

# Transcript Bridging Divides: Contextualizing Conflict – Practising Religious Literacy for Peace

Webinar Series

## Nurturing Seeds:

Religious Literacy as a Skill for Peaceful Engagement

EPISODE 2:  
Bridging Divides: Contextualizing Conflict – Practising Religious Literacy for Peace

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Collaborative (REC)

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COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

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***This fireside conversation explored how religious literacy can be practiced as a peacebuilding tool in the context of conflict and division.***

***Dr. Dicky Sofjan shares lived examples from Indonesia and Asia-Pacific, showing how grassroots religious literacy fosters peace through empathy, trust-building, and deeply rooted, locally led initiatives.***

***The webinar series "Nurturing Seeds: Religious Literacy as a Skill for Peaceful Engagement" is a collaboration between the International Dialogue Centre and the Tanenbaum Centre for Interreligious Understanding.***

## Setting the Scene: From Fragmentation to Dialogue: Religious Literacy in Fragile Contexts

**Kate Soules, Co-founder and Executive Director of the Religion and Education Collaborative (REC), Moderator:**

This is the second installment of this 3 Webinar Series, nurturing Seeds of Peace, hosted by the International Dialogue Center and the Tannenbaum Center for interreligious understanding.

Today, I'm going to be talking with Dicky Sofjan about how religious literacy can be practiced as a peacebuilding tool in the context of conflict and division.

Welcome to our conversation today. I'm really glad you're here. Can you say a little bit more about your work, and maybe some examples of how you see religious literacy and action in your context to get us started.

**Dr. Dicky Sofjan, Associate Professor of Inter-Religious Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia**

My name is Dicky Sofjan. I am from the Inter-Religious Department in the Graduate School of Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. I have been a professor here in ICRS for close to 15 years now. So basically, I teach and do research on religion and contemporary issues. I have been working on religious literacy since 2016-2017 initially with the British Council and the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office in London, and also the British Council in Indonesia, but now we are closely working with the Mennonite Central Committee.

**KATE SOULES:** Wonderful. Can you give us a little bit more details about the work you do on a day-to-day basis, and some ways that you've seen the impacts of religious literacy or the impacts of a lack of religious literacy in the work that you do.

**DICKY SOFIAN:** Sure. Indonesia experienced what's called the *Reformasi* or the Reform movement in 1997-1998, and obviously that ushered in a whole new ball game altogether. And so we had democratization, media liberalization, and we also had decentralization and regional autonomy. Obviously with that you had an explosion of participation. You had a lot of people coming together to associate themselves and to build movements and build organizations, and so on and so forth. It also marked a rise in religious movements as well, and the rise of many religious-based political parties. We saw at least 150 or so during the early days of *Reformasi* new political parties, many of which were very ethnocentric or religious-based political parties.

**KATE SOULES:** And how does understanding religion play a role in having all of these different political parties and organizations arising? Kind of all around the same time. What do people need? What do or did people need to know about religion in order to navigate this new landscape?

**DICKY SOFIAN:** The problem is, we were under a military autocratic regime for 32 years. And so a lot of the democratic and religious movements were pretty much constricted, and they were managed by the State. We had military police intelligence looking over our shoulders, and so on and so forth. So that went on close to 32 years.

With *reformasi*, there was this new realization and heightened awareness, and also this desire to participate in society, in politics, in business, in the civil sector, civil society sector, and so on and so forth. So what we saw was the coming out of many of these ethnic and also religious groups to the fore and building alliances and building power structures, both at the central level, but also at the provincial district and local levels.

And so what we saw was this mushrooming of many of these organizations, civil society, NGOs, civil society organizations, and political parties, both at the national and local levels. Sort of trying to aggregate the interests and bring them to the fore and to the elections. But after a few elections, there was also this inertia, if you like, in the sense, why are we required to participate in these recurring elections?

Now that we have direct elections for the president, for the governors, for the mayors, and even for village heads. So you can just imagine the life of an Indonesian post-reform that we had to engage in a lot of these elections, both at the national level, provincial, district/mayoralty level and also at the village levels.

Thus, you find a lot of people and organizations and movements falling off the cracks, right? And many of them have become somewhat disillusioned by democracy. So there is a sense of disenchantment and a sense that they've been disenfranchised. Hence, we saw right after *reformasi* even very quickly, a lot of friction, a lot of conflict, a lot of communal strife. Some of them occurred in the far-flung provinces of Moluccas and also Central Sulawesi.

Obviously at that time we also had secessionist movements in Aceh and Papua. And so you get all of them mixed together in one country, and you can just imagine the challenge that the government and society have been confronting in terms of trying to come together as a nation.

So the religious literacy programme provides and facilitates that coming together of people of different ethnicities, of different religions to come together and to talk about essentially what they are facing in real time, in contemporary period. One of the reflections that I got after experiencing and managing this programme was that I felt like all of the religious groups and faith communities are actually facing more or less the same kind of problems related to political polarization, economic and environmental injustice, intolerance and also how to come to terms with the predatory nature of the social media.

As we know, social media has become somewhat antisocial in many respects, and are dividing people and communities into so many subgroups. From my own assessment, the religious literacy programme had helped to get these faith communities from different parts of Indonesia to come together, and to have meaningful discussions and conversations about the real issues.

## **In Conversation: Embedding religious literacy in peacebuilding and reform**

### **Practising Trust: How Religious Literacy Builds Community in Fragile Environments**

**KATE SOULES:** We often talk about religious literacy as this kind of add-on skill set that we need to add to existing skills of civic engagement and other ways of engaging with diversity. But you're talking about - in your context - going from having a government that didn't allow any of that, to all of a sudden, an entire population needing the skills to engage in democracy. That's a really big transition. And, religious literacy isn't just an add-on, it's an integral part of that. And that's a really different way of thinking about how religious literacy plays a role in these overall skills of being engaged as a citizen.

**DICKY SOFIAN:** If I have to describe religious literacy and the necessity for it, there are three things I would say: context, context and context. So basically, religious literacy needs to be contextual. In the case of Indonesia, for instance, for many decades, even since independence, we've experienced only what we call the mono-religious educational system, whereby Muslims only get to learn and study about Islam, Catholics about Catholicism, Protestants about Protestantism, Hindus about Hinduism, and so on and so forth.

There has been no effort, and no systematic way in which students and young people can actually learn and study other religions. This is largely due to the unwarranted fear of religious dilution, that the students and young people will be somehow confused with their own religiosity and religious affiliations if they were to be 'forced' to study other religions.

However, we've seen other educational systems elsewhere whereby they introduce other religions into the classroom and into the fore, so that students have a much more multi-religious perspective and understanding.

If you look at the theory about empathy, for instance, empathy can only come through multiple perspectives. Thus, if we want our citizens to be empathic and to be able to understand the sufferings of other people, then they need to have a more grounded educational system, whereby they would be exposed to the experiences of the religious others. This is what we are lacking in the Indonesian educational system.

## **Beyond Labels: Navigating Identity, Power, and Belonging**

**KATE SOULES:** When we were talking last week, you talked about the Ministry of Religious Affairs and these very almost siloed religious extension officers who represent different religious traditions, but don't necessarily collaborate with each other at the local level. Can you talk a little bit about how your work with those religious affairs officers has been transformative, for some of these individuals.

**DICKY SOFIAN:** Sure. So one of our main partners in our religious literacy programme is with the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs. If you look it up, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is one of the most powerful institutions in Indonesia in terms of its national budget allocation. For instance, they are the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> largest recipient of the national budget allocation, which amounts to around Rp.75 trillion, which is equivalent to roughly US\$4.8 billion.

So it's quite a significant amount of money to spend on the governance of religion throughout the archipelago. Within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, they have this very unique collection of people whom they call the *Penyuluh Agama*, which essentially are religious extension officers. They amount to around 67,000 across the vast archipelago, and operate at the sub-district level or *kecamatan* level.

Many of them work in silos, simply because the budget allocation and the management of state funds is very linear, from the central ministry to the provinces, to the districts and mayoralities, and to the sub-districts. As a consequence, if they had training or capacity development programmes for their religious extension officers, the Muslims only get to meet the Muslims and the Catholics only get to meet the Catholics, Protestants, the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Confucianists, and so there was never any sort of opportunity or facilitation by the Ministry to get them together.

Meanwhile, the Ministry's role is to enhance their capacity to develop more sensitive ideas and notions about the development of the country and some of the trends in society and the world. So that was the problem when we first developed the religious literacy programme. My idea was to first break the mold and to break this "silo-ization" within the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The idea was to get religious extension officers to meet, greet, and collaborate, hopefully in the future, and share notes and experiences with respect to how they manage their congregations and the people who are under their wing.

It was interesting that when we held these religious literacy programmes, some of these people didn't realize that some of their friends were actually religious extension officers as well, and working in the same sub-district, or working in the same district. And so one of the things that we did correctly was to break the "silo-ization", making them much more exposed to the kinds of experiences and issues that they were facing in society.

### **Safe Space, Real Questions: Building Trust Across Religious Lines**

**KATE SOULES:**-some of the knowledge building that you have to do in that religious literacy work is not necessarily even about the religions, but just who is also a religious extension officer like, who else is in this same role? and so are there, do you have any? I always love stories and examples of how these impact at the personal level. Are there any examples of interactions that you've seen between these individuals or communities as a result of this programme?

**DICKY SOFIAN:** Absolutely. There are two types of training that we do. One is the cascade workshops or training programmes for the religious extension officers. And the other is a higher level of Training of Trainers (TOT).

So when it comes to the TOT, for instance, we would get the extension officers from the different provinces and districts to come to Yogyakarta to be trained for five days, and we deliberately made the policy to have them stay with people from other religions. So you would have in one hotel room, for instance, one Muslim religious extension officer, and one Hindu perhaps, and one Catholic with one Confucianist, or one Protestant with a Buddhist, and so on and so forth.

They would obviously have their own conversation behind closed doors. But from what I have observed, for instance, in many of the coffee breaks, lunches and dinners, and even some of the activities within the TOT, and also during the cascading workshop - there were a lot of very basic questions. Like you would have maybe a Catholic extension officer asking a Confucianist: Who is your God? What is the name of your God? Or maybe a Buddhist would ask: Do Confucianists have a prophet, a messenger, for instance? Or a Muslim might ask a Catholic: In what way or how do you reconcile your idea about the Trinity and the belief in one and only God?

So you get these kinds of interactions which would never have occurred within any of the training or programmes held by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. And it's exactly these kinds of difficult conversations which would elevate their thinking and appreciation for people from other faith communities.

If you get them to stick together long enough the affective filters will come down, and they will have much more understanding about the faith of their neighbors, of their colleagues, of their co-religionists, but also much more empathy and much more mutual respect.

## Mutual Learning: Religious Literacy Through Lived Encounter

**DICKY SOFJAN:** One of the things that I also highlighted in the academic paper about the religious literacy programme was this idea about mutual learning platforms. Religious literacy programmes can serve quite effectively as a mutual learning platform for the targeted individuals, from the different faith communities, to learn together, to be asking the taboo questions, the sensitive questions which you might otherwise not have posed, because there has never been any opportunity or a chance for them to do so in other settings.

And so to me, religious literacy is learning about religions and learning about the religion of your friends, of your colleagues, of your neighbors, and, while doing so, you enrich your own understanding about your own tradition.

**KATE SOULES:** Yes, it's one thing to read in a textbook or hear from a lecture what the Catholic doctrine on the Trinity is. It's an entirely different thing to talk with somebody who is a devout Catholic, and how they individually interpret that and wrestle with the Trinity and the one true God.

And so, that this mutual learning platform approach to religious literacy is really valuable. Religion only exists because of the people who continue to practice it. And so learning about religions from those people makes a lot of sense.

## From Clicks to Communities: Strengthening Religious Literacy in the Digital and Local Sphere

*Audience questions spotlight the challenge of countering misinformation online while empowering credible, community-rooted voices to foster religious literacy and social cohesion.*

## Fostering Religious Literacy Online: Tools and Training for Navigating an Emotionally Charged Digital Space

**DICKY SOFJAN:** We have a module on religious literacy, both for the actual workshop proper and also for the TOT. So basically, it comprises a number of thematic sessions. One is on religion and us. The second is on religion and the State. The third is on religion and ecology, then religion and human dignity, and the last one is religion and the Internet.

We've added two more sessions, which include religion and human rights and religion and peacebuilding. The "religion and the Internet" session has always been, from the very beginning, part and parcel of the religious literacy programme we've done, because we've also realized that a lot of these religious extension officers, who also happen to be religious leaders in their own respective ways in their communities, in their sub-district levels or districts (some of them are even relatively famous in their own sort of context and region), need support in this space.

One of the things that we teach them is the skills and competencies to be able to detect hoaxes. And so we do have some skills-building activities to develop that capacity. We've also taught them how to avoid spreading hate speech.

The latest addition is actually on AI; how do you detect real content from content that is created and constructed by AI? Now, one of the interesting things is again about the context in Indonesia. And I'm sure this is also happening and occurring in many different countries and contexts: you get these so-called celebrity preachers, or celebrity stars, if you like. A lot of them have made a name for themselves through social media.

They do a lot of sermons, preachings, and religious messaging through social media, *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Reels*, *Instagram*, and so on. And oftentimes these religious extension officers cannot compete with them, both in terms of savviness in the technical aspects of social media, and in terms of their messaging.

So one of the things we try to do is train them in creating digital content. And this has been endorsed from the very beginning by the Ministry. The Ministry is actually hoping that many of its religious extension officers can at least try to compete in terms of the production of social media content, content that is aligned with religious moderation, aligned with non-extreme interpretations of religion. This has always been part and parcel of our religious literacy programme from the very beginning.

**KATE SOULES:** This is a topic that I've been interested in for a while. I had a - still have - a friend, but we met in grad school, who saw the gap in high quality, religious studies content online and made an effort to compete with some of those celebrity-religion personalities on YouTube and produce actual, scholarly videos. And so that approach is a really valuable one - getting voices with authority, and actual training and not just the training in communication and in religious literacy making those points. And, maybe even doing some of that training through these online platforms that they're messaging on so that the people that are watching them also recognize, how to tell the difference between really sensationalist or fake social media about religion versus things that are thoughtful and engaged, and really concerned with religious literacy.

**DICKY SOFIAN:** Absolutely. One of the things about social media is the effectiveness and the efficiency and efficacy in terms of this process of massification, right? And so within this context of the culture of celebrity and the culture of instantaneity, we are seeing this process of the massification of religious messages out there in social media.

And, as you noted correctly, there's a lot of, sorry to say, very unsubstantiated, if not low-level quality in terms of the religious messages. Many of them are downright wrong and incorrect.

But this whole idea about massification is also connected to what's called the dumbing down effect. Because if you're going to massify your messages, then you need to dumb them down to a certain extent so that a lot of people can understand. And if you were to just blurt out scholarly analysis on religion or on theology, obviously you'd be facing a brick wall, essentially, because the masses would not be able to digest it well enough. The "netizens" would not even have the time to digest some of these more substantive messages or forms of knowledge.

**KATE SOULES:** Yes, it's an additional skill set to be able to translate some of these really complex issues in religion into very accessible terms, and communicate them in an accessible way, without diluting the context and the complexity of it.

**DICKY SOFIAN:** Definitely. And that I'm so happy to hear that we've been including this in the religion and the Internet from the beginning of our programme.

**KATE SOULES:** We have to be aware of this form of communication, and be actively working on it, and not avoiding it.

## Critical Thinking Across Difference: Religious Literacy in Indonesia Today

**DICKY SOFIAN:** There are a lot of issues and problems and challenges we face in terms of how to govern a religiously diverse society like Indonesia. People know Indonesia as a Muslim-populated country, one of the most populated Muslim countries. And now we have Pakistan, which supposedly has more Muslims quantitatively than Indonesia.

But not many people realize that in some provinces of Indonesia, especially in the eastern side of Indonesia, you have more Christians or more Catholics in many of these provinces and districts. So you do find that dynamic of dual or triple majority, dual or triple minority, meaning to say that at the national level you might be a majority, but in certain provinces or districts, you might be a minority. The same goes for other religious communities.

So there is that full realization on the part of the Indonesian nation and leaders that we have that problem, that we have those issues, and that we can't expect to have one theology, one religion that would supersede others. Thus, there is that idea about religious moderation, or moderatism, however you might want to translate it.

But to me, religious moderation has its own baggage. Because religion is also about passion. Religion is also about believing in the goodness of your own tradition, right? Meaning to say that if you believe in something good, then you want to fight for it, right? You want to strive for it, and you want to invite others to share the blessings. This is very natural in many religions, especially in Islam and Christianity. Maybe not so with other religions, especially Hinduism or Buddhism, for that matter.

But what's most important, and the main distinction between religious moderation and religious literacy, is that there is that aspiration to infuse critical thinking in religious literacy, and the idea to build that multiple perspective, with the hope that the participants will have developed empathy and mutual respect and appreciation for the religious others.

These are some of the main objectives of religious literacy, which I find are very different from the kind of state-sponsored religious moderation programmes, although we have been working and been in conversations with people within the Ministry of Religious Affairs on these issues.

But with the new Minister of Religious Affairs now, for instance, he has underlined two major agenda: one is Eco-Theology, and the other one is on the *Curriculum of Love*. These are two very interesting and fascinating subject matters to be upheld by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

And so, as much as people might have suspicious ideas about having a Ministry of Religious Affairs, in the case of Indonesia, I can attest to the fact that a lot of the officers, a lot of the public officials in the Ministry of Religious Affairs are scholars, learned people, people who are trained in religion, people who are *ustads*

(teachers of religion), people who are coming out from theology schools, and people who have done their Masters and Ph.D. degrees, both in Indonesia and overseas.

So, there's a lot of desire for progress. There's a lot of desire for a much more vibrant religious celebration of diversity. But the state, as we know it, is always conservative, right? It's the academics and the NGO activists, the religious preachers, who are usually the ones more passionate and more gearing toward progress.

**KATE SOULES:** That's a great answer. And to throw out those two new topics at the very end of our time, Eco-Theology and the *Curriculum of Love* now I feel like we have another several hours' worth of conversation that we could have.

And the point you make about religious literacy - including that critical thinking component - from my perspective, becoming religiously literate doesn't have to mean dialing back your religious passion in any way. But it's also being able to apply critical thinking in your interactions with others and say perhaps I have this religious passion, but I recognize that it's not the same as that of this other community or this other individual. And maybe we need to find ways to work together at times.

So I really appreciate that perspective.

**DICKY SOFIAN:** Yes, and many of the things I discovered during our training programmes, there's also a lot of conversations about rituals and festivities. Because there's a lot of ignorance. There's a lot of unawareness with respect to the question of: what does this ritual actually mean for you?

And there are a lot of those kinds of questions coming in from people of other faiths. And these are genuine questions that the religious extension officers want to know, because oftentimes they get questions from their congregations, and if they don't know the answer, they can't just make it up, right?

So the religious literacy programme facilitates those kinds of learning, so they can ask the other religious extension officers from the other religious traditions and come up with a smart response to some of these questions and issues.

**KATE SOULES:** When I've taught religion courses and religious literacy workshops, often what I want people to come away with is not all of the answers. No one is ever going to be able to answer every question about religion, but more the knowledge and skills for how to find those answers, and how to evaluate the answers they find with a critical perspective. And so, none of these religious affairs officers are going to be able to answer every last individual specific question. But if they can go to their colleague from another religion, or know which sources to point to, that's a much more valuable resource than saying "I don't know," or worse, making up an answer, which is never ideal.

## **Trusted Messengers, Global Reach - Final reflections on why religious literacy starts local, and scales with empathy, partnership, and purpose.**

**KATE SOULES:** Are there a few final words that you would want to leave us with? Or a lesson that you hope that the participants in your training programmes leave with if they forget everything 6 months later, like this is the core thing that they they're holding on to?

**DICKY SOFJAN:** Well, as I'd mentioned, the first phase in our religious literacy programme was supported by the British Government through the FCDO and the British Council. For the second, we are working closely with the Mennonite community in Indonesia. I am the founder and president of the Indonesian Foundation for Peacebuilding and Academic Partnership.

The Mennonites' core business is peacebuilding and conflict resolution. And this was one of the reasons why we added "Religion and Peacebuilding" into our curriculum for the religious literacy programme. So we try as much as possible to diversify our partners, and to expand the curriculum and expand the skill sets and competencies, because society is becoming much more complex and complicated nowadays.

It's becoming much more polarized. Although if you look at the data, Indonesia is not as polarized as the US, for instance, or the UK or Germany or France. But we do have our fault lines, religious fault lines, within each of the religious communities and among the religious communities.

I sincerely hope that we can share the learnings we've accumulated throughout these years on religious literacy. We've tried it with diplomats from seven to eight countries. We had one religious literacy programme for diplomats, with Indonesian diplomats, Turkish, Russian, Surinamese, Ecuadorian diplomats, and others.

And we have, for the past three years, also been training Christian pastors from the Indonesian western region on religious literacy.

So I see that there is this revival of religious literacy in many parts of the world. We saw the rise of religious literacy in the G20 Interfaith Forum, and we are seeing that in many of the other international multilateral fora as well, highlighting the need for religious literacy.

And the work of Erin, for instance, in global diplomacy also plays an important role in that. So I'm very hopeful that religious literacy will have more proponents in the future, and hopefully people will be able to appreciate more the benefits, and the sort of desire that we have, for society, for the world, through religious literacy.

**KATE SOULES:** Thank you so much. I'm really inspired by the work that you're doing. And how you're working within your particular context to think about religious literacy and bring it to a particular population. Of these extension officers who then have another reach and can further bring religious literacy to communities and places where you might not be able to get your training - but they're going to be able to get access.

Thank you everyone. Thank you all for being here with us today. We have noted all of the questions in the chat, and they'll be really valuable as we think about future webinars.

## **Acknowledgements**

*The International Dialogue Centre - KAICIID extends its heartfelt thanks to  
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**"Bridging Divides: Contextualizing Conflict – Practising Religious Literacy for Peace" was Episode 2 of 3 in the webinar series "Nurturing Seeds: Religious Literacy as Skill for Peaceful Engagement".**

The graphic features a central illustration of an orange hand holding a small green seedling with white leaves and a red dot, growing out of a mound of dark soil. Above the hand, a white dove with a blue olive branch is depicted, surrounded by white raindrops. The background is a light blue gradient with a faint circular pattern. Text elements include 'Webinar Series' in a white box, the title 'Nurturing Seeds: Religious Literacy as a Skill for Peaceful Engagement', the episode count '3 EPISODES', and the dates 'JULY 17, 21 & 24, 2025'. Logos for Tanenbaum and CIID are at the bottom right.

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