

## **Graduate Teaching in Indonesia as a Means of Interreligious Engagement**

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*This paper will explore the lessons learned from bringing a professor of Judaism to the predominately Muslim country of Indonesia to introduce his religion. As background, the paper describes the Indonesian approach to religious diversity, mystical Islam in Indonesia, and the history of Jews and Judaism in Indonesia. The core of the paper narrates the teaching of mysticism as a means of interreligious encounter and the experience of lecturing about Judaism to Islamic colleges. It concludes with the opinion that bringing a representative of a religion for direct contact with people in another country retains its importance in situations of little prior exposure.*

*Keywords: Jewish-Muslim, Indonesia, Jewish, Muslim, Islam, Mysticism, Interreligious, Interreligious Teaching, Graduate Teaching, Antisemitism*

### **Introduction**

Indonesia is the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, yet it has only a handful of Jews. How does one bring Judaism into the interreligious awareness of such a country? Several sporadic initiatives have been conducted to bring Jewish traditions into discussion with the interfaith dialogue rubric of Indonesia, with some Indonesian higher education institutions offering a course in Judaism to help fill the gap. This year, the Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) at the Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta attempted to foster a knowledge of Judaism among its students by bringing in a professor of Judaism. This article situates and reports on the project.

Specifically, the summer program's decision to bring in a professor of Judaism offered a unique approach to interreligious studies. The program is situated in a region with distinctive religious demographics along with singular characteristics. Especially distinctive is Indonesia's treatment of other religions and religious groups through three local lenses: that of "unity in diversity," that of Islamic *tawhīd* (divine oneness), and that of the widespread belief among the people of Java in a mystical, sacred cosmos. These characteristics make both Islam and the differences among Indonesian religions culturally bound, producing a configuration of interreligious encounter far removed from the more common essentializing approach to world religions and interfaith dialogue.

The purpose of the course was specifically envisioned with the goal of teaching the students about other faiths with an instructor who was a believer and practitioner of another religion outside their current religious horizons. Perhaps most importantly, this course served as an agent of interreligious social change. It offered the students a way of comfortably integrating Judaism into their social worlds while at the same time encouraging them to rethink their own religious views.

### **Background on Indonesia**

Since the beginning of its modern history Indonesia has had a unique and dynamic interreligious history, embracing its numerous multicultural traditions and diverse religious

beliefs. With over four hundred ethnic groups, Indonesia is forced to manage complexity and diversity.<sup>1</sup>

Indonesia is the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, playing host to significant Hindu and Christian communities.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia’s constitution requires belief in the national ideology of Pancasila (the Five Principles), including the demand for the endorsement of a single God in its first principle. Pancasila specifies six recognized religions embraced by the majority of Indonesians that enjoy government services: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Once a citizen comes of age, their religious identity, signified by one of these six religions, appears on their government identity card.

Indonesia was founded on the motto of “unity in diversity.” In addition to requiring Pancasila as an official ideology, the country also necessitates that each religion accept revelation through a prophet and scripture. Muslims acknowledge Hindus and Buddhists as having one God and, conversely, Hindus and Buddhists see themselves as having one God, revelation, and scripture. The country uses the phrase “God almighty” in official events to refer to the divinity of all six religions. The motto “unity in diversity” thus shapes not only Muslims’ conceptions and perceptions of other religions, but also non-Muslims’ conceptions and perceptions of their own faith traditions, consequently producing unique versions of Hinduism and Buddhism, for example.

Pancasila was legally mandated and taught in secondary schools from the founding of the Indonesian state until 1998. It still patterns the country’s law and ideology, but has gained many variant interpretations. How much of it is social policy as opposed to theology is debatable; for some this doctrine is solely a policy of social cohesion (akin to American “civil religion” in the United States), while for others it represents a progressive and tolerant reading of Islamic theology.

Under Pancasila, the Islamic focus on *tawhīd* or divine unity remained in place, but the conception also included the other official religions. *Tawhīd* in this case is thus not merely a theological or ontological theory (as it is in Islamic theology, philosophy, or mysticism), but a theory of religious pluralism or diversity, and thus a theology of religions. However, because the Indonesian government has generally treated indigenous religion and spiritual movements as culture and folkways rather than theology or religion, such practices were forcibly integrated into any of the six official religions.<sup>3</sup> Even if they chose to maintain their own tribal culture, indigenous tribes were made to pick one of the six official religions for their identity cards and often made the choice based not on personal conviction, but on regional location and social cohesion with other tribal groups. This status quo remained in practice until 2017, when the Constitutional Court granted indigenous adherents the right to put “native-faith followers” (*penghayat*) on their identification card.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanny Dhewayani, “Managing Religious Diversity in Indonesia: Policy and Reality,” in *Religion, Public Policy, and Social Transformation in Southeast Asia*, ed. Dicky Sofjan (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: ICRS, 2016), 71–98.

<sup>2</sup> Muslim Population By Country, retrieved March 31, 2020, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/muslim-population-by-country>.

<sup>3</sup> See Samsul Maarif, *Pasang Surut Rekognisi Agama Leluhur Dalam Politik Agama Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: CRCIS, 2017); Zezen Zaenal Mutaqin, “Penghayat, Orthodoxy and the Legal Politics of the State,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 42, no. 122 (2014): 1–23.

<sup>4</sup> Marguerite Afra Sapiie, “Constitutional Court Rules Indigenous Faiths ‘acknowledged’ by State,” *The Jakarta Post*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/11/07/constitutional-court-rules-indigenous-faiths-acknowledged-by-state.html>; Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission*

## Islam in Indonesia

Islam in Indonesia is a local variety of the Islamic faith, varying from puritanical to deeply Sufi, and incorporating many local cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> To appreciate this unique relationship of local practice with Islam, one must consider the recent important work by Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. Ahmed asserts that there is something unquestionably present in the life and thoughts of every Muslim that makes them Muslim, enables them to express themselves, understand themselves as subjects, and recognize each other as Muslim when they are—as he would put it—“speaking Islamically.”<sup>6</sup> For Ahmed, to speak Islamically means that many phenomena which the average outsider would consider to be completely contradictory to the foundational precepts we commonly associate with Islam, is actually part of the “Islamic” consciousness of the practitioner. This includes many elements of mysticism, philosophy, magic, music, poetry, visual and literary arts, and devotional traditions, even if these elements seem against common perceptions of Islam. Ahmed wants us to reconsider Islam neither as the product of an overarching institution of control, nor as a subject of any individual arbiter, but rather as diffusely defined by the vast geography of theologically equal practitioners, all of whom are shaped by the revelation from God to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE.

The writings of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who wrote the classic academic works on Indonesian religion, illustrate Ahmed’s point. The starting point for any theoretical discussion, Geertz, whose knowledge of Islam in Morocco influenced his view of true Islam as centered on law (*fiqh*), saw Javanese Islam as an Islamic veneer over Javanese traditional religion.<sup>7</sup> More recent scholars like Mark Woodward reverse this idea and make Islam out as the primary religious category, using a local cultural blend of Hindu-Buddhist-animist practices as ways to be Muslim.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Ahmed would agree with Woodward, trusting the subjective understanding of religion more than abstract definitions based on law or Arabian Islam; Javanese Muslims render local beliefs and practices “Islamic” by engaging them through the lens of the Islamic tradition (broadly defined by Ahmed as “hermeneutical engagement” with divine revelation). The encounter of local beliefs and Indianized religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, produced a cross-pollinated version of religious interaction that became the formative element of the Indonesian interreligious landscape and spiritual expressions. Later, the coming of Christianity and Islam introduced Islamic Sufism, further enriching the Indonesian religious landscape.<sup>9</sup> One of our colleagues at the university recently wrote a book showing how Islam can even be compatible with tribal animism.<sup>10</sup>

In general, Indonesia is home to a predominately easygoing hybrid Islam, oriented more toward local traditions of the arts and devotion than strict adherence to Islamic law. Rituals practiced by Sufis are seen to possess mystical powers that tap into the sacred realm, with the

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*Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Lorraine V. Arragon, *Fields of the Lord: Animism, Christian Minorities, and State Development in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Francis Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Shahab, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); see also *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson: Arizona University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> See Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam*.

<sup>10</sup> Maarif, *Pasang Surut*, 15–16.

goal being to obtain blessing (*karamat*). For Geertz, this was a native Javanese animism with an Islamic veneer. Current trends, by scholars such as Woodward, consider such practices to be Islamic Sufism, which makes use of local language and practices. The mysticism of Sufism is their Islamic identity. Most Indonesian Sufi groups care little about later Arabic fatwas or *fiqh*. The Muslim graduate students in the Universitas Gadjah Mada classroom and local Muslims in Jogja (Yogyakarta) gave similar answers. If you asked them about how they interpret the anti-Christian (or Jewish or Hindu) writings of the medieval Ibn Taymiyya (or other conservative Muslim thinkers) that restrict interfaith activities, they either answered that it is not *hadith* and does not apply to them, or that they are not Salafi so it does not matter. Even traditional groups, such as the Nusantara, assume that if something is not expressly forbidden in the Qur’an then it is permitted.

Woodward, together with Muhammad Umar, in a recent article argues that “the Salafi religious and cultural agendas are incompatible with Islam as understood by a vast majority of Muslims” in Indonesia.<sup>11</sup> Salafists see localized Islam as inauthentic and seek to ban the cultural Sufi world of poetry, music, performance. It is this view that drives Indonesians to totally reject the Salafi as not having the proper Islamic worldview.<sup>12</sup> Plato’s *Republic* states that “when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them.”<sup>13</sup> Here the converse is true. The Indonesian commitment to *gamelan* music and ritual performances means that extremism cannot be accepted. This Sufi Islam that accepts the practices of the local Javanese culture is thus rather mellow, pluralistic, irenic, and accepting of its cultural setting. In addition, Java also has many nominal Muslims, without Islamic practice or knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

## Judaism in Indonesia

Judaism is not among the six official faiths because of its small number of practitioners in Indonesia. However, the tiny community of Indonesian Jews is protected by the Indonesian constitution (Art. 29/2, 1945 Constitution). It is an accepted religion along with Zoroastrianism and Daoism, as explicitly mentioned in a government regulation.<sup>15</sup> At the time of the founding of the state, some Jews had their identity listed as *Hebrani* (Hebrew) with an “H,” but that practice faded without any ill-intention over time.<sup>16</sup> Although Judaism naturally fits into the spirit of Pancasila, it is just as easily ignored because the numbers are so negligible among 260 million Indonesians.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Sani Umar and Mark Woodward, “The Izala Effect: Unintended Consequences of Salafi Radicalism in Indonesia and Nigeria,” *Contemporary Islam* 14 (2020), 49–73.

<sup>12</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “Introduction: Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam and the ‘Conservative Turn’ of the Early Twenty-First Century,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn,”* ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), 15ff.; Noorhaidi Hasan, “Ambivalent Doctrines and Conflicts in the Salafi Movement in Indonesia,” in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 169–88. See also Carool Kersten, *A History of Islam in Indonesia: Unity in Diversity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2008), 93.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Arif Zamhari, *Rituals of Islamic Spirituality: A Study of Majelis Dhikr Groups in East Java* (Canberra: The Australian University E Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Presidential Decree No.1/PNPS/1965.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Hadler, “Translations of Antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and Violence in Colonial and Post-Colonial Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 94 (2004): 304.

<sup>17</sup> Lindsey Shanson, “Strangers in Paradise,” *The Jerusalem Report*, November 18, 1993, 32; James Theodore Siegel, “Kiblat and the Mediatric Jew,” *Indonesia* 69 (2000): 25, 36. Regardless the micro-minority condition of the Jewish community in Indonesia, Hadler and Kamsma argued the validity of their presence in Hadler, “Translations of Antisemitism,” 292; Mattheus (Theo) Joseph Kamsma, “The Artful Deletion of Israeli/Jewish Presence in the Straits,” in *Between Mumbai and Manila: Judaism in Asia since the Founding of the State of Israel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 163–88.

Jews have had a presence in the Indonesian archipelago since the medieval era. Egyptian, Yemenite, and Omani Jews were active in trading activities between the Middle East and India, which then included the Indonesian island of Sumatra, at least earlier in the tenth century.<sup>18</sup> From the seventeenth century onward Jewish individuals worked as Indian traders and as interpreters for different European powers, notably for the British East India Company.<sup>19</sup> The Dutch East India Company brought Dutch Jews who settled in Batavia (present day Jakarta) at the end of eighteenth century. Over the next decades, as the Kingdom of the Netherlands set up its colonial power over the archipelago, more Jews came.<sup>20</sup> Jacob Saphir Halevi, a Jerusalem-based Jewish emissary (*shaliach de-rabbanan*) on his way to Australia, stopped in Batavia in 1861. He reported the presence of creolized Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, many of them married to local women. They were unable, in his view, to maintain their Jewish identities without a synagogue or rabbi.<sup>21</sup> The coming years testified to the significant arrival of Sephardic Jews from Aden and Baghdad, and along with an increase in the Ashkenazic community, this necessitated the construction of synagogues in several cities and an organized Jewish community.

From the 1920s onward Zionist activities became prominent.<sup>22</sup> Before the coming of Japanese Imperial Army, the 1930s witnessed the peak of the Jewish population as the archipelago became a transit hub for European refugees. However, the Japanese occupation (1942–45) was difficult, as most of the Jews were interned along with other Europeans.<sup>23</sup> The independence and post-independence wars (1945–49) dissipated the Jewish communities, which largely migrated to southern California, Australia, the Netherlands, and Israel, leaving the rest to be absorbed into the Indonesian society. In the post-independence era, the first Indonesian president, Sukarno, took an anticolonial position which led him to openly display his distaste over the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, reflecting the remnant of the “old establishment force.” (Indonesia does not recognize Israel as a diplomatic partner or as a state.)

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<sup>18</sup> Shlomo Dov Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 228–29; Buzurg ibn Shahriyār, *The Book of the Wonders of India: Mainland, Sea, and Islands*, ed. and trans. Greville Stewart Parker Freeman-Grenville (London: East-West Publications, 1980), 62–64; Shlomo Dov Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Forrest, *A Voyage from Calcutta to the Mergui Archipelago, Lying on the East Side of the Bay of Bengal, Etc.* (London: J. Robson, I. Owen, and Balfour, Edinburgh), 39; Clements Robert Markham, *The Voyages of Sir James Lancaster to the East Indies, with Abstracts of Journals of Voyages to the East Indies, during the Seventeenth Century, Preserved in the India Office* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1877), 81; François Pyrard, *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, trans. Albert Gray, vol. I (London: Hakluyt Society, 1887), 283–85; B. Lionel Abrahams, “A Jew in the Service of the East India Company in 1601,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 9, no. 1 (1896): 173; John Jourdain, *The Journal of John Jourdain, 1608-1617, Describing His Experiences in Arabia, India, and the Malay Archipelago*, ed. William Foster (Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1905), 108; Walter Joseph Fischel, “Abraham Navarro: Jewish Interpreter and Diplomat in the Service of the English East India Company (1682-1692),” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 25 (1956): 42ff.; Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 52.

<sup>20</sup> Lode Frank Brakel, “Een Joodse Bezoeker Aan Batavia in de Zestiger Jaren van de Vorige Eeuw,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 9, no. 1 (1975): 64–65.

<sup>21</sup> Ya'aqov Safir-Halevi, *Sefer Even Safir Ha-Shalom, Sefer Sheni (Vol. 2)* (Mainz: Meqitse Nirdamim, 1874), 41ff.

<sup>22</sup> Israel Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveler by Israel Cohen* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1925), 210–11. The representation of Zionism in the Dutch colonial world was Keren Hayesod, the fundraising organization, coordinated by S.I. van Creveld, who responsible for the publication of a newspaper, *Het Joodshe Land* (1926–42) as a communication media among the Jews in Dutch East India. The publication ceased after the Japanese Occupation.

<sup>23</sup> Rotem Kowner, “The Japanese Internment of Jews in Wartime Indonesia and Its Causes,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 38, no. 112 (2010): 349–71.

There are no official figures on the number of Jews in Indonesia, but we can estimate less than two hundred Indonesian Jews, mostly expats in Jakarta and Bali. A number are descendants of the original Jewish Dutch community; many of them report “Christian” on their identity papers, which, as mentioned, only allows for six choices of identity, even if they are permitted to practice their own faith.

However, there is a recent trend of conversions to Judaism clustered in several cities, which deserves a longer discussion than we can engage in. Briefly, however, these conversions are part of a new transnational religious discourse, driven by the internet and the powerful position of Israel, and as an escape from interreligious tensions between Islam and Christianity. The era after the Oslo Peace Accord (1993) opened up the possibility for Indonesians, both Muslims and Christians, to make pilgrimages to holy sites in Israel. This created a new Jewish reality for Indonesians, sometime in peculiar ways, such as the adoption of Messianic Judaism and Jewish symbols among Indonesian Christians,<sup>24</sup> and new understandings of Jews, Judaism, and Israel among Muslims.<sup>25</sup> Triggered by different motives, including curiosity, some Muslims and Christians study Hebrew and Jewish literature as Judeophiles. Some came to our public lectures carrying Hebrew grammar books.<sup>26</sup> Many of the latter reached out to our program when they read the announcement on the university website of a visiting Jewish professor.

The challenge to the integration of Judaism, nevertheless, does not come from the legal side or from Jewish presence in Indonesia. Rather, the problem of Judaism’s integration into Indonesian interreligious pluralism stems from a lack of knowledge. Indonesians in general do not know about Judaism and are filled with many misconceptions. There is a persistent popular belief that Judaism is unwelcome in Indonesia because it is not listed among the official religions—that is to say, the belief is that they were excluded on purpose. Even the small community of Jewish expatriates generally believe Judaism was intentionally excluded rather than explicitly mentioned along with Zoroastrians and Daoists.

In addition, conspiracy theories circulate about the Jews as major players in Western and *Illuminati*-backed attempts to control Islam. In some Indonesian Muslim circles, the antagonism against the Jews is based on nineteenth-century religious polemical literature in which Jews are typological figures that exist to glorify Islam.<sup>27</sup> Later, anti-Judaism was part of Indonesian nationalists’ rhetoric of anti-Western colonialism.<sup>28</sup> This rhetoric became programmatic in 1970s when the antisemitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was translated and sold

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<sup>24</sup> Leonard Chrysostomos Epafra, “The Trepidation of the Name: ‘Allah’ as the Polemical Space among Indonesian Christians,” in *Science, Spirituality and Local Wisdom: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Current Global Issues* (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: UGM Graduate School, 2014), 871–98.

<sup>25</sup> See the discussion of pilgrimage to Israel as a contested space between Christians and Muslims in Mirjam Lücking, “Travelling with the Idea of Taking Sides: Indonesian Pilgrimages to Jerusalem,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 175 (2019): 196–224.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Raphael Ahren, “Muslim Man Opens First-Ever Hebrew Course in Indonesia,” *The Times of Israel*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/muslim-man-opens-first-ever-hebrew-course-in-indonesia/>.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Hadler, “Translations of Antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and Violence in Colonial and Post-Colonial Indonesia,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 32, no. 94 (2004): 291–313; Karel A. Steenbrink, “Nūr Al-Dīn al-Rānīrī (d. 1658): Malay Texts about Jews and Christians by an Indian Muslim,” in *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Trialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis, and Pim Valkenberg (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 237–53; Ronit Ricci, “The Ambiguous Figure of the Jew in Javanese Literature,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 38, no. 112 (2010): 403–17.

<sup>28</sup> G.S. Sam Ratu Langi, “Judaisme,” *Asia Raya*, April 29, 1943; Tan Malaka, *Nasrani-Jahudi Dalam Madilog* (Bukit Tinggi: Nusantara, 1948); Harry Jindrich Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation, 1942–1945* (The Hague; New York: W. van Hoeve, 1958), 255n50.

freely in Indonesian bookstores, and integrated into Muslim books.<sup>29</sup> This populist media, while quantitatively negligible, consistently presents Islamicist theories against Jews and the Western world, portraying Jews as working together to undermine Islam.<sup>30</sup> To gauge the influence of this material on the public mood is complicated since the internet and globalization allows for the flow of competing positive views of Jews and Judaism throughout the Indonesian public.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the virtual non-existence of Jews in the public space, discussion about Jews in relationship with Israel and Zionism is often tense. Jews have become an emblem of Western political culture, especially the politics of the United States. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, there were protests at the remaining synagogue in Surabaya, which was emblematic of Western imperialism—in other words, the United States and the Jews became equated. In some occasions, anti-Israelism is a political position in which the US-backed Israeli forces are perceived as the oppressors of a Muslim Palestinian nation.

However, the complex attitude of average Indonesians toward the Jews also displays degrees of philosemitism.<sup>32</sup> The disproportional concern with Judaism, despite the limited acquaintance with Jews themselves, may also be the result of a very limited exposure to actual Jews by Indonesian co-religionists. Indonesians speak of the Abrahamic religious traditions, popularly referred to among Indonesians as *tradisi Ibrahim* or *milah Ibrahim*. Both Islamic and Indonesian religious traditions in turn speak of Judaism as Abrahamic, but in Indonesia it had no real content because of the relative absence of Jews or knowledge about Judaism.<sup>33</sup> To fill out the concept of Abrahamic religions with knowledge of Judaism, the University decided to tackle the ignorance, misinformation, and lack of exposure with a graduate course.

### **Bringing Judaism to the University**

University Gadjah Mada, a nonconfessional state-owned university in Yogyakarta, is the major center for the academic study of religion on the graduate level in Indonesia and is the feeder school producing the faculty of many of the Indonesian Islamic colleges. The program's students play an outsized role in Indonesian religious education. The University locates the MA in Religion at the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) and locates the PhD in the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, a consortium of three universities:

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<sup>29</sup> While there were numerous books, religious and non-religious inspired by *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, those were translated from Arabic sources. The latest translation from English is from Hikmah publisher Victor E. Marsden, *The Protocols of the Meetings of the Elders of Zion: Berita Acara Pertemuan Para Pemuka Agama Zion*, trans. Katarina Surahmi P. (Jakarta: Hikmah, 2006), which was in a single package with Henry Ford, *The International Jew: Membongkar Makar Zionisme Internasional*, trans. Shalahuddien Gz, Ken Ndaru, and Anies Lastiati (Jakarta: Hikmah, 2006). The most systematic antisemitic work was from Ridwan Saidi, a prominent man of letters, in *Fakta dan Data Yahudi di Indonesia dan Refleksi Perdamaian PLO-Israel* (Pondok Labu, Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Informasi Pembangunan, 1993); *Fakta dan Data Yahudi di Indonesia: Serta Operasi Kaum Westernis, Orientalis dan Spionase Intelektual Snouck Hurgronje di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi Informasi Pembangunan (LSIP), 1994). The book was renewed with new information by Ridwan Saidi and Rizki Ridyasmara: *Fakta dan Data Yahudi di Indonesia Dulu dan Kini* (Jakarta: Khalifa, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> For the full discussion see Leonard Chrysostomos Epafra, “*Damn! Beckham Is a Jew*”: *The “Jew” in the Indonesian Public Discourse* (Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP, 2010); “Yahudi Nusantara: Realitas Sejarah Dan Dinamika Identitas,” *Religió* 3, no. 2 (2013): 32–33.

<sup>31</sup> For full discussion see Leonard Chrysostomos Epafra, “The ‘Jew’ in the Imagination of Indonesian Muslims” (Master Thesis, Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, 2005); “The Trepidation of the Name,”; and “Contextual Jews: The Emergence of New Jewish Identity in the Post-Reformation Indonesia,” in *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia: Cultural Contacts in Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Epafra, “The Trepidation of the Name.”

<sup>33</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “Yahudi Sebagai Simbol Dalam Wacana Pemikiran Islam Indonesia Masa Kini,” *Gema Duta Wacana* 53 (1998): 109–25; Hadler, “Translations of Antisemitism”; Epafra, “Yahudi Nusantara.”

Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga (UIN), and Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW). Together they offer an integrative, international Ph.D. program in interreligious studies. This is the only Religious Studies Ph.D. program in the world that is co-sponsored by a Muslim, a Christian, and a non-confessional university.

The need to address the lack of exposure to Judaism was already a concern of the CRCS when, in 2001, it welcomed Temple University Professor Rabbi Rebecca T. Alpert as a visiting professor for a course in Judaism for Indonesian students.<sup>34</sup> In her own account of her time in Indonesia, Professor Alpert remarked that her colleagues thought she was crazy to go to a Muslim country. Noting that the passion of the students to learn something Jewish was strong, Alpert explains how she learned about the different portrayal of Biblical characters in the Qur’an, eventually concluding that her exposure to Islam meant the course was as eye-opening for the instructor as for the students.

Today in the Western academic world there are many Jewish professors of Islam and Christianity as well as Muslim and Christian professors of Judaism, a reality that is comparatively different to Professor Alpert’s personal perception in 2001. Contemporary literature includes many works comparing the two faiths, and scholars across the world are engaged in interreligious learning and visiting each other’s countries. The similarities and differences between the Bible and the Qur’an are now well known to anyone engaged in Jewish-Muslim interreligious study.

Since then, several sporadic Indonesian initiatives have been conducted to bring Judaism into discussion within the interfaith dialogue rubric, and some Indonesian higher education institutions offer a course on Judaism. For example, last year both UIN and UKDW offered a course in Judaism for undergraduates. Considering the strategic value of such engagement, in 2019 the Asia Pacific Institute of the American Jewish Committee and CRCS invited a Jewish professor to broaden the Indonesian students’ interfaith perspectives through the study of Judaism in relationship with mysticism. The visiting professor would work with a local professor to effectively teach the course.

A committee of 2019 CRCS faculty conducted telephone interviews with several candidates, choosing Professor Alan Brill from Seton Hall University in NJ. Brill was elected by the CRCS faculty because of his extensive background in interfaith work, including having taught in other countries that have little knowledge of Judaism. He is an expert in interfaith dialogue, Jewish thought, and mysticism, an Orthodox Rabbi, as well as an interfaith activist. For him, the teaching was less of a novelty than for Professor Alpert. Brill already teaches in an interfaith setting in NJ, has taught for a semester at Banaras Hindu University in India, and has given lectures to classrooms in Dubai, Turkey, and elsewhere.

Professor Brill taught in tandem with Dr. Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras from the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS). Professor Epafras is himself a scholar of Judaism with a personal interest in Jewish spirituality who teaches Judaism on the undergraduate level at UKDW. He has participated in the Brandeis Schusterman program for Israel Studies. He even translated Heschel’s *The Sabbath* into Indonesian, although due to market forces this has yet to find a publisher. Among his specialties are the status of Jews in Indonesian public discourse and Jewish Sufism in medieval Islam.

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<sup>34</sup> Rebecca T. Alpert, “Teaching Judaism in Indonesia: Some Reflections,” *The Reconstructionist* 67, no. 1 (2002): 4–26.



## The Course

The course was titled “Comparative Mysticism.” Allotting forty percent of class time to the study of Jewish mysticism, the six-week program allowed the instructors to locate Judaism within the larger discussion of religious interaction and interfaith discourse.

As noted above, Indonesia embraces its diverse multireligious traditions. Part of the success of accepting this diversity is that average Indonesians are not only religious, though many believe they are living in what one scholar calls a “sacred cosmos” through which “the unseen worlds” are considered a potent reality.<sup>35</sup> The subject of mysticism is appropriate for Indonesia and gives a sense of Judaism within the above Islamic context. Mysticism, both in the vernacular sense associated with magical practice and as a philosophical and spiritual discipline, is familiar to many Indonesians.

For the students in the classroom, Indonesian Sufism and mysticism is not the sublime, unitive, mystical experience of William James or a way to see the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) of Islamic texts and rituals as described by the classic books on Arabic and Persian Sufism. Rather, they used the word mysticism for any religious experience or connection to religious or ritual forces. The terms in Indonesia are *kebatinan* (science of the inner), which in class they used for any religious experience, and *kepercayaan* (religious faith). Following the Indonesian usage of the term, students considered the unseen world and sacred cosmos all around them to be mysticism.<sup>36</sup> The practice of seeing inner meaning is thus expanded beyond the realm of classically Islamic texts and practices.

Indonesian Muslims view Sufism in much the same way that most Muslims across the world did before the nineteenth century. For them, Sufism is the primary way in which you are Muslim, not necessarily some esoteric, elite way of being Muslim.<sup>37</sup> Based on the students’ prior familiarity with Sufism as part of the broader Indonesian culture, teaching Judaism within the comparative realm of mysticism is a sensible choice. Judaism as mysticism is not considered some alien religious tradition, but rather part of the sacred cosmos with which they are already familiar. To this end, the course provided a space for meaningful discussion beyond the apologetic spirit. A course in comparative mysticism complements the Indonesian emphasis on mysticism for self-understanding of their own religion and is an easy way to introduce Judaism into the curriculum. Each class was a full three hours in length, yielding a total of thirty-six class hours and ample time to present these views.

The course was welcomed warmly by the students. There were seventeen matriculated students and four auditors from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. Of the official students, fourteen were Muslims and three were Christians—two local Protestants and one Russian Orthodox exchange student. The Christian students were interested in the variety of mysticism presented, thus adding to their limited knowledge of Christianity available in their hometowns. The Muslim students in general appreciated Sufism and integrated it into their own Muslim belief. However, the graduate students were curiously disinterested in visiting

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<sup>35</sup> Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, *Living in a Sacred Cosmos: Indonesia and the Future of Islam* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2019); Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *The Seen and Unseen Worlds in Java, 1726-1749: History, Literature, and Islam in the Court of Pakubuwana II* (Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Anton Geels, *Subud and the Javanese Mystical Tradition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997); Arif Zamhari, *Rituals of Islamic Spirituality: A Study of Majlis Dhikr Groups in East Java* (Canberra: The Australian University E Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> See Shahab, *What Is Islam?* and James Winston Morris, “Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism:’ Between Written Tradition and Popular Spirituality,” in *Mystics of the Book* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 293–334.

Sufi saints or graves, as they associated such activity with their parents and grandparents. The students read and internalized the assigned classic Sufi mystics such as Ibn ‘Arabī and Mulla Ṣadrā on the “unity of being” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), in which all of creation is a manifestation of the divine.

Returning to the opening discussion of how Indonesian Islam accepts Hinduism and Confucianism as part of a unified monotheistic God of *tawḥīd*, it should be noted that Indonesian teachers present the Sufi mystics Ibn ‘Arabī and Mulla Ṣadrā as pluralistic monists and define *tawḥīd* as the “unity of being,” *waḥdat al-wujūd*, of all creation. This reading of *waḥdat al-wujūd* arguably denies an ontological distinction between Allah and creation because all of reality pre-existed in the mind of Allah prior to the exact moment of creation. All of creation becomes a manifestation of the divine; we experience the divine in all things. Hence, Jewish and Christian mysticism are part of the divine manifestation. There is thus an elision first from theological unity of being, then to onto-theological unity of being, and finally to a unity of being that is a theory of religious diversity and pluralism (a onto-theology of religions).<sup>38</sup>

The students possessed these mystical perspectives, especially important in their rejection of Salafi ideologies. To them Arabic beards and robes do not make them Muslim, but rather the unity of God in the heart. Brill wanted to take his entire university class to a Sufi *dhikr* (a group ritual exercise reciting a divine name or phrase out loud) or visit a *ṭarīqa* (Sufi brotherhood or order), since as a group of university liberals they had never done this. While the students may possess personal theologies based on Ibn ‘Arabī and Mulla Ṣadrā, they had no actual pietistic practice or exposure. There is even a center for the study of Mulla Ṣadrā in the city, to which Brill wanted to connect the class. Unfortunately, the hectic lecturing schedule outside of the university precluded the visit.

The class covered contemporary approaches to mysticism starting with William James, Evelyn Underhill, William Stace, and Stephen Katz. It then discussed more recent approaches such as those of Michel de Certeau, Jeffrey Kripal, and Amy Hollywood. From there, the lectures turned to mystical texts from the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions. The class liberally used short videos from experts on mysticism including Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Bernard McGinn, and Daniel C. Matt, who spoke, respectively, on Islamic, Christian, and Jewish mysticism.

The students benefitted further from the discussion of topics that dealt with hybridity and mutual influence such as Jewish Sufism and Christian Kabbalah, which comprise a historical testimony of lively and surprising interreligious interaction. The Jewish Sufism section of the class was tackled by Professor Epafra, based on his extensive experience with the topic as the subject of his doctoral dissertation project.

Professor Brill’s syllabus included the Jewish Sufism of Bahye ibn Pakudah, Ovadiah ben Avraham ben Maimonides, Isaac of Acco, and Eliyahu deVidas as bridge topics to illustrate how Judaism was similar to their view of Islam. He pointed out similarities of Jewish Sufism to the stages of the Sufi path and he also demonstrated Jewish authors’ usage of al-Ghazzali. Brill also used the class as a chance to explain the historical background of Jews under Islam. The

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<sup>38</sup> See William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), for a book-length argument for this elision, and Gregory Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ‘Arabi* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), for an argument challenging it.

class then turned to a discussion of the Zohar, which led to an explanation of *midrash* and Jewish understandings of the Bible.

Conversely, a natural outgrowth of this presentation was to show the similarity of Mohammed's ascent (*mi'raj*) to Jewish ascents, or the sefirot and four worlds of the kabbalah to the realms in Ibn 'Arabi's cosmology. The students enjoyed Hasidism and Neo-Hasidic adaptations and likened them to the Neo-Sufi tales they were raised on. Some of them came from *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), which helped them to understand the *murshid-murid* (master-pupil) relationships in Hasidic context.

Independent of the course, they personally accepted the universal Sufism of the West as meaningful to their Indonesian Islam, including Inayat Khan, Idries Shah, and Robert Frager. Hence, they appreciated Neo-Hasidism and other modern adaptations of Jewish mysticism as akin to their own interests. Continuing the theme of hybridity, Brill showed how medieval Sufi tales found their way into modern Hasidic tales, further supporting their own generally eclectic views of religion.

The semester ended with a discussion of the turn to spirituality and the commodified version of mysticism. The students found especially meaningful the presentation of contemporary works on spirituality, including works from Robert Wuthnow, Jeremy Carrette, and Richard King, Wouter J. Hanegraaf, and Paul Heelas. The discussion of how both Jewish and Islamic mysticism were being repackaged as "mindfulness" was fruitful. They especially enjoyed the videos of contemporary popular Kabbalah and the discussion of the Kabbalah Centre for their relevance to the media and internet driven world.

As noted, the Indonesian students have a natural sense of the unity of paths and kept turning to their own Indonesian Islam as a rubric to understand texts. Brill wanted to add variation to their understanding of other traditions by showing the unique particularistic qualities of each text. Yet, in the universal spirit of Evelyn Underhill, which dovetailed with their own Islamic views, the students treated Bonaventure, Al-Ghazzali, and the Zohar as similar. Readings from the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich offered the greatest moment of alterity with Islam by portraying gendered, blood-filled, Christological visions. The students did not want to pursue these images further, even the Protestants in the class.

The class had no moments of tension and the mood was light, befitting a summertime class. Yet, unlike American students they were not comfortable with an open-ended classroom discussion of the material. They were more used to taking notes while in class. Many of the students were advanced enough in English to understand the new materials to which they had formerly had limited access, but there was also some degree of challenge for those who need to walk extra miles to handle advanced English. A few of the Muslim men spoke up every class and two of the Christian women regularly spoke up. But the rest were largely silent. They preferred to talk to Professor Brill after class, over lunch or when they met with him about their required research papers, during which they discussed their opinions of the material.

It is hard to gauge how much they changed their opinions because we unfortunately did not include an assessment element. The students were not all of one opinion, which seemed to vary based on their family backgrounds and their secondary education and colleges.

The course itself was a change in normal engagement in their graduate study because of its interreligious nature—among instructors and students, among students of different

religions, and among themselves and the comparative material. The Jewish material is now integrated into their own understandings of both academic studies of mysticism and Sufism as well as their own personal understanding of mystical religion as a focus of their own Islam. This might not have been the best way to teach the Jewish material if the goal was solely an academic knowledge of the history of Jewish texts or an understanding Judaism in its own terms. However, the effect of creating commonality was crucial for this first step of encounter with the material.

### **Islamic and Christian Colleges**

Besides teaching graduate school at the university, Professor Brill traveled to speak around the country. The goal was to give their students and the broader community some familiarity with Judaism. Brill gave public lectures on Judaism in five universities in four cities. These were met with powerful responses; in the three Islamic universities, hundreds of Muslim students flocked into the seminar rooms. All of them enthusiastically came with a great expectation to learn about Jews and Judaism. This audience ostensibly knows English, having studied it as part of their high school and college education, but in all the schools he used a translator, stopping after every idea. The translator in the first school only helped with some words and summarized a few ideas, so by the last school Prof. Brill was sitting with the translator the night before and going over the entire talk.

Many Indonesians attend religious colleges—Christian, Hindu or Islamic—funded by the state and subject to state supervision. They are generally undergraduate institutions; students go to the non-confessional universities for graduate school. The Islamic colleges teach Islam in a college social-science style. They have a mandatory freshman course in Islamic religion and culture. The rest of the courses are part of the various majors. A history major can take history of Islam, a sociology major can take a course on Islamic sociology, an education major can take courses on Islamic education. Even a college that has a major in Islamic law offers courses of a historic-social nature such as “Rise of the Salafi in the Modern Era.” Their overall approach to the study of Islam is to rely on the tolerant and culturally embedded Indonesian form of Islam and to study the tradition in a historic manner.

In some ways, one can compare this historical approach to Islam to the modern historic study of Judaism as a means of understanding one’s tradition; in addition it seems similar to forms of Judaism that place emphasis on peoplehood and folkways. Students are encouraged to use their own clear thinking about the classic texts over the stringent interpretations made in later centuries. The heads of these Islamic colleges ideally have graduate degrees from places like the Center of Religious Studies at the non-confessional Universitas Gadjah Mada where Brill taught his graduate course. These deans and department heads have the responsibility for the formation of a tolerant Islam in their institutions.

The Islamic colleges actively seek to go beyond the mandated course and offer a required course in world religions as part of their goal of creating a tolerant Islam. They actively dismiss the hardline exclusive readings of Islam produced in other countries. Brill’s audiences already knew something about Judaism from the chapters in introductions to world religions books of Huston Smith and Ninian Smart. However, those 1960s classics present Judaism as essentialized, without medieval history, and as a religion outside politics. Because they had already discussed the other world faiths in Ninian Smart’s book, bringing in Professor Brill afforded them the first-time opportunity to meet an adherent to a faith they have studied before,

but had only encountered in texts. Brill also met students who are studying Hebrew and came to the event in T-shirts embossed with “Shalom” in Hebrew.

There are some books in Indonesian exclusively on Judaism, translated from Middle Eastern sources with a contemptuous, conspiratorial tone. The most popular book in Malay countries, including Indonesia, was the translation of Egyptian scholar Ahmad Shalaby’s *Agama Yahudi: Perbandingan Agama (Jewish Religion: A Religious Comparative Approach, 1977)*.<sup>39</sup> This textbook, the standard reading of many Indonesian Muslim scholars for so many years, considered the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* one of Judaism’s sacred texts.<sup>40</sup> A few better informed books are available as well, such as the translation of Abba Eban’s *My People, The Story of the Jews*, and the more recent *Agama Yahudi* by Olaf Schumann, a German professor who worked for Indonesia since the 1970s.<sup>41</sup> In the fall of 2019, one of the Islamic colleges introduced a new course focusing on Judaism. The textbook that the teacher produced builds on the categories of Ninian Smart.

Professor Brill emphasized the historical intimacy of the religious traditions, notably Islam and Judaism. Many of the students were delighted at such a possibility, especially given the negative image in Indonesian public discourse that constantly portrays Jews as the enemy of Islam. Professor Epafra warned Professor Brill by telephone before he arrived in Indonesia to “be prepared to respond on Israeli-Palestinian-related questions.” It was assumed to be crucial for any academic and scholar arriving to present Judaism in Indonesia. While such questions were asked by the audiences in the seminars, none of them emphasized it or appeared hostile. Most of the time they asked about what could be done to diffuse tension, or how to combat social media stoking the fires of hate.

In each Islamic college, Professor Brill began his talk by introducing himself and his religious background as a Jewish American of Eastern European descent, a rabbi, and a professor. He opened his talks by recounting how the medieval Fatimid traders who originally brought Islam to Indonesia included Jews, as documented in the Cairo Genizah, where we find responsa permitting wives back home in Egypt to remarry after Indonesian shipwrecks.<sup>42</sup> Indonesians understood these as analogous to the similar *fatwa* permitting remarriage for Muslim traders. The intended purpose of this opening was for the listeners to clearly understand that Jews were on the Fatimid trading ships as part of what Marshall Hodgson called the Islamicate culture; the Jews were part of the diversity of Islamic Egypt in many ways similar to Brill’s own cultural belonging to the United States.<sup>43</sup>

The first part of the talk was an introduction to Judaism as similar in structure to Islam in unity of God, prayer, and the other pillars of Islam. Brill also showed similarity in dietary

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<sup>39</sup> Ahmad Shalaby, *Agama Yahudi: Perbandingan Agama*, trans. Syed Ahmad Semait (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1977). For the Indonesian context, the work is expanded and contextualized by Prof. Burhanuddin Daya, from Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic Institute (before it became a full-fledged university). The title was *Agama Yahudi* (Yogyakarta: Bagus Arafah, 1982). It became the only “official” reading in the institution until very recently.

<sup>40</sup> Bruinessen, “Yahudi Sebagai Simbol,” 216–17.

<sup>41</sup> Epafra, *Damn! Beckham Is a Jew*, 61–69; “Kata Sambutan,” in *Agama Yahudi: Pendekatan Pada Ilmu Agama-Agama* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2018), vii–xiv; Abba Solomon Eban, *Sejarah Ringkas Umat Israel*, trans. Lembaga Biblika Indonesia (Ende, Flores: Nusa Indah, 1975). This is the translation of Abba Solomon Eban, *My People, the Story of the Jews* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969). The latest work on Judaism, which discusses the interfaith dimension as well, is Olaf Herbert Schumann, *Agama Yahudi: Pendekatan Pada Ilmu Agama-Agama* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, 62–64.

<sup>43</sup> Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I:59.

practices, circumcision, and other rituals. He then repeated those ideas in a historic manner, mentioning Talmud, *ḥadīth*, *kalām*, *sharīʿa*, *fatwas*, *responsa* and Jewish Sufis. Brill gave a brief overview of Jews under medieval Islam, both symbiosis and tension. He included famous contrasts, such as the high that Shmuel Hanagid reached and then the pogrom against his son. Brill continued by briefly surveying the decline of the Jewish-Muslim relationship under colonialism and the rise of nationalism. He transitioned to contemporary Muslim interfaith efforts as well as very briefly mentioning the basic terms of twenty-first-century interfaith and intercommunal relations.

Finally, he concluded with the story of one of his current Muslim Seton Hall students. The student came to the program wanting to know about interfaith work and Christianity, and through the course of his study he decided that he wants to become a professor of Judaism in a Muslim country. He is currently working on a PhD on medieval Jewish texts. Brill purposely concluded with this story as an exhortation for his listeners to encounter Jews and study Judaism.

The content of the talk was based on texts from the two chapters on Islam from Professor Brill’s book *Judaism and World Religions*,<sup>44</sup> as well as articles and handouts from Rabbi Professor Reuven Firestone, an academic specialist on Jewish-Muslim studies and speeches from Rabbi David Rosen, a leader in engaged Jewish-Muslim interfaith work. Firestone’s work gave the scholarly content to the talk and Rosen’s work gave the rhetoric of engaged dialogue.<sup>45</sup>

The reaction was better than anyone expected. We were told to anticipate thirty to fifty students showing up in each school. Instead, attendance numbers were estimated at two hundred in Manado’s Christian college and 160 in Kediri’s Islamic college. The audience was excited to meet a Jewish scholar. There was sincere appreciation for opening new vistas. One female student came up to Professor Brill after a talk, saying: “You give really good *da’wa*,” using the Arabic phrase for outreach or calling to God.

The audiences had never heard any of this material before. They did not really know the basics of Judaism or the history of Jews under Islam, and they had never met a Jew. Professor Brill’s visit was an eye-opening novelty, similar to the great transformation of attitudes that occurred from the visitation of Jews to Christian congregations in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>46</sup>

In some ways, Brill’s visits were akin to the original interfaith model of bringing in a speaker from an unknown religion without a local demographic base. A source for this model is Swami Vivekananda’s introductory speech at the Parliament of World Religions (1893); his audience knew nothing about Hinduism, or at best, just knew it as paganism. Such an experience can produce a shift in thinking that begins to include the unknown religion in one’s worldview. A similar phenomenon, but on a smaller scale, occurred here. From our experience, we think this direct method of interfaith encounter, often criticized by critical interreligious studies as simplistic and reductive, works well for an audience that has never met a member of

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<sup>44</sup> Alan Brill, *Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Reuven Firestone, *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims* (NY: Ktav, 2001); *An Introduction to Islam for Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008); David Rosen, <https://www.rabbidavidrosen.net>.

<sup>46</sup> Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Stuart Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997); Yaakov Ariel, “Interfaith Dialogue and the Golden Age of Christian-Jewish Relations,” *Studies in Christian Jewish Relations* 6, no. 1 (2011).

another religious tradition. This first encounter with a practitioner of the unknown religion is, in fact, extremely necessary.

Brill was repeatedly warned to prepare for abrasive questions from the students about Palestine/Israel, but these questions never came. Maybe they were just polite. Maybe Brill seemed more of a cleric than a politician, the same way one would not ask a Swami from the Vedanta society about Indian nationalist politics. Perhaps they themselves do not associate their Islamic practice in any way with the politics of Arabia, Pakistan and Syria, or even their own government's actions to suppress rebellions. In general, many of them displayed a distinction between their privatized Islam and their public and political Islam.

In general, Brill was asked by the students in each school about the normal concerns of contemporary college students. The questions of the students were: Judaism and the LGBT community, Judaism and feminism or Judaism and woman's rights, is the internet good for religion, and what is the role of the internet in fostering peace or violence. They did ask about overcoming social-media hatred in Middle Eastern conflicts. They also asked about Jewish dietary laws and the exact times of Jewish prayer. They wanted PowerPoint images of Jewish ritual objects such as tallit, tefillin, shofar, men's and women's head coverings, synagogues, and Jews from different lands. But they had little interest in the theological debates of Moses vs. Muhammad, or the nature of Jewish scripture, or even Quranic passages. They already have a basic respect and tolerance for other faiths as part of their curriculum. Since the Indonesian constitution states that "the nation is based upon belief in one supreme God," there would already be an automatic sense that all citizens worship one God and that one sticks to observing one's tradition. This basic equivalence of faiths as political theology allowed them to easily add Judaism to their accepted religions, which they have all studied in high school as part of civics or civil religion. While other topics would likely come up in a detailed discussion, their first reaction was to inquire about Judaism as a lived community.

After each talk, Professor Brill would be surrounded by dozens of students wanting to take a selfie with him. Indonesia is a very big Instagram country. There are now hundreds of pictures on Instagram of him with young women students in a *jilbab* (the Indonesian name for *hijab*). These were generally not worn in the 1980s, and returned in the twenty-first century as part of the self-identity of the younger generation. This drives many of the baby-boomer-age Muslims, who feel their children are getting too religious, crazy. Yet, this same academic young generation is generally more educated, open, and tolerant than its elders. They are more outwardly Islamic and have been influenced by the rise of greater Islam in the public sphere, but they do not associate this attitude with any fundamentalism. There is a vast literature on how the young feel the *jilbab* is essential to their Islam but how they are more likely than the previous generation to write dissertations on feminism. More than half of Brill's own graduate classroom were female, a major change from fifteen years ago.<sup>47</sup>

Most of these same women wanted to shake Brill's hand and then put their arm around Professor Brill for a selfie. As Brill has been in other Muslim counties where touching between sexes was clearly not permitted, he asked many of them if touching a member of the opposite sex was permitted. Each woman gave a variant of the same basic answer: "We are not Salafi." Salafi now functions as a pejorative in the language of the college students for those too strict

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<sup>47</sup> Annisa Beta, "Hijabers: How Young Urban Muslim Women Redefine Themselves in Indonesia," *International Communication Gazette* 76 (2014): 377–89; Pam Nilan and Lyn Parker, *The New World of Adolescents in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2013); *Youth Identities and Social Transformations in Modern Indonesia*, ed. Kathryn Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

in the law or those who invoke a *fatwa* from the Arab lands. The youth of Indonesia have their own unique identity and beliefs as Indonesian Muslims.

### **Teaching Judaism in Indonesia: Lessons Learned**

In recent years Indonesia has been forced to reckon with growing religious conservatism, radicalism, and identity politics. Those in regions affected by this turn limit meaningful interfaith interaction. Numerous initiatives have been taken by the Indonesian civil society organizations and local communities to dilute the religious-ideological barriers. However, considering the micro-minority status of the Indonesian Jewish community, Judaism is unfortunately an improbable partner for any interaction by these initiatives. Judaism needs an extra effort to bring it into a more visible position. Some of the Islamic educational institutions made a proactive move to teach Judaism in Indonesia and bring it into the conversation. One good example of this is how the Islamic University of Darussalam Gontor, East Java, and Islamic State Institute Manado regularly visit the Tondano Synagogue in North Sulawesi to learn about Judaism and establish a constructive interfaith encounter.

All in all, creating a Muslim-Jewish dialogue as part of a trilateral dialogue with Christians, similar to Western initiatives since World War II, is deemed important for the Indonesian context. The course title “Comparative Mysticism” was chosen because it elevated the conversation beyond the exclusive discussion of Judaism. It locates Judaism within the same paradigmatic plane of religious discourse, so as to eschew Judaism as an essentialized religion beyond history. The discussion within the class successfully contextualized the Jewish mystical traditions as on par with the Indonesian Muslim experience. The project would be more powerful if it included programmatic exposure to local mystical practices and Jewish practitioners, as it might help to internalize the cognitive element of the course.

Most classes in interreligious studies with the goal of helping create understanding between the Abrahamic faiths are taught with Western or Middle Eastern perspectives. This class had many unique elements, in that the class was configured against the background of the Indonesian treatment of other religions through three local lenses, that of “unity in diversity,” that of Islamic *tawhīd*, and that of the widespread belief on Java in a mystical sacred cosmos.

These Indonesian characteristics, culturally bound in a way unlike most presentations of how to teach such a course, create a significant variant on the interfaith course. Discussing this case of unique religious aspects of Indonesia would be helpful in Western courses to show how hybridity and specific forms of Islam create different interreligious discussion. It would also show the classroom the internal diversity of Islam, providing an example of an Islamic tradition different from Salafi variants.

Courses in interreligious understanding have become commonplace in academia, with many fine works explaining the best practices of interreligious teaching. For example, the recent anthology, *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, seeks to make space for “a commitment to promoting students’ deep understanding of religious traditions different from their own” as well as “reflection on questions of meaning, purpose, and values...considering the significance of one’s own narratives, beliefs, and practices.”<sup>48</sup> The uniqueness of the Indonesian context, the method of teaching mysticism at the graduate level, and visiting the

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<sup>48</sup> *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 12, 25. In addition, see *Teaching Interreligious Encounters*, ed. Marc A. Pugliese and Alexander Y. Hwang (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).



undergraduate-level classroom, offered up many interesting applications of interreligious education.

The program The Study of Religions Across Civilizations (SORAC) has similar insights regarding the need to create companionship with visiting scholars. They work to create American Muslim understanding through a critical study of religious ideas in companionship with scholars from different global contexts. Our experience in Indonesia shows that a visiting scholar can bring much insight.<sup>49</sup> Religious thinking varies from society to society, making it vital to undertake a critical study of religious ideas in companionship with scholars from different global contexts and from different experiences. The shared scholarly experience of reading and discussing a variety of religious texts gives insight into the visiting scholar's very different positions. Books alone do not give a real knowledge of what others believe.

A visiting lecturer is a form of interfaith encounter and interreligious engagement that works well for bringing knowledge of an unknown religion to a group in a foreign country. The age of globalization creates a field in which people can travel to foster interfaith relations. In many ways, this is the opposite of grassroots initiatives, in that organizations in different countries can have joint ventures to create the encounter. In addition, this method allows greater Jewish-Islamic encounter and reciprocal knowledge in countries that do not have a significant Jewish population. The program is truly a success, and the lessons that can be drawn from it underline the importance of firsthand information and personal interaction in eradicating misunderstanding and religious stereotyping.



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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.religionsacrosscivilizations.org>.