

# 1.2. Yanwar Pribadi Book Review BKI Volume 174 Issue 2- 3 2018.pdf

*by Yanwar Pribadi*

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**Submission date:** 08-Jul-2022 02:49PM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 1868021511

**File name:** 1.2. Yanwar Pribadi Book Review BKI Volume 174 Issue 2-3 2018.pdf (66.2K)

**Word count:** 2000

**Character count:** 11286

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**M. Muntahibun Nafis**

*Pesantren Pluralis: Peran Pesantren Ngalah dalam Mengembangkan Nilai-nilai Pluralisme di Tengah Masyarakat yang Multikultural*. Yogyakarta: Insan Madani [with forewords by James J. Fox and Mujamil Qomar], 2017, xxii + 330 pp. ISBN 9789790264533, price IDR 75,000.00 (paperback).

A number of authors have recently investigated several aspects of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia. Florian Pohl (2006), for instance, explores, among other topics issues of anti-violence, interfaith dialogues, and human rights in the *pesantren* world. In a similar vein, Martin van Bruinessen (2008) examines traditionalist and Islamist *pesantren* in Indonesia, with a focus on three *pesantren* connected with the underground *Darul Islam* movement. Furthermore, Azyumardi Azra, Dina Afrianty, and Robert W. Hefner (2007) review a broad spectrum of Islamic education in Indonesia that includes the institutions of the *pesantren*, the *madrasa* (Islamic day schools), and other types of Islamic schools. Meanwhile, Mun'im Sirry (2010) and Eka Srimulyani (2007) observe the *pesantren's* role in the development of civil society discourse and its efforts to provide education for women and to tackle gender issues, respectively. All of them attempt to prove that there is no relation between the *pesantren* and Islamic radicalism, and that *pesantren* are traditionalist, moderate, peaceful, contributive to democratization, adaptive to the ideals of Indonesian nationhood, and supportive of the nation's democratic civil society.

A lecturer at the State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) Tulungagung, Indonesia, M. Muntahibun Nafis—the author of the book here under review—goes further by probing the pluralism, tolerance, multiculturalism, moderation, and nationalism of *pesantren* with a focus on Pesantren Ngalah, an unusually open-minded *pesantren* located in Pasuruan, East Java. In the history of Islam in Indonesia, *pesantren* are generally regarded as traditional Islamic educational institutions. They are the centers of rural religious life and tend to be tradition-oriented and socially conservative (Van Bruinessen 2008: 218). These institutions did not emerge before the eighteenth century and in fact only became widespread in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Van Bruinessen 1995: 173; Ricklefs 2007: 52).

*Pesantren Pluralis: Peran Pesantren Ngalah dalam Mengembangkan Nilai-nilai Pluralisme di Tengah Masyarakat yang Multikultural* (A Pluralist Pesantren: The Role of Pesantren Ngalah in Developing Values of Pluralism in a Multicultural Society) focuses on the development of religious pluralism specifically in the Pesantren Ngalah, particularly the way this institute constructs pluralist values, deals with the concept of pluralism, and manages the implications of

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pluralism inside its classrooms and for the broader community. This book is mostly intended for students and scholars interested in education, anthropology, sociology, and Islamic Studies. It attempts to show some rather unusual approaches by a *pesantren* to disseminate religious ideas and Islamic teaching (*da'wah*) in a multicultural society. While most *pesantren* are skeptical of the ideas of pluralism which are thought to be closely associated with Westernization, capitalism, and liberalism, Pesantren Ngalah, through its main leader, Kiai Sholeh Bahruddin, promotes pluralist values through *da'wah* activities and through its curricula in the institute's formal and non-formal education system. Based on the author's doctoral dissertation, this book shows that the development of religious pluralism in Pesantren Ngalah appears to have taken place due to the genealogy of Kiai Sholeh, the influence of his teachers, and his position as a guide in Muslim mystical brotherhoods (*tariqa murshid*), and that the development of religious pluralism in Pesantren Ngalah is implemented through daily learning and daily activities of the religious leaders/scholars (*kiai*), the teachers, the pupils of *pesantren* (*santri*), and the surrounding community.

In a context in which most recent studies on *pesantren* have had an anthropological or sociological approach, a detail-oriented work that focuses on one particular *pesantren*, especially on a sensitive topic in Indonesia (such as religious pluralism), has value in itself. Due to the vast number of *pesantren* in recent years (more than 16,000) (Tan 2011: 92) and the fact that these institutes have been a significant educational institution since the Dutch colonial administration, the book offers an important case to study the relationship between one such *pesantren* and religious pluralism, which usually do not go hand in hand. Such a relationship is actually part of a movement starting from the end of Soeharto's long authoritarian regime in 1998 for more democratic Muslim politics in which the participation of Muslim leaders in democratic campaigns has centered around the formulation of religious arguments in support of pluralism, democracy, women's rights, and civil society (Hefner 2005: 4; Bertrand 2010: 45). Nafis argues that religious pluralism is a system of value that views religious diversity or pluralism positively and optimistically by accepting it as a reality and striving to do good deeds based on that reality (pp. 32–33).

In chapter 3 to chapter 6, Nafis explores the Pesantren Ngalah, including its profile in chapter 3, the ways it constructs pluralism in chapter 4, its transformation and internalization of pluralism in chapter 5, and the implication of its notions of pluralism for the surrounding community in chapter 6. As many accounts associate pluralism with particular Indonesian figures, such as Gus Dur, Cak Nur, or Syafi'i Ma'arif, this account becomes interesting as the author

illustrates how pluralistic ideas are deeply attached to an institution, not only to an individual.

Nafis shows us how Kiai Sholeh's wide and flexible interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) has generated the construction of pluralistic ideas and practices in Pesantren Ngalah (p. 158). Of these practices, some are worth noting: the institute has been a place for interfaith dialogues and seminars, it has been known to promote a moderate and accommodative way of Islamic textual interpretation, Kiai Sholeh has delivered sermons in churches, non-Muslims have taught certain subjects in the *pesantren*, non-Muslims have resided in and studied at Pesantren Ngalah, and the curricula of its formal and non-formal educational system have been influenced by multiculturalism and pluralist ideas (p. 175). As a result of the construction of pluralist ideas and practices, Pesantren Ngalah has been known as a place to promote counter-hegemonic ideas against capitalism and Westernization, and as a *pesantren* that has supported the development of a number of Islamic organizations and congregations in Pasuruan and East Java (pp. 209–215).

Unfortunately, this book has some serious shortcomings. First, it has no clear arguments based on actual data; the author's opinions dominate many pages and too often the author sides with Pesantren Ngalah. The book also provides a rather naïve understanding of its development, such as how Kiai Sholeh dealt with rumors of adultery with his female *santri* (p. 126), his genealogy that is claimed to be clearly traced to the Prophet Muhammad (pp. 128–129), and the way the author feels that the pluralist aspects of Pesantren Ngalah are perfectly suitable for various ethnic communities in Pasuruan (p. 250). Therefore, we learn nothing of how and why most *pesantren* in Indonesia avoid pluralist ideas and practices. Likewise, the fact that there is an up close and personal relation between the *kiai* and his *santri* in Pesantren Ngalah (p. 161), or that its three functions as a religious, social, and educational institution are integrated (p. 169), are neither new nor disputed. The book might have been stronger if the author had included more factual findings and analyses in chapter 3 to chapter 6, instead of focusing on theoretical discussions.

Second, chapters 1 and 2 are long-winded and lifted mostly unmodified from the author's doctoral dissertation, and probably could have been edited and concisely revised into a single chapter. The theoretical discussions in Chapter 2 seem to be a decorative addition, as is often the case with doctoral dissertations in Indonesian universities. In addition, the author does not clearly identify his methods and sources.

Third, the author depends too much on other authors for information on Pesantren Ngalah that he could have discovered himself from fieldwork. Worse, Nafis mostly does it without any critical discussion. Instead of relying on another

er author for information on the local government's limited concern towards religious life in Pasuruan (p. 239) or the role of Pesantren Ngalah in *da'wah* activities (p. 251), he could have interviewed the *kiai* himself on the subject. This raises doubts about the accuracy of his descriptions of the institute, its *kiai*, Pasuruan, and many other things.

Fourth, the book lacks cohesion. The objectives of the book appear relatively late in the book's introduction (p. 7). Meanwhile, key definitions also appear late; for example, the definition of 'pluralism' only appears in chapter 2. In addition, there are several misprints scattered throughout the book, and the spelling of names and concepts is inconsistent or wrong. For example, Zamakhsyari Dhofier turns into Zamakhsyari Dlofier (p. 3), 'pendidikan' is spelled as 'pan-didikan' (p. 7), 'inovasi' is wrongly spelled as 'inofasi' (p. 12), or 'reproduksi' and 'sufistik', instead of 'reproduksi' and 'sufistik' (p. 283).

Given the book's intended readership, the author could have demonstrated that there have been continuities and changes in the development and debates of pluralism in Islamic institutions in Indonesia and beyond. It could be done by tracing the history of *pesantren* in East Java and by exploring the characters of traditional understanding and application of Islam in a multicultural province such as East Java.

All in all, despite these critiques, this book is a very positive addition to scholarship on the *pesantren* initiated by Zamakhsyari Dhofier almost forty years ago. Nafis offers a sympathetic portrait of a religious institute that, one would hope, could become a role model not only for Muslim communities but also for the Indonesian government, given contemporary problems of political polarization, radicalism, and religious intolerance, particularly since the 2014 presidential elections.

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