secular’ carried such ideas as modernity, empiricism, and rationalism, so that the ‘religious’ is associated with something unmodern, metaphysical, and irrational.³⁴

That secular-religious binary opposition is one of the most influential paradigms in the way ‘religion’ has been portrayed. Besides the secular-religious categorization leading to portraying religion as irrational, another paradigm underlying the construction of “world religions” is that Christianity is placed to be the prototype and that religions are a cultural necessity in an evolutionary development of human civilization.³⁵

³⁰ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14

³² There are two views of classical scholars living in early Christianity on the original meaning of the word *religio*. Cicero said that *religio* has a relation to the word *religere* which means ‘to retrace’ or ‘to read anew’. In this respect, *religio* has the sense of reiteration of the ancestral ritual tradition. On the other side, Lactantius disagreed with Cicero by saying instead that *religio* derives from *religare*, which means ‘to bind’ or ‘to link’. This latter understanding is the one which eventually affected the meaning of religion as commonly understood. See further in Sachot (2007) as cited by Michel Picard in “Introduction: ‘Agama’, ‘Adat’, and Pancasila”, in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia...*, p. 1.

³³ On the history of the reification of the word ‘religion’, the most recommended book is *The Meaning and End of Religion* by Wilfred C. Smith.

³⁴ Catherine Bell, “Paradigms behind (and before) the Modern Concept of Religion,” in *History and Theory*, Vol. 45, pp. 31-32

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28 & 36-37

On the “Christianity as the prototype” paradigm, it was the spread of Christianity in Europe, brought eventually by missionaries and colonizers to many parts of the world, that made Christianity seen as the frame of reference for what religion is. As the prototype for religion, Christianity had all the characteristics with which people started addressing various cultures. Christianity was the major parameter used to categorize, conceive and portray the different traditions of what had been later considered to be “religion”. The problem in this respect lies in the possibility that Chinese or Japanese traditional practitioners would have denied having any religion because what they practiced and observed as tradition was unlike the model presented by Christian missionaries.³⁶

What makes Christians more confident in making Christianity as the prototype of religion was its history, particularly in the medieval era, in which there was contestation between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. For the Christian cosmology at that time, Jews were seen as misguided despite having shared scriptural basis and common sacred stories and Muslims were seen as “the barbarian at the gate threatening the very physical and psychological borders of Christendom.”³⁷ This case of three monotheistic religions rivalry made Christians believe that Christianity can be a model that could be applied more widely to a variety or even all cultural expressions throughout the world. In the later development, this made having a scripture and a personal-God, which has a very monotheistic bias, the two fundamental requirements in order for a tradition to be called religion.

The problem emerges when it comes to the social phenomena that did not previously and/or still do not have those criteria in order to be called religion. Buddhism, a non-theistic ‘religion’, as stated in the previous section, does not have the concept of personal-God as understood by the theistic ones; the thing is that Buddhists are not concerned with such an idea as for them the world works through the natural laws. In the history of Indonesian Buddhism, to mention one example where that definition affects governmental policy, it was in the New Order era that Buddhists who was imposed to have such a personal-God invented a name of their ‘God’ in order to be recognized by the state and to avoid oppression. Another example is Hinduism. For many centuries, the Hindus did not have a scripture in the sense of a written sacred text. The Hindu’s Veda was orally transmitted from generation to generation and not written down—the oldest Sanskrit text of the *Rg-Veda* was not printed as a book until 1854.³⁸ Again, the word ‘Hinduism’ itself

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31

³⁸ *Anatomy of the Sacred...* p. 100.

was invented by the Western at the time of British colonialism (previously it was Muslims who invaded India and invented the name 'Hindu'); "there are Hindus, but there is no Hinduism."³⁹ Before the name 'Hinduism' was invented, if a Hindu was asked about their religion, he/she would have answered like this: "I belong to this caste"—and a caste has its own *dharma* which has to do with the communal duties and is not equivalent with 'religion'.⁴⁰

There is also another problem in the underlying paradigm of world religions, namely, "the cultural necessity of religion" as portrayed in the evolutionary approach of studying history of religions. This approach, which is fraught with Tylorian idea⁴¹ of determining the origins of religion, views religion in an evolving history of human civilization, from animism to polytheism up to monotheism. In this evolutionary approach, monotheism is seen as the most advanced way of human history in being religious and, as a consequence, those who are described as animists are regarded as not yet modern, uncivilized, or primitive. Hence emerges the new categorization, that is, the world religions supposed to be the opposite of the 'primal religions'. Those so-called primal religions are described in Tylorian framework as having such criteria as locality (or sort of ethnic 'religion'), possessing no written sources, marked by oral traditions, and having no distinction between the natural and the supernatural. In this respect, James Cox has criticized this identification by arguing that the classification "primal religions" is a non-empirical Christian theological construct.

Quoting Rosalind Shaw (1990), Cox says that Western academics have expressed a bias toward religions with written scriptures, organized structures, and identifiable doctrines. The counter-evidence for this identification, Cox challenges, is the fact that Judaism is an ethnic religion and Hinduism cannot be set apart from its expression in Indian culture; meaning, both were not universal or 'world religions'. Besides, most world religions in their earliest development were giving priority to

³⁹ Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 65.

⁴⁰ Catherine Bell, "Paradigms behind (and before) the Modern Concept of Religion"... p. 99.

⁴¹ It refers to the framework of Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), an English anthropologist, considered the founder of cultural anthropology, whose works are very influential to the later scholars of the field in bringing up the idea of cultural evolutionism. Religion in the Tylorian framework is seen as part of human evolution; it began with animism, then polytheism, and ended up with monotheism. In this framework, thus, animism is conceived of being the backward form of human religiosity. This idea overwhelmingly affects the way modern people perceive indigenous beliefs.

the spoken over the written sacred word. In this regard, Islam, for example, emphasized the recited revelation rather than the written form; let alone Hinduism with its Veda. In sum, the universal-primal categorization of religions is not proper as it is not supported by evidence (at least in their earliest form) and having bias from Christian theological construct. Responding to the problem of how the religions of indigenous peoples can be properly described, then, Cox has a suggestion to follow the direction proposed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, namely, the so-called “cumulative tradition” being an outward expression of the personal faith, stressing that traditions are not static but develop dynamically in response to various factors. In Smith’s idea “all terms for classifying any cluster of religious phenomena such as ‘Hinduism’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Christianity’ and so on are suspects since they are inadequate in themselves, misleading, and subject to innumerable qualifications.” In referring to what is called ‘primal religions’ (in universal-primal categorization), Cox prefers to use “the religions of indigenous people.”⁴²

The point the aforementioned explanations are trying to show is that because the religions clustered in the so-called world religions are even a modern construction and that their earliest forms were more or less like today’s indigenous traditions, it is highly possible to come up with a new construction of the definition of religion to include indigenous beliefs and practices.

Third: *The undefineability of the word ‘religion’ can be pragmatically described through ‘family resemblance’ and this description has the possibility to be a modus vivendi in Indonesian religious politics of dealing with aliran kepercayaan.*

As has been previously shown that the word ‘religion’ appears to be impossible to be adequately defined, one may argue that the best position is not to define it; it is better to leave those traditions without imposing the term ‘religion’ to denote them. One statement that reflects this position is that of Wilfred C. Smith. He says that people “throughout history and throughout the world have been able to be religious without the assistance of a special term, without the intellectual analysis that the term implies,” and that “the only effective significance that can reasonably be attributed to the term is that of ‘religiousness’.”⁴³ In terms of scientific explanation, what Smith proposed is, as stated above, the

⁴² James L. Cox, *The Classification ‘Primal Religions’ as a Non-Empirical Christian Theological Construct*, p. 74.

⁴³ *The Meaning and End of Religion...*, p. 194. Smith has traced the history of the world ‘religion’: how it has undergone a ‘reification’ from a quality of piety (“religiousness”) to a institutionalized beliefs; from an adjective to a noun.

“cumulative tradition”, the aspect that can be scientifically studied, being an outward expression of the unempirically observable faith.

In fact, many recent scholars come up with their own description of religion, depending on the field they are studying or doing a research. For a research purpose, anthropologists, for instance, commonly use the definition of religion proposed by Clifford Geertz. In studying the Ammatoans of Sulawesi, Indonesia, Samsul Maarif defines religion as “ways of relating: how human beings relate to their fellow humans including the living and the dead, and other beings: animals, plants, forests, mountains, rivers, and invisible beings such as gods and spirits.”⁴⁴ In this perspective, Maarif believes, religion includes many aspects of everyday life.⁴⁵ But still, in terms of the recent development of scientific research, religion is treated not as an objectively distinct phenomenon that has a defining feature applicable universally, but as an object of analysis or the claim the adherents of such religion are making.

The problem, however, takes place when it comes to state policy and, the one which is discussed in this article, indigenous traditions: whether indigenous tradition is religious. The question is, then, how to define, or rather to describe, the undefinable phenomenon of religion in order to include indigenous traditions. The previous section has shown that because religion is a modern invention so that, as this paper argues, it is possible to de/re-construct the prevailing definitions of religion.

That possibility in tackling the problem that religion has no a universally essential defining feature exists in viewing what counts as religion through the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblance”.⁴⁶ This idea is built upon his theory of “language game”.

⁴⁴ Samsul Maarif, *Dimensions of Religious Practices: The Ammatoans of Sulawesi, Indonesia*, a dissertation submitted to Arizona State University, published by UMI & ProQuest, 2012, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Maarif’s definition of religion is too inclusive since it, as he himself acknowledges, “includes politics, economics, agriculture, rituals, and so forth.” Also, in defining religion as human’s ways of relating to other beings, ecology can be included. Maarif’s understanding of religion is most likely influenced by Bird-David’s account on redefining animism. Opposing the hegemonic view that animism is a simple religion and a failed epistemology, Bird-David offered a framework perceiving animism as a relational epistemology. See further: Nurit Bird-David, “Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology”, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 40, Feb. 1999, pp. 67-91.

⁴⁶ This idea of tackling the problem of defining religion by using “family resemblance” approach has been elaborated by Victoria S. Harrion, “The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multi-Cultural World”, in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (June 2006), pp. 133-152

Through this “family resemblance” approach, game can be analogous to religion. In this respect, Victoria S. Harrison says,

“Wittgenstein shows that if we consider any feature that some games possess, we will find some other game that does not possess it. Competitive activity, for example, may at first sight appear to be a feature possessed by all games. However, counter-examples are easy to come by: certain card games, solitaire for instance, are not competitive. As no feature is possessed by all games, no single feature can be used to define what games are.”⁴⁷

By using game as an analogy, Wittgenstein meant to point to the fact that many modern abstract concepts, like game, do not actually have a universally defining feature. Religion in this respect is not exceptional. Harrison further states,

“Later thinkers, inspired by his approach, have proposed that one reason why religion is so difficult to define might be because ‘religion’ is one of these concepts that do not refer to things possessing a single defining characteristic. Perhaps, instead, “religion” is a complex concept used to refer to things sharing a number of features—and thereby exhibiting a number of ‘family resemblances’—not all of which need be present.”⁴⁸

To get examples of that analogy, as Harrison shows, Theravada Buddhism, Shaivite Hinduism, and Christianity can be put in comparison. If religion is required to have a founder, both Therava Buddhism and Christianity have a founder, but Theravada Buddhism does not possess an idea of God; and, in contrast, Shaivite Hindus do not have a holy founder yet they believe in a God. In short, this analogy shows that religions have nothing that they all have in common; however, many overlapping resemblances exist among them.

That “family resemblance” approach may be challenged by the possibility that there would be also many resemblances between religious and secular phenomena. Nevertheless, the thing meant to be pointed out here is that, as much as indigenous tradition is concerned, they have resemblances closer to what counts as ‘the religious’ rather than to ‘the secular’. Also, in terms of epistemology, this “family resemblance” approach is the most helpful so far. As religion cannot be adequately defined, it can only be described through “what is” and “what is not”. In fact, ‘the religious’ has been and is constructed to be the opposition of

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

what ‘the secular’ is. In the light of this understanding, ‘the religious’ is simply what ‘the secular’ is not.

Indigenous people have been subject of discrimination; their belief system is not regarded as parallel to religion ‘as commonly understood’. Encountering this treatment, they have been evolving, as the non-theistic religions did, and attempting to have their tradition resemble the ‘recognized’ religions. In this understanding lies the possibility of ‘religionizing’ indigenous traditions. Even if they do not have all the aspects possessed by the monotheistic religions, they resemble some aspects of the theistic ones and more aspects of the non-theistic ones, such as rituals, ‘supernatural’ worldview beliefs on the ‘sacred’ or—to borrow Tillich’s term—‘ultimate concern’, and so on so forth.

Besides the theoretical possibility, in the context of Indonesia where Islam is the predominantly embraced religion, it is also possible to get some insight from Islamic theology. The Qur’an (109:6), the primary source of Islam, addresses some practices of the *mushrikin* (worshippers of idols) and says, “For you is your religion, and for me is my religion” (*lakum dinukum waliya din*).⁴⁹ It is clear from this passage that the idolatrous tradition practiced by the *mushrikin* of Mecca at the time of Prophet Muhammad was referred to as *din*, the same word applied to the religion of Islam.⁵⁰ The point is that if that idolatrous tradition, which had no scripture and is not clear as to who the founder is, can be denoted by the word *din*, which has been mostly translated as ‘religion’, and can be referred to with the same word for the religion of Islam, then the same case should be also applicable to those Indonesian indigenous traditions.

Based on the above arguments, this article is trying to show that how we define religion can be pragmatically done through “family resemblance” approach, besides some insight from Islamic theology which needs to be elaborated further in another discussion. Religionizing indigenous tradition is, thus, valid. The “family resemblance” approach can also be a *modus vivendi*⁵¹ by which indigenous traditions in Indonesia, which have resemblance with the already recognized religions, can be legitimately called indigenous religions. The arguments outlined in this section have also pointed to the fact that the idea that

⁴⁹ In the Sahih International’s translation, the word *din* is translated as religion. So is Mohammed Pickthall’s. In Indonesian translation, the passage is translated as “*untukmu agamamu, dan untukku lah agamaku.*”

⁵⁰ See Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami’ al-Bayan fi Ta’wil al-Qur’an* (Muassasah al-Risalah, 2000), Vol. 24, p. 661.

⁵¹ *Modus vivendi* here means, as commonly understood, a temporary arrangement to accommodate disputing parties to allow life to go on in an agreement. It is called *modus vivendi* because there still a need of discussion as to the state can come up with an adequate definition in the law applicable permanently.

indigenous traditions in Indonesia are mere culture/custom/*adat* and not religion needs to be critically reexamined.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The arguments outlined in this paper shows that it is valid and legitimate to consider Indonesia's *aliran kepercayaan* to be religion. This is based on three propositions: (1) There has not been a single definition of religion agreed upon by all scholars of the field and each proposed definition has been criticized as either not properly exclusive or not properly inclusive; (2) The commonly understood definitions of religion, particularly those applying to the 'world religions', are in service of political purposes and they are basically modern invention; (3) The undefineability of the word 'religion' can be pragmatically described through 'family resemblance' and this description has the possibility to be a *modus vivendi* in Indonesian religious politics of dealing with *aliran kepercayaan*. In sum, by these three propositions, this paper argues that because no adequate definition for the word 'religion' and that the prevailing definitions are modern invention, it is highly possible and valid to redefine religion using "family resemblance" approach through which Indonesia's *aliran kepercayaan* can be considered religion.

Nevertheless, no less important is that, after embracing the arguments posited above, there are still some challenges. The "family resemblance" approach offered in this article to religionize indigenous traditions has two main consequences. First is that it does not come up with a new definition. This could result in difficulty in determining the proper definition that should be adopted in the Indonesian law that regulates religious life. In this respect, scholars of law should be involved in the discussion, that is, whether it is possible in terms of law not to define religion while at the same time include *aliran kepercayaan* in the cluster of religion. Also, important is to determine what are the kinds of "religious family" so that what is closer to 'the religious' rather than to 'the secular' can be identified.

Second, when the resemblance possessed by *aliran kepercayaan* is regarded as taking some aspects of the world religion, particularly Islam in the case of Indonesia, there would be possible for such *aliran kepercayaan* to be deemed as a deviant form of Islam, not as a distinct religion. This has happened to Agama Djawa Sunda (Madraism) whose part of its origins was mirroring the 19th-century Islamic practices in West Java.⁵² Also, this can be risky when it comes to law, especially the

⁵² Zeken Zaenal Mutaqin, Indonesia and the Malay World (2014): Penghayat, orthodoxy and the legal politics of the state, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, DOI: 10.1080/13639811.2014.870771.

1965 Defamation Law which states, “Every individual is prohibited from intentionally, in public, conveying, endorsing (advising), or soliciting public support for an interpretation of a certain religion embraced by Indonesian people or *undertaking religious activities that resemble the religious activities of the religion*, where such interpretation and activities deviate from the basic tenets of the religion.”⁵³ With regard to this problem, what is constitutive of ‘resemblance’ prohibited by the Defamation Law must be put under scrutiny and discussed in another detailed elaboration as to its legitimacy and its wording accuracy.

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⁵³ Zainal Abidin Bagir, “Indonesia”, in *Keeping the Faith: A Study of Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in ASEAN* (Human Rights Resource Center, 2015), pp. 149-150 [Italic is to emphasize]. As Zainal A. Bagir states, the initial target of the Defamation law was the *kebatinan* movements that were not included in the cluster of the officially recognized religions.

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