SINETRON LEADS TO NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY:
Christian Identity and the Representation of Religion in Indonesian Popular Culture

Kristi
Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies,
Universitas Gadjah Mada
Email: kristi@gkj.or.id

Gregory Vanderbilt
Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies,
Universitas Gadjah Mada
Email: gvanderbilt@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Having Pancasila as its ideology, with its first pillar of Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa (the belief in one deity), Indonesia is neither based on a certain religion, nor giving a privilege to a certain religion. In the context of the resurgence of religion, Islam obviously becomes the only normative in everyday life, including in popular culture. This paper analyzes the way Indonesian Christians see the representation of religion in sinetron, the television soap opera tat is considered the predominant form of popular culture in Indonesia, and negotiate their identity as religious minority. The work is based on a research project conducted in Gereja Kristen Jawa (GKJ/Christian Church of Java) Gondokusuman in Yogyakarta. A random survey about sinetron titles watched by the embers of the congregation show that eight titles are popular. A more intensive questionnaire is distributed to the church council as the representation of Christians who are active in church activities. It is also intended to show the most-watched sinetron in 2017. From the survey, there are two most watched sinetron: "Tukang Ojek Pengkolan" (TOP/Motorcycle-taxi Driver on the Corner) and "Dunia Terbalik" (DT/Upside-down World). Eighteen people who watch both TOP and DT then were interviewed. Using the framework of first generation of reception study, the work finds that Christians' reception on the representation of religion in sinetron can be categorized into three patterns: mirror of reality, watching for pleasure, and religion is necessary. Those three patterns show that Christians' reception is in negotiation position.

Keywords: religious, representation, popular culture, Christian identity, negotiation

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has Pancasila (literally means "five pillars") as its ideology. The first

pillar is *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* which means the belief in one deity. This pillar shows that Indonesian ideology is not based on one religion. It also does not mean that Indonesia gives any privilege to certain religions. Every religion is, in principle, equal. The practice, in fact, speaks differently. As it also happens in other places, that the majority is usually more dominant, Islam as the majority religion in number seems to dominate in every aspects of everyday life in the country. It can be seen in the use of Islamic prayer in public schools, the use of Islamic greeting in public event, and the fact that most of Muslim women wear jilbab (Islamic head cover) publicly. It makes difficult for non-Muslims to get equal rights in every aspects of everyday life. It does not only in the term that they are discriminated in public sphere such as participation in politics and academia, but also in the representation in popular culture, which is both public, as shared culture, and private, consumed by people, including Christians, in their homes. This is what I understand from the point of view of the minority group.

The form of popular culture chosen in this research is *sinetron*, an Indonesian genre of soap opera. It is chosen because *sinetron* and television share cultural experience of Indonesian. Initially, television, which the project was started in 1962, was used by the state to weave the unity of Indonesia (Kitley, 2014: 24-25, 28). By watching the same programme, the state hopes that the Indonesian share one national culture. It can be done when communication satellites make it possible for almost all area of Indonesia access television and the yearly programmes are centrally arranged in Jakarta (Sen and Hill, 2006: 110). But the appearance of private television and the easiness to get video cassette in the late 1980s, gave opportunity for audience to find various kind of entertainment programmes, especially foreign ones. The condition was responded by the state by making a programme that can show the identity of good Indonesian. *Sinetron* was then chosen (Kitley, 2000: 104). The storyline was focused on four normative ideologies: familyism, neighbourliness, simple life, and national ideology (*wawasan nusantara*). All good Indonesians must live those normative promoted by the state (Kitley, 2000: 147).

The collapse of the New Order in 1998 brought a kind of liberation, not only in politics that are characterized by the existence of multi political parties and the decentralization of government, but also in popular culture that is characterized by the freedom of content of television programme. The normative was slowly changes, especially in the representation of religion. While in the New Order era, the representation of religion was very strict. After 1998, religion is freely represented. It leads to single representation of Islam. Islam is more and more represented in television in various ways

(Sofjan with Hidayati, 2013: 36-50). In *sinetron*, it was started by *sinetron religi*, that obviously show Islamic elements, which firstly broadcasted during Ramadan month (Rakhmani, 2016: 54, Subijanto, 2011: 243). But in the late 2000s, *sinetron religi* broadcasted everyday throughout the year (Rakhmani, 2016: 47). Moreover, in *sinetron* that are not included in *sinetron religi*, there are also Islamic representations in it. In contrary, Christian *sinetron* is only recorded being broadcasted in holy day season but not every year and not in every television channel.

The condition explained above leads to questions about the way Christians see the single representation of religion in popular culture. Further, it also raises a question about the way Christians negotiate their identity belonging in Indonesia as a minority related with the lack of representation of their religion in popular culture. To reach the answer, the framework used is that television audience is not passively affected by television they watch as the paradigm that media is a propaganda tool and audience are only passive consumers (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003: 5-6, Adorno, 2003: 55-56, Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 95-97). Instead, every television audience is active. They can choose to accept the meanings brought by the media or create their own meanings (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003: 91-92). This is what is meant by reception. Sandvoss argues that reception is about the interplay between the reader and the text (Sandvoss, 2011: 231).

The reception theory used here is of the first generation (Alasuutari, 1999: 2-4). It is based on Stuart Hall's theory of "encoding" and "decoding". By using those terms, Hall argues that television program have meaning to be circulated as created by the producer. It is called as encoding process. But the audience has their free choice to understand the meaning based on their backgrounds. It is the one called as decoding. It means that audience do not always receive the same meaning as the one transmitted and each audience also can get different meaning from same programme (Hall, 1973: 4-5). For the decoding process, there are four types. The first is the dominant or hegemonic code. Audience in this type receive meaning as put by the producer; the dominant and preferred meaning. The second is the professional code, when a professional broadcaster transmits meaning according to the dominant or hegemonic one. The third is negotiated code. In this type, audience's response is the combination between accepting and opposing the transmitted meaning. They understand the meaning brought by the programme but do not wholly accept it. The fourth is oppositional code, where the audience is fully understands the meaning transmitted through a programme but fully oppose it by decoding the meaning in contrary way (Hall, 1973: 16-18).

THE STUDIES OF REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION IN POPULAR CULTURE

To position this paper among the scholars, there are three aspects that must be considered. First is study about Christian identity in Indonesia in post-1998. One of it is "Christianity and Religious Freedom in Indonesia since 1998" (2016) by Zainal Abidin Bagir and Robert W. Hefner. It talks about that Christians in Indonesia feel better condition before the *Reformasi* in 1998. After, they feel more pressure and more limited access to politics and academia positions. They also feel that the public is coloured by Islamic bylaws. While most study about Christian identity in post-1998 mostly focus on participation in politics and academics, this paper focus on the participation of Christians in popular culture.

Second is study about the representation of religion in popular culture, especially television. There are many studies about it. In "Television" (2015), Elijah Siegler argues that the representation of religion in television can function as priest, prophet, or rabbi. It has priestly function when television maintaining religious values. Prophetic function can be seen when television criticize religion. Rabbinic is seen when television catalyses religious debate and changes in lived religion. Dicky Sofjan with Mega Hidayati in *Religion and Television in Indonesia: Ethics Surrounding Dakwahtainment* (2013) argues that television can mediate religion for audience or mediatised religion to make it fit with the consumer's needs. Ariel Heryanto in *Identity and Culture: the Politics of Indonesian Screen Culture* (2014) states that after the New Order collapsed, Islam was the only normative that comes into sight in public, including in popular culture. He sees the phenomena as the result of Indonesian history that open the space for Islam to be manifested in public and the way market seized the opportunity. Riane Subijanto argues in "The Visibility of a Pious Public" (2011) that in post New Order era, Islamic piety's presentation in media is increasing as popular piety culture that shapes and is shaped by its public. While most study about representation of religion in television focus on the representation itself, this paper focus on the way the representation is seen by the audience, especially those who have different religion with the one represented.

Third is study about the Islamic piety in public. Noorhaidi Hasan in "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere" (2009) and Greg Fealy in "Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia" (2008) focus on the increase of Islamic appearance in public. The appearances are in many sectors, but mostly in popular culture, in everything that can be

consumed. Hasan argues that the phenomenon is the part of resurgence of religion and the way Muslims show their piety. Fealy argues that it is the way Muslims show their identity as pious. This paper investigates Islamic piety in *sinetron* but not focus on the way Muslims show it in public, but the way Christians (non-Muslims) see Islamic pietism in popular culture, which is both public and private.

This work is based on the research conducted in Gereja Kristen Jawa (GKJ/ Christian Church of Java) Gondokusuman in Yogyakarta. It is located in Yogyakarta, the place of the first television station outside Jakarta (August 1965). It is the oldest GKJ in Yogyakarta (in November 2018, it will turn 105 years old). It has a large and diverse congregation, and is located in an urban area which is intensively affected by popular culture. The members mostly are Javanese, but there are also many non-Javanese. Most of them have married members of GKJ Gondokusuman and chosen to become members as well and others are students or workers who moved to Yogyakarta and decided to be the member of GKJ Gondokusuman. The range of the age of the members is very wide; from new-born babies until those who are in age 90s. At least, the oldest council member is 81 in 2018. The congregation members mostly live in Gondokusuman *Kecamatan* (Sub-District) where the church building is located. Others live in other *kecamatan*, some even outside the City of Yogyakarta. The Sunday services are held in three languages: Bahasa Indonesia, Javanese, and English (only in third Sunday) to accommodate the diversity of the members.

The research combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative is used twice. First, it was random survey through WhatsApp message to know the *sinetron* title watched by congregation members of GKJ Gondokusuman. It was conducted in October 10, 2017. I sent random broadcast WhatsApp message to 250 congregation members at October 10, 2017. I asked them whether they watch *sinetron* or not and if they watch what is the title. There were 70 people who responded and from those people, 21 watch *sinetron*. From this first survey, there are eight *sinetron* titles that are watched including Dunia Terbalik, Tukang Ojek Pengkolan, OK Jek, Anak Langit, Dua Wanita Cantik, Anak Jalanan, Dia, and Cinta dan Rahasia. This first survey is continued by other survey. This second survey was conducted among the council which consists of 106 members in January 11-13, 2018. They are considered as representation of congregation members because they are directly chosen by the congregation members to be council members. They are also considered as representing active Christians because they in charge of all church's programmes and elected because the trust of their piety. From 106 members,

there are 71 men and 35 women. Of them, 38 watch *sinetron* during 2017, 23 males and 15 females. The most watched *sinetron* in 2017 according to the survey are *Tukang Ojek Pengkolan* (Motorcycle-taxi Driver in the Corner) and *Dunia Terbalik* (Upside-down World). There are eighteen members that watch both of them.

After the survey, I start the qualitative method by doing interview and categorizing the interview result in a pattern. The interviewees are those eighteen members who watch *sinetron*. The interviews were guided by a list of questions but also open for more explanation and story from the interviewees. The main questions are about religion they see in *sinetron* they watch, their opinions or feeling about the representation of that religion in *sinetron*, and the need of religion represented in *sinetron*. Some interviews are recorded by voice note in my iPhone. Two interviewees refuse to be recorded and some could not because of noisy conditions and technical failures. Besides recording, the interviews are well noted in book note. Both recordings and notes are typed in a form of summary of each question for each interviewee.

THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION IN *SINETRON*

Two most-watched *sinetron* by Christians in 2017 are Tukang Ojek Pengkolan (TOP/Motorcycle-taxi Driver in the Corner) and Dunia Terbalik (DT/Upside-down World). Both *sinetron* are not categorized as *sinetron religi* which the title usually used Arabic words and show Islamic teaching explicitly. But as will be shown below, those *sinetron* contain Islamic elements in them. Firstly, the representation of religion in those *sinetron* can be observed through markers of identity. It means that something observable that commonly identified as owned by certain religion. The first marker is the dressing. It can be easily observed that some women wearing *jilbab* (Islamic head cover) and men wearing *baju koko* (shirt commonly identified as Muslim fashion for men) and some kinds wearing hat that is especially identified as Islamic (*kopiah*, *peci*). The second marker is the religious activity. There are *pengajian* (reading Quran), *shalat*, preaching about Islam, wedding and funeral in Islamic way, and *adzan* (the call for worship). In DT, this second marker is shown more explicitly. The third marker is the language. The characters often use Arabic terms that commonly identified to Islam, such as *Assalamu'alaikum* (peace be unto you), *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), *Astaghfirullah* (may God forgive me), and *In sha Allah* (God willing). The fourth marker is the religious role models. There are *haji* (appellation for Muslim men who already do hajj pilgrimage) that is being respected more than other people and *Ustadz* as Islamic religious teacher that has authority to teach, preach, and give advice

to Muslims. The fifth marker is the place of worship. In TOP and DT, there is only mosque mentioned or showed, no reference of other religion's place of worship.

Secondly, the representation of religion is shown through religious values. Islamic values are presented through the advice given by elders, haji, and Ustadz. They give advice in the midst of quarrel or struggle of life. Other values are shown through the gesture of the characters. For example, women kiss her husband's hand. It is based on the Islamic value that husband is the imam of the family. Thirdly, the representation of religion is shown through direct dakwah (proselytizing) in the story line. This marker is only appears in DT. There are scene in the mosque where Ustadz Kemed or his assistant, Kusoy, preaching Islam. For example is in the episode of April 25, 2017. There are two scenes showing Kusoy, the assistant of *Ustadz* Kemed, teaching the history about *Nabi* Musa ("Prophet" Moses) according to Quranic version. The scenes are in the mosque and showing the lesson, with Kusoy preaching, children and adult listening, and *Ustadz* Kemed proudly smiling seeing his assistant giving well preaches. From those three ways of religion is represented, it is clear that there is only Islam represented in it. Although the title do not contain any "Islamic words" and broadcasted daily, not in Islamic holy day season, the two *sinetron* show Islam as the only religion and normativity.

THREE PATTERNS OF WATCHING *SINETRON* BY CHRISTIANS

I argue that Christians become active audience in the case of watching *sinetron* in TV program. The way they see the representation of religion in *sinetron* is not automatically influenced by the portrayal of religion in *sinetron*. They have their own backgrounds, experience, and understanding that form their reception on the representation of religion in *sinetron*. Their answers can be categorized into three patterns. The first pattern is that they identify *sinetron* they watch with their real life. I call this pattern as the "mirror of reality". This first pattern is expanded to the way they see religion represented in *sinetron*, the way religion represented, and the representation of Islam and Muslim compared with the reality in interviewees' daily life. The second pattern is that they choose to start and keep watching these *sinetron* for their own enjoyment. They choose the less Islamic *sinetron* ones. They do not pay attention to the religious side of the *sinetron* and choose to enjoy only the entertainment side. I call this second pattern as "watching for pleasure". The third pattern is that they think religion must be presented in *sinetron*. This opinion does not depend on the genre of *sinetron* they watch but based on their understanding of *sinetron* and common life. I call this third pattern as "religion is necessary".

PATTERN 1: "MIRROR OF REALITY"

In the case of this work, Christians like watching *sinetron* that shows reality. They choose Tukang Ojek Pengkolan (TOP) and Dunia Terbalik (DT) because they see these *sinetron* show reality. They use the words *masuk akal* (make sense), *merakyat* (grassroots), *seperti kenyataan* (like reality), *keseharian* (daily life), *seperti bukan sinetron-seperti kehidupan sehari-hari* (like not a *sinetron*-like daily life), *tidak mengada-ada* (not making up), *cermin masyarakat Indonesia* (mirror of Indonesian society), *gambaran hidup* (portrayal of life), and *tidak dibuat-buat* (not artificial). The identification with reality is further reflected in terms that the characters of these *sinetron* wear ordinary clothes, not glamorous, not weird. It is different from other *sinetron* or other kinds of TV dramas that mostly show the high class way of life.

Speaking about reality, in relation with main plot of DT, which background is husbands who are left by their respective wife to be migrant labourer, some interviewees cannot connect it with their daily life. It is related with their condition in Yogyakarta where the existence of migrant labourer is rare. Others mention that the phenomenon of women migrant labourer shows that women can be strong and responsible for the family. Negative impact of a story about women migrant labourer also mentioned because this *sinetron* is indicated as push women in rural area to be migrant labourer and leads the husband to be not responsible. The comments about women migrant labourer shows that the ideal of husband as breadwinner in a family still dominating Christians so that although they somehow feel distance with the reality they see in DT.

The discussion about *sinetron* and reality can be further expanded to religious representation. Most of the interviewees think that the religion of all the characters in TOP and DT is Islam. They say that it is because the characters in *sinetron* resemble Muslims in their daily life. They mention about dress, religious activities, language, place of worship, and religious character which are identified with Islam. They also can mention values that they see as Islamic. Actually, this single portrayal of religion does not fit with reality because Indonesia consists of various religions. The interviewees' neighbourhood also home for people with various religions. It leads to a statement that in reality there is no harmony between different religious adherents, while in *sinetron* there is no diversity of religion. Nevertheless, in the same time, some interviewees see this as portraying the reality experienced by them. In their daily life, Christians, as minority, are always left aside. It is the same, in *sinetron*, Christians also get no place.

Responding to single representation of Islam in *sinetron*, the interviewees

relate it to the fact that Islam is majority in Indonesia. It is understandable to them that only Islam is put in *sinetron*. It is to attract Muslims, the majority of Indonesian population, to watch those *sinetron*. It is related with ratings and advertising. It means that Christians' number do not count as important to gain popularity and money for the *sinetron* producer and television station. In representation of Islam and Muslim, most of the interviewees see that it is different with what they see in daily life. Some Muslim in *sinetron* is better than in reality because they are diligent and full of peace, while in their daily life, Muslims they know are lazy to do worship and fanatics to other religion. On the other hand, other interviewees see that Muslims in the daily life are more diligent to do worship than in *sinetron*. The other points directly to the fact that in daily life there are more Muslim women wear jilbab than in *sinetron*.

These opinions show that Christians understand what kind of Islam brought by *sinetron*. But they have their own knowledge about Islam in their daily life. They do not automatically and fully receive the portrayal of Islam in *sinetron*. They negotiate their knowledge with their observation of *sinetron* and daily life. From this first pattern, it can be seen that Christians can partly identify themselves with the reality shown by the *sinetron*. The identification is mainly about way of life, especially in ordinary or simple life living by the characters. But they cannot identify the *sinetron* with the reality of diverse Indonesia and with their fellow Muslims. Ironically, they can see their powerlessness as religious minority so that they are not considered important to be represented in *sinetron* because their number will not significant in raising rating and advertising.

PATTERN 2: "WATCHING FOR PLEASURE"

In the search for entertainment, as other people in Indonesia, Christians watch *sinetron*. Among many options of *sinetron* title, two become most watched. As mentioned in pattern 1, the "reality" becomes one of the reasons of the choosing of these *sinetron*. Other reason that is mentioned is the humorous elements on it. They need to be refreshed and feel relief when they can laugh when watching these *sinetron*. They do not really pay attention to the story and conflict there. Most of them even get difficulty to remember the name of the characters. Those reasons also explain why the Christians keep watching these *sinetron* although religion represented there is only Islam. They already choose the less Islamic ones among many other *sinetron* titles. They keep distance with the religious elements, do not pay attention to religious side, and feel confidence with their own faith that will not be affected by Islamic elements in the *sinetron*. They also see that goodness portrayed in *sinetron*

actually is universal, not exclusively owned by Islam, although the characters are Muslims.

On the other side, there are also statements that show the powerlessness of Christians in popular culture. They say *terima apa adanya* (accept what it is), *menghargai* (appreciate), *tidak menjadikan sinetron sebagai sumber didikan* (do not make *sinetron* as source of education), *tidak masalah karena Islamnya tidak terlalu tampak* (no matter because the Islam is not very visible), *tidak ada pilihan lain* (no other choice), *tidak ada tontonan Kristen* (no Christian programming), *adanya itu* (only that exists), *ambil yang baik-baiknya saja* (take only the goodness). Those phrases show that they long for Christianity element in *sinetron* or at least no Islamic element, but they do not have other choice than to enjoy what is offered. It shows the way Christians negotiate their identity. They need entertainment but the choice is limited to Islamic coloured programmes. They choose the less Islamic *sinetron*, do not pay attention to religious elements in it, and think that goodness portrayed is universal. They understand of their powerlessness but keep to make active choice to get them entertained by the confidence that their faith will not be affected.

PATTERN 3: "RELIGION IS NECESSARY"

Regarding to the religious element in *sinetron*, most of the interviewees say that it is necessary to include religion in *sinetron*. Some say it without condition. They say that religion can be more easily understandable in popular language of *sinetron* than by preaching in worship places. Other says that religion is needed to guide the audience to remember God and do goodness. Nevertheless, most of them require certain condition in representing religion in *sinetron*. They think that it is better to represent various religions in *sinetron* so the audiences can be reminded about the real condition of Indonesia. Other condition that mentioned is that religion is better presented through the manner of the characters, not by religious symbols, and also that the representation leads to good relationship among neighbours. If the condition cannot be met, it is better to exclude religion from *sinetron*.

The fact that most Christians see that religion is necessary to be represented in *sinetron* show the changes in normativity in television. While before 1998, national ideology is the only ideology that must be represented in television, after 1998, religion becomes the only normativity represented. Christians may be affected with the representation of religion that have already coloured television during twenty years after *Reformasi* so they see that religious must be represented in *sinetron*. But at the same time, they also keep the value of national ideology because they want the representation of religion show the

diversity religion in Indonesia and become guidance to live harmoniously with others. This opinion is also applied to Christianity. If the *sinetron* represent Christianity, they also want the same condition applied. In this pattern, Christians negotiate their identity as a Christian and an Indonesian. They do not want to wholly accept that Islam is the only normativity that should be followed. They understand that Islam can bring goodness but must be accompanied by other religions and in a bigger frame as in Indonesian context.

CONCLUSION

The *reformasi* era has brought a new form of freedom to Indonesian democratic system, not only in political dynamic but also in popular culture. It is understood that before the *reformasi* era, the national ideology was the basic normativity. After the *reformasi*, Islam has been seen as the obvious normativity offered. *Sinetron*, as the predominant form of popular culture, has shown a single representation of religion; Islam. In the case of the audiences of *sinetron* in TV, the Christians who watch the *sinetron* choose to negotiate their identity when watching the *sinetron* representing only Islam according to their points of view.

Christians identify the *sinetron* not only with the reality life, especially in the way ordinary people live, but also in the fact that Christians are left aside by Muslims. As in *sinetron* they do not get a place, they also understand that Islam presented in the *sinetron* is not always the same with Islam they know in their neighbourhood. They consume *sinetron* only for their own pleasure, choosing the less Islamic ones, and do not pay attention to religious sides on it as they think the goodness portrayed is universal values and they are confidence that their faith will not be affected. They think that religion is necessary to be included in *sinetron* but in a more ideal way by showing various religious norms to support a building harmony among Indonesians. These three patterns show that Christians receive the message brought by the *sinetron* in negotiation code. They understand that the *sinetron* bring dominant message about Islam and their dominance, but they choose to receive the meaning in their own way, based on their background, experience, and benefit.

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