A MODEL OF INTERRELIGIOUS ECO-THEOLOGICAL LEADERSHIP TO CARE FOR THE EARTH IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study aims to explore a model of interreligious eco-theological leadership based on unique experiences of interfaith figures, to save the Earth, in the North Kendeng Mountains, Central Java, Indonesia. It employs the encyclical 'Laudato Si'' of Pope Francis and the concept of interreligious eco-theology proposed by Felix Wilfred and Julia Watts Belser to serve as the theoretical foundation. The Pope's teachings on the importance of dialogue involving all people, regardless of their religion and beliefs, to care for the Earth are compatible with Wilfred and Belser's interreligious eco-theological concept. Both the teaching and the concept even provide an opportunity for the development of an interreligious eco-theological leadership model. While such a model of leadership is significant and necessary to care for the Earth, a specific study about this topic has, in fact, not been found yet. This study examines such a leadership model in the Indonesian context characterised by religious diversity and beliefs as well as environmental issues. As seen in a movement pioneered by the Sedulur Sikep community in the North Kendeng Mountains, some interreligious leaders participated in protecting and preserving the environment. They moved together to protest against the construction of a cement factory in the region. The movement, in turn, influenced public policy-making for the sake of the integrity of creation and environmental sustainability. This real example of the interreligious eco-theological leadership model to care for the Earth can inspire ecological movements elsewhere.

Keywords: crisis, encyclical, praxis, interreligious, ecotheology

1. Introduction

With the ecological movements in Indonesia, interreligious eco-theological leadership has played a pivotal role in overcoming the environmental crisis. In this context, it is interesting to discuss a model of such a leadership based on Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* (after this abbreviated as LS) [1] and Felix Wilfred and Julia Watts Belser's concept on interreligious ecotheology [2, 3].

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Pope Francis' teaching on dialogue for caring for the Earth is, to some extent, similar to Wilfred and Belser's concept of interreligious ecotheology [2, 3].

The primary purpose of this study is to explain the model of interreligious eco-theological leadership in the Indonesian context, especially concerning environmental issues in the North Kendeng Mountains. The said leadership model is considered quite relevant and significant to the Indonesian context as the country has diversity in terms of religion and beliefs but also faces heavy environmental problems. Hopefully, this study opens up more discussion about interreligious eco-theological leadership models required to save the Earth.

This study is of interest because it offers at least three benefits. First and foremost, theoretically, it enriches insights on environmental science and contextual theology with a new proposition, namely, an interreligious eco-theological leadership model to care for the Earth. Second, it is useful for changing one's perceptions, perspectives, and behaviours to become more concerned with caring for the Earth. Third, it can be a guidance for political and socioeconomic leaders in terms of policy-making to overcome ecological problems. The results, hence, can present a reference model to care for the Earth in the future.

Compared with the previous academic works, this study proposes three novelties. First, while the earlier works focus on only the concept of interreligious eco-theology, this study focuses on an interreligious eco-theological leadership model. Second, this research deals with actual issues, namely environmental problems in the North Kendeng Mountains of Central Java, Indonesia. There exists an interreligious eco-theological movement to care for the Earth carried out by several interfaith leaders comprising the community of *Sedulur Sikep* (the indigenous religion in North Kendeng), Islam and Catholics. The third novelty is related to the experience of the author as one of the persons involved in the Earth-care movement in the region, along with several other interreligious leaders [4].

2. Literature review on LS and interreligious ecotheology

The LS is an official document of Pope Francis, published as an essential encyclical in the Catholic Church tradition that concerns environmental issues [5-7]. There are many critical writings about LS, but none of them analyses the interreligious eco-theological leadership model. Soon after the publication of LS, several theologians, eco-theologians and scientific observers studied LS according to their competence. From 2015 to 2018, experts such as Jeffrey Goh [8], Reginald Alva [9], John Bayer [10], Mary Taylor [11], Ashley Beck [12], Paul L. Younger [13], Brendan Byrne [14], Michael S. Northcott [15], Judith Gruber [16], Clement Compos [17], James Hanvey [18] and Paul Scherz [19] have published articles on LS. This existing literature, however, only focuses on the themes of Theology [8-12, 15, 17, 18], spirituality [13], eco-ecclesiology [16] and ethics [19].

Some previous studies have tried to link LS to the context of certain countries, such as those written by Compos in the Indian context [17], Peter Knox from an African perspective [20], and Pedro Walpole in the Asia-Pacific context [21]. Several books have enriched this study in understanding the context and ecological vision of LS, as written by Sean McDonagh [5], Antonio Spadaro [6], Vincent J. Miller [7], Kevin W. Irvin [22] and Anthony J. Kelly CssR [23]. Two books by Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam [24] and Elizabeth-Anne Stewart [25] also played an essential role in understanding the traces of leadership in LS.

Some studies on LS done from Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist Daoist, Judaic, even indigenous religious perspectives open the scope to examine the interreligious eco-theological leadership model. Adnane Mokrani [26] and Russel Powell [27], for example, link LS to Islam, while Ruel M. Nalam [https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/pdf/conferences/arts-congress-proc eedings/2018/spcn-01.pdf] and Junno Arocho Esteves [https://www.ncronline. org/blogs/spirituality/eco-catholic/buddhists-christians-know-eco-crisis-ego-crisis -cardinal-says] analysed LS from the perspective of Hinduism, Daoism and Buddhism. Next, Finsensius Yuli Purnama [28], Isis Ibrahim [29] and Zainal Abidin Bagir [30] discuss LS in terms of indigenous religions, while Purnama and Bagir have placed LS in the context of The North Kendeng Mountains. However, they did not specifically address the interreligious eco-theological leadership model.

The interreligious eco-theological concept as the theoretical foundation for this study is closely related to ecotheology. According to A.P. Hadiwadoyo MSF [31] and Ernst M. Conradie [32], ecotheology can broadly be defined as a theology friendly and caring for the environment. Leonardo Boff [33] stated that ecotheology has offered alternative ideas in dealing with the increasingly severe ecological crisis and demands a holistic action in the form of cooperation with everyone.

Meanwhile, A.J. Spencer [34] added that ecotheology moves in a reflection-action-reflection sphere to evaluate perceptions, perspectives and poor behaviour towards the environment and invite all parties to work together in facing the ecological crisis. Next, C.W. Hrynkow [35] reminded that theologians should consider the environmental crisis when offering reflections and alternative actions. This consideration becomes the basic premise of ecotheology in dealing with the ecological disaster. The said premise is seen in the LS-based interreligious ecotheology, mainly through the option for and with the poor (see LS 10, 16, 20, 25, 29 - reference numbers in this bracket and so on refer to LS).

3. The Encyclical LS on ecological crisis

Pope Francis asserted that Mother Earth is screaming to us "because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her" (LS 2). The ecological crisis has made the Earth injured (LS 53).

From the historical record, Rachel Carson [36] and Lynn White [37] have published their studies of the ecological crisis in the 1960s. Pope Francis also highlights the human root of the environmental crisis (LS 101-136) at present. He underlines that humans have destroyed the Earth and its contents, both the abiotic (such as soil, water, air, and weather) and the biotic elements (such as biodiversity of flora and fauna). This crisis has ultimately affected human life and, therefore, must become a theological concern (LS 63, 101, 139). Such an ecological crisis includes pollution, climate change (LS 20-22), water problems (LS 27-31), loss of biodiversity (LS 32-42), decreased quality of human life and social damage (LS 43-47) and global inequality (LS 48-52). Pope Francis mapped the complexity of this environmental problem in a more practical but comprehensive term, namely the ecological crisis (LS 17-61).

According to A.M.C. Waterman [38], Pope Francis' view of the ecological crisis is very detailed and profound. He makes a reliable analysis of the current state of the ecological emergency, which, if not handled properly, will destroy the present and future generations. Waterman affirmed the teachings of Pope Francis on the importance of dialogue to address the ecological crisis, internationally (LS 164-175), nationally, and in the local context (LS 176-181). The Pope has also called for transparency in decision making (LS 182-188), both in the political and economic fields regarding the fulfilment of human needs (LS 189-198); and interreligious dialogue (LS 201).

Although this notion may sound hyperbolic, Pope's teachings do provide essential and vital inspiration in examining the ecological crisis [38]. These teachings are indispensable because the crisis is still going on and even tends to be more severe, complex, and alarming. Considering this ecological crisis, Pope Francis writes, "I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affects us all." (LS 14)

4. Understanding the concept of interreligious ecotheology in LS

The term interreligious ecotheology refers to an understanding that all people should care for the Earth, regardless of their religion and beliefs [2, 3]. Although Pope Francis did not explicitly use the term, his teaching that all people of any religion and faith must take care of the Earth (LS 64) can underpin the understanding of interreligious ecotheology. According to Pope Francis, '*Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years*' (LS 53). Therefore, caring for the Earth is a must for everyone.

This notion seems to be the basic idea of interreligious ecotheology in the encyclical of LS Pope Francis encouraged anyone to get involved in this interfaith cooperation (LS 7, 14-15). The concept of interreligious ecotheology is evident in Pope Francis' teachings, where he challenges everyone to work together to address the ecological crisis. He opened many people's awareness about the importance of working together to care for the Earth, regardless of their religion,

beliefs, scientific competence and cultural, social and political background (LS 163-201).

The Pope stressed the importance of joint movements to respond to the ecological crisis. Everyone must establish dialogue and collective actions to care for the Earth, protect nature, and defend the poor. In short, everyone must build a network of brotherhood with a respectful attitude (LS 200-201). The teachings conveyed with all sincerity have touched the heart of everyone [38].

Although there might be a difference in understanding of what interreligious theology is, Pope Francis' teachings are in line with Wilfred and Belser's concepts on the interreligious ecotheology [2, 3]. In this case, through his LS, Pope Francis confirms Wilfred and Belser's ideas about the importance of interreligious eco-theology.

5. Interreligious ecotheology as a joint movement of religious leaders

Interreligious ecotheology is a collective movement by all religious traditions to respond to the ecological crisis as initiated by Wilfred, 6 years before the LS was published. According to Wilfred, the ecological crisis is an opportunity to rethink the consciousness, behaviour, and teachings among the faithful about God, the Earth and humans for a harmonious life. It is also a chance to rethink and discover unique relations among religions [2].

According to Wilfred, interreligious eco-theology can contribute to the transformation of awareness, attitudes, and praxis toward the Earth. Religious people should forget conflict in the past and form a unity in diversity whereby the ecological crisis becomes a space for interreligious movements to build meaningful dialogue. The horizon of our understanding of humanity, creation and God can evolve through an on-going conversation that focuses on the Earth [2].

Like Pope Francis, Wilfred was right when emphasising that the ecological crisis could not be faced alone. There must be cooperation with all people, whatever their religion and beliefs might be. Wilfred then proposed a fundamental question: "What can Christianity learn in dialogue with other religious traditions for the salvation of the planet Earth so that human salvation can happen? A more in-depth dialogue leads to the evolving of an interreligious eco-theology." [2, p. 46]

Wilfred concluded, nowadays, there has been a growing awareness of the need for a paradigm shift in our relationship with the Earth, which in turn also brings transformation in the relationship between humans and God, whatever their religion. Merely relying on managerial, technical, or superficial changes in the existing development model is not enough to achieve this goal. Establishing interreligious ecotheology will bring a paradigm shift in perspective, attitude and value [2].

Within this framework, Pope Francis' teachings and Wilfred's ideas fit with one another. Interreligious eco-theology inspires humanity to establish primordial relations binding together all that exists. Interconnectedness and interdependence shed compassion to all beings. This view also becomes an embodiment of a deep sense of solidarity among humans. It presupposes that each religious tradition should critically examine its belief systems, worldviews, and values to discover the extent to which they are responsible for the ecological crisis, especially by the narrow anthropocentric perspective. This movement helped stem the tide of competition and wealth accumulation as a cause of the ecological crisis and gradually brought radical change through interreligious eco-theological praxis [2, cf. LS 14-15].

Like Wilfred, Belser also wrote an essay on environmental justice and interreligious eco-theology to care for the Earth and humanity [3]. She analysed several cases of injustice to be dealt with from the interreligious eco-theological perspective. For example, the grassroots movement of women from the African-American Church protested a pile of poisonous rubbish in a black-dominated community in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1982. Other cases were the Bhopal gas tragedy that occurred in 1984 that killed thousands of the poor in India and a study of a document known as 'United Commission of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice' on 'Toxic Waste and Race' in 1987. Starting from these cases, Belser asked, "How did religion respond to the environmental crisis, engage in, or turn away from the ethical demands of ecological injustice?" [3]

According to Belser, religion has played an important role in pioneering the environmental justice movement. However, it has not been able to solve the problem because it relates to many parties. She maintained that theologians, religious experts, and academics often underestimate the importance of explicit attention to the problems of injustice, violence, and environmental destruction [3]. Therefore, fostering ecological insight and commitment to the mutual movement among religious people in responding to the ecological crisis is very important.

Belser stressed the importance of interreligious thoughts on environmental theology, including theological reflections written by academics from non-Christian traditions [3]. She proposed the concept of interreligious ecotheology while analysing the works of Larry Rasmussen, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Melanie L. Harris, Sharon V. Betcher, Pankaj Jain, and Sandra B. Lubarsky in the *Religious Studies News* [3]. She urged that everyone should be aware of the importance of interreligious ecotheology and environmental justice. Academics and interreligious leaders have the primary responsibility to do so [http://rsnonline.or g/index1e98.html?option=com_content&view=article&id=1458&Itemid=1616].

Belser's reflection is concerned with the pedagogical framework of environmental justice, while Wilfred's concept of interreligious ecotheology is closely related to the perspective of the contextual theology movement. Here, Belser invites anyone to better integrate justice awareness into ecotheology and Pedagogy not only in the classroom but also in joint movements outside the classroom. Interreligious ecotheology, according to her, can be conducted in places of worship, in classrooms, or in protest fields. In terms of Pedagogy and Theology, a new commitment to the teaching and learning of interreligious ecotheology will grow when everyone gets engaged in combatting the ecological crisis and environmental justice [3]. Interreligious ecotheology arises from an understanding that the ecological crisis is a common challenge that all believers must face and overcome it (LS 3, 14-15, 64, 201) [2, 3]. The similarity of the teachings of Pope Francis with the idea of Wilfred and Belser gives space and the opportunity to examine the concept of an interreligious ecotheological leadership model. With this in mind, although Pope Francis, Wilfred, and Belser did not specifically discuss such a leadership model, they have shown significant traces towards the said model in the context of the ecological crisis. This study will examine it further.

6. Looking at the Indonesian context

Pope Francis' teachings, as well as Wilfred and Belser's study on the importance of dialogue and interreligious eco-theology to save the Earth, are very relevant and significant in the Indonesian context, concerning two fundamental things. First, Indonesia is a country with a diversity of religions and beliefs and known with its largest Muslim population in the world. According to the Indonesian Population Census in 2010, a total of 207,176,162 residents in Indonesia were Muslims (87.18%). The Protestant Christian population was 16,528,513 (6.96%) and the Catholics were 6,907,873 (2.91%). Meanwhile, the Hindu population was about 4,012,116 (1.69%) and Buddhists were about 1,703,254 (0.72%). Further, the 'youngest religion' recognised by the Indonesian government, i.e. Confucianism, was embraced by 117,091 people (0.05%). The other categories consist of 299,617 people (0.13%), 139,582 people (0.66%) did not declare their beliefs and about 757,118 (0.32%) people were not asked [39].

In Indonesia, the citizens included in the three last categories are generally called the indigenous religion followers. They usually declare themselves as *Penghayat Kepercayaan* (native-faith followers). On November 17, 2017, the Indonesian Constitutional Court answered their lawsuit by establishing their belief as one of the six religions in Indonesia. Since then, the citizens no longer use their identity by choosing one of the six religions recognised by the government. They can register their belief-related identity according to their indigenous faith on the National Identity Card instead.

Second, Indonesia is recently facing an ecological crisis. Alexander Sonny Keraf [40], for instance, sees the environmental emergency in Indonesia in a global context. At the same time, Emil Salim [41] reads the ecological crisis in Indonesia from the LS perspective, specifically from the context of Pedagogy and sustainable development. They both describe the environmental crises in Indonesia, ranging from the damage of forests, soil, coral reefs, water, air, up to sea pollution. Besides, the country also faces waste problems, the extinction of biodiversity, springs water, and natural resources [40, 41].

With a particular case in the North Kendeng Mountains, the local community faces the threat of ecological crisis due to the construction of cement plants [4, 42-44]. The main problem in the region deals with the conflict over natural resources due to the planned construction of a cement factory. Disputes involve residents opposing the local government and the cement company [4, 44].

The conflict occurred because of differences in perceptions of the existence of the cement plants. The company and the government believe that the business does not damage the environment. Conversely, the local community and several interreligious leaders were of the view that the company and its activities would cause environmental damage through the soil, water, air, and climate pollution. The existence of the cement company also threatens the springs and livings of the majority of the agricultural population in the area [4, 42-44].

From 2006 until now, residents of the North Kendeng Mountains have fought against plans to build the cement factory. Resistance occurred in many places, such as in Sukolilo, Tambakromo, Kayen, Brati (Pati Regency), and Gunem (Rembang Regency). Gunretno, the key person of the *Sedulur Sikep* community in Sukolilo, is the leader of the local movement together with *JM*-*PPK* (*'Jaringan Masyarakat Peduli Pegunungan Kendeng'*/the Kendeng Mountains Care Community Network) and interfaith leaders supporting the movement to save the Earth there. In this context, some interreligious leaders move with them to take care of the Earth in the North Kendeng Mountains [4, 42-44].

Using this context, Pope Francis' teachings and Wilfred and Belser's ideas [1-3] are not only relevant and significant but also provide a crucial affirmation. Several interfaith leaders have conducted an interreligious eco-theological movement to preserve the Earth in the region. It is still going on until today and is a clear example of the interfaith leaders' movement comprising of the *Sedulur Sikep*, Muslim and Catholicism communities [4, 42-44].

The movement, or what is in this study called with a praxis of the interreligious eco-theological leadership, has, in practice, brought about contextualisation of teachings and ideas about interreligious ecotheology. There, interfaith leaders worked together to overcome the ecological crisis as a common problem. This fact expresses an excellent example of interreligious eco-theological leadership in response to the crisis in the North Kendeng Mountains. The leaders persistently worked together at the grassroots level to oppose the construction of the cement company, which was assessed as threatening the Earth [4, 42-44].

There were representations of at least three religions taking part in the movement, i.e. the indigenous religion known as *Sedulur Sikep*, Islam and Catholicism. They acted in various ways, such as a long-march at around 150 kilometres to demand environmental justice, cultural arts performances, discussions, public/popular lectures for the local community, and reforestation. In principle, together with the local community and *Sedulur Sikep*, the interreligious leaders criticised the provincial government policy and the cement company through nonviolent actions [4, 42-44].

Besides, they also carried out a lawsuit in the judiciary against the local government and the cement company. They won the cassation at the Supreme Court level. Nevertheless, the local government and the cement company did not heed the decision of the cassation. In response to this, several women performed the most extreme measure by cementing their feet in front of the Presidential Palace in Jakarta to show their protest against the government policy and the cement company [8]. On that occasion, the Archbishop of Jakarta named Msgr. Ignatius Suharyo (now Ignatius Cardinal Suharyo), came to support them [https://www.sesawi.net/uskup-agung-keuskupan-jakarta-mgr-ignatius-suharyo-selasa-siang-presiden-undang-bertemu-di-istana/]. In this sense, the interreligious eco-theological leaders are present to show their alignments to care for the Earth.

7. The importance of interreligious eco-theological leadership

Given the constant ecological crisis, the role of the interreligious ecotheological leaders in dealing with environmental problems, now and in the future, is significant [4, 22, 24, 26, 42-44]. In this context, Pope Francis' affirmation is very significant. He stated that "We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations" (LS 53).

The following are three reasons for the need for interreligious ecotheological leadership in caring for the Earth. First, the ecological crisis that afflicts the Earth requires the presence of interreligious eco-theological leaders to take care of it. The crisis is a shared responsibility; hence, their presence was intended to implement the teachings of Pope Francis and the ideas initiated by Wilfred and Belser.

Second, the interreligious eco-theological leaders have a vital authority to remind anyone who causes the ecological crisis. They also possess a strategic role to drive communities to take care of the Earth (LS 201). Their struggle in saving the Earth can inspire people to do the same action. As such, they help create a harmonious life from the leaders or policymakers to the grassroots level.

Third, the presence of the interreligious eco-theological leaders concerning the ecological crisis has influenced public policy-making to care for the Earth. In the case of the North Kendeng Mountains, they have supported the struggle of the residents in shaping the policy made by the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, towards the cement company. As a result, the President has listened to their aspirations by publishing a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to ensure the implementation of the principles of sustainable development in a region, as well as the formulation of policies and programmes that are environmentally friendly [http://perpustakaan.bappenas.go.id/lontar/file? file=digital/177300-Konten%20E2167.pdf].

Unfortunately, the Regional Government, in this case, the Governor of Central Java at the moment, did not comply with the SEA issued by the President. This fact has led to the on-going struggle by the local citizens, the *Sedulur Sikep* community, and interreligious leaders to care for the Earth in the North Kendeng Mountains.

8. Conclusions

Interreligious ecotheology has emerged from the consciousness that all believers must overcome the ecological crisis as a common challenge. In this understanding, everyone has to build leadership capable of caring for the Earth.

Pope Francis' teachings calling for everyone to work together to care for the Earth are compatible with Wilfred and Belser's ideas about interreligious ecotheology. The combination of both even provides space for the development of an interreligious eco-theological leadership model to confirm a joint movement to care for the Earth, as seen in the Earth-care movement in the North Kendeng Mountains of Central Java, Indonesia. Later, the said leadership model can also be used as a reference of how to respond to ecological crises elsewhere under the condition that interreligious leaders must have a strong commitment to care for the Earth.

In the context of the North Kendeng Mountains, the interreligious ecotheological leadership model has been able to harmoniously unite leaders from various religions and beliefs to caring for the Earth. This leadership model has also played an essential role in influencing public policies and decision making by political and socioeconomic leaders concerning environmental preservation. The struggle in caring for the Earth is believed to be able to inspire the emergence of similar movements in other places to respond to the endless ecological crises, both in Indonesia and in other countries.

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