Church-Building as a Means of Communication in a Multicultural Society

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Abstract

The Catholic Church in Indonesia exists within a multicultural and multi-religious environment. Although people of different religions can generally live in harmony and peace, there is an alarming phenomenon, namely xenophobia, caused by radical and fundamentalist groups. Churches, as a symbol of the Christian community's presence, are frequently built in the Western style, exacerbating xenophobia. This paper aims to highlight the architectural style of Yusuf Bilyarta Mangunwijaya, a priest and architect who attempted to design a church that communicates with a multicultural society and contributes a contextual approach to dialogue in a multicultural society.

Context: Religious Freedom Violation

Although religious freedom in Indonesia—the world's largest Muslim population—is guaranteed by law, discrimination against religious minorities still exists. One such case occurred in December 2022. In Cilebut Barat, Sukaraja District, approximately 64 kilometres (39 miles) south of Jakarta, a group of Muslims lined up outside the home where the Batak Christian Church's Christmas Day worship was to occur and prevented worshippers from entering the house. Hundreds of discrimination cases like this have occurred in previous years. The Setara Institute, a

leading Indonesia-based non-governmental organisation that conducts research and advocacy for democracy, political freedom and human rights, decisively reports that 180 religious freedom violations occurred in 2020. This number had only slightly decreased to 171 in 2021; however, as many violations are not reported to the National Human Rights Commission, the actual number is likely to be higher.

In the case of Cilebut, the congregation does not have a church because the requirements for building a church have not yet been fulfilled. According to human rights advocates, obtaining permission to build houses of worship in Indonesia is burdensome, preventing Christians and other religious minorities from establishing such buildings. Permits to establish a place of worship are frequently used to avoid construction. Indonesia's *Joint Ministerial Decree* of 2006 makes obtaining permits for most new churches nearly impossible. This regulation demands three conditions: first, the local government must issue a license to establish a house of worship; second, a recommendation from the Communication Forum of Inter-Religious Communities ('*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*' in the Indonesian language), a forum for inter-faith community leaders under the auspices of local governments and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, must be obtained; and third, at least 60 community members must support the plan to build a house of worship. These three requirements create possibilities for discrimination to occur.

First, local governments, such as governors or regents, can politicise the authority of local governments to issue permits for the establishment of houses of worship. For example, a governor may refuse to allow a Christian community to build a church in a Muslim-majority area to gain Muslim support in the next general election. *Second*, the Inter-Religious Communication Forum cannot defend minority groups, as membership in the forum is based on religious representation, meaning that the more adherents a religion has in a region, the more members the religion has in the forum. *Third*, the requirement of support from at least 60 community members has the potential to lead to discrimination. The requirement is undeniably acceptable in a community that is accepting of religious minority groups; however, in a low-tolerance area, it will undoubtedly impede the establishment of houses of worship.

Analysing Causes: Majoritarianism and Xenophobia

The difficulties associated with establishing a place of worship are not limited to Christian communities living in Muslim-majority areas. When living in Christian-majority areas, such as Flores, or Hindu-majority areas, such as Bali, Muslim minority groups sometimes face similar challenges. These circumstances exemplify the reality of 'majoritarianism'. Majoritarianism asserts that an ethnic or religious majority has

the right to determine a nation's fate without regard for minority rights. Ethnoreligious nationalism, such as the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and Bamar Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, provides an example of majoritarianism. Ethnoreligious nationalism is the fusion of national identity and the ethnic majority's religious affiliation. In these examples, only the majority group members are treated as full citizens. Meanwhile, minorities are tolerated as long as they do not challenge the majority, are appropriately deferential and accept being marginalised—politically, economically and culturally. Minority groups of any religion will face discrimination in a country characterised by majoritarianism. In Indonesia, the regulation of permits to build houses of worship reflects a majority-minority dichotomy.

Furthermore, the Setara Institute observes that the problem of establishing houses of worship for minorities in Indonesia is exacerbated by social segregation, with people preferring to interact with others from the same group. Radical Muslim groups, however small in number, have spread xenophobia among Muslims. Some Muslims may feel threatened by the presence of Christians and symbols representing their existence, such as churches. In a recent case of intolerance, a Muslim hardliners organisation urged the Catholic community to consider covering a statue of Saint Mary. They claimed that such a religious symbol would interfere with their worship during Ramadan, the month of fasting.

Possible Approach

Establishing a church building is not easy against the recent growth of radical Muslim groups in Indonesia. When considering the need to build new churches, this situation must be taken into account. In some areas, the number of Catholics has increased, which has inevitably led to the need for new church buildings or the renovation of existing churches that are no longer sufficient to accommodate the number of worshippers. The Catholic Church in Indonesia must develop a new approach to how it presents itself in such a multicultural and multi-religious society—particularly in a society slowly being affected by xenophobia. One of the many ways to represent the Christian community in the sociocultural landscape is to establish a church as a place of public worship. Designing and establishing a church is thus a process of communicating and dialoguing with society.

Yusuf Bilyarta Mangunwijaya (1929–1999), a priest and architect, claimed that, unfortunately, church buildings are frequently built grandly in many areas. Building a church can be motivated by the need to demonstrate the existence of the Christian community in the face of the threat of xenophobia and the pressure of

majoritarianism, and as a result, certain architectural styles can create the impression that the church is a foreign element in the sociocultural landscape. Consequently, Mangunwijaya is concerned about an 'indigenised' or 'inculturated' style of church architecture as he observes that church buildings do not only function as places of worship or liturgical activities. The history of Christianity in the Middle Ages shows that church buildings served as places of worship and a means of teaching morality. Charles Bouchard and John Lewis showed that the windows of European cathedrals were decorated with stained glass depicting personified figures of virtues, especially the four cardinal virtues: justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence. As a result, Mangunwijaya contends that church buildings should be viewed in terms of their liturgical functionality and as a form of communication between Catholics and people of other faiths.

The Indonesian Catholic Church is still working for the indigenisation of the Catholic Church in Indonesian society. Regrettably, this process is frequently limited to liturgy alone, preventing elements of local culture from becoming an expression of the Catholic faith in worship practices. In this country, churches are merely places of worship. Mangunwijaya, on the other hand, has attempted to express the concept of indigenising church buildings through his thinking and architectural innovations. To better understand Mangunwijaya's ideas, I draw on ideas from theologians and architects.

According to Simon Unwin, a renowned architect and academic who has written extensively on architectural design and theory, architecture is a practical, poetic and philosophical art that enables us to shape and organise space in such a way. This practical, poetic and philosophical architecture also enables us to tell and explain our physical and spatial experiences of life and the world. The nature of a building is to become one with the site through contextually connected spaces.

Furthermore, Unwin also mentions the 'metalanguage of architecture'. According to Unwin, the metalanguage of architecture does not differ significantly from the language we use in speech and writing. Unwin states that it has undergone changes and developments over thousands of years and will continue to evolve in the future. Although they are inanimate objects, buildings are not soulless; existing buildings are always animated by human life, the *Animal Symbolicum*, characters and tendencies, and desires and ideals. In agreement with Unwin, Mangunwijaya says that buildings are the image of the person who built them.

Meanwhile, Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa argues that architecture is a picture of life and an expression of hope for an ideal life. He also believes that language and architecture are intimately connected. The analogy between language and

architecture can help us understand what architecture should be. In language, we use words (vocabulary), composing them according to certain rules (syntax) into sentences that are intended to convey meaning to others. Something similar happens in the world of architecture. The basic architectural elements (walls, roofs, doors, etc.) can be likened to vocabulary within language; the way architectural elements are combined and arranged form something akin to a syntax that should also be able to convey a message (meaning) to anyone who sees or uses it.

Pallasmaa's ideas resonate with the thoughts of Murray A. Rae, a theologian and architect from New Zealand. Rae believes that architecture is more than just a utilitarian activity focused on meeting functional demands; it is also a poetic activity with the capacity to alter our perceptions of the world. Rae maintains that architecture can create new ways of viewing and comprehending one's surroundings.

Rae's notion of architecture as a poetic activity stems from his belief that architecture is more than just building structures; it is also about creating spaces that evoke emotion and meaning. In his opinion, architecture is an art form that can be used to create beauty, inspire awe and help us interact with the world around us in new and profound ways. Rae also believes that architecture can influence our ideas of reality. Architects may affect our moods and emotions and help us perceive the world from a different perspective by building beautiful, harmonious and well-proportioned environments. This, in turn, can lead to new thoughts and viewpoints that we might not have explored otherwise. Overall, Rae's perspective on architecture as a 'poetic activity' emphasises the significance of aesthetics in shaping our perception of the built environment. Architects can build places that spark new ways of seeing and experiencing the world by considering architecture as a creative art form rather than a pragmatic necessity.

These key concepts from architecture can be used in considering church buildings as a means of communication. As an architectural work, a church building should represent the true Church, namely as a community (ger. *Gemeinschaft*), because it is part of the 'Mystical Body of Christ' (*Lumen Gentium* art. 7) and as a 'Sacrament'. Meanwhile, variations in form and function in architecture can symbolise certain meanings. In an ecclesiastical context, these meanings include community, inclusivity and, most importantly, a symbol of Christ's presence in the world. Therefore, these meanings need to be translated or expressed in architectural works while collaborating with the principles of form, aesthetics and function in architecture.

The Church is also a sacrament that presents Christ and His works in the world. Karl Rahner even referred to the Church as the '*Grundsakrament*' or the basic sacrament. The Church is a sacred symbol. It presents the works of God—the real

presence of Christ in this world. The Church presents the virtues of Christ's life, who is present for the small and weak, associates with all people, and proclaims the news of salvation and liberation to humanity. Jesus Christ has a full human face, complete with joys and sorrows. Similarly, the Church is here to immerse itself in the world because the world's sorrows and joys are the Church's sorrows and joys (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* art 1). The Church is called to be present in the world with its various cultures, just as Jesus Christ wore the full face and nature of humanity (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* art. 59). In a similar vein, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) no. 1180 states:

Where the exercise of religious freedom is not hindered, Christian citizens build buildings, which are designated for worship. These visible churches are not places of ordinary assembly, but depict and testify to the Church, which lives in this place, the dwelling place of God among men reconciled and united in Christ. [emphasis by author]

Mangunwijaya's vision of indigenisation in his church architecture works tries to echo an ecclesiology that cares about the sorrows and joys of the world (GS 1), is present in diverse cultures in the world (GS 59) and lives among people (CCC 1180) around it.

Mangunwijaya's Architectural and Theological Contribution

Mangunwijaya has translated his theological ideas into several church-building designs. His architectural works embody the vision of the Indonesian Church, namely the Church that dialogues with multicultural and multi-religious society and becomes part of society. In the context of the relationship between Christians and the Muslim majority, which is not always characterised by a conducive atmosphere, church buildings can communicate the above vision to the community.

Mangunwijaya's theological reflections can be better understood if his life as a Catholic priest is placed within the historical framework of the local church where he worked, namely the Archdiocese of Semarang. The first Indigenous bishop of this diocese, Albertus Soegijapranata SJ (1896–1963), is an important figure in the history of the Catholic Church in Indonesia in general and in Java in particular. His life history reflects the struggle of the Indonesian Catholic Church in building and shaping its identity as a Catholic community that is truly rooted in Indonesian society and culture. He was an eyewitness to the colonialism era in Indonesia. The era was characterised by the resistance of the natives against the colonial government, while it was also marked by the role of the Catholic Church (which was brought by Europeans) in the

birth of the new state. Thinking about the presence of the Catholic Church in the plural Indonesian society and culture, Soegijapranata assigned Mangunwijaya—who had just been ordained as a priest—to study architecture in Europe, namely in Aachen, Germany. Soegijapranata noticed that church buildings still had a colonial feel at the time, and as a result, he had a vision of churches being built in a local style. Yustinus Darmojuwono (1964–1981), the next bishop, carried on his predecessor's dream. When Mangunwijaya returned from his studies in 1967, he realised his dream of constructing a Catholic church with a local cultural flavour. His first commission was the St. Maria Assumpta Church in Klaten. I will use these church symbols to demonstrate how Mangunwijaya used church design to communicate with the local community. This example was chosen because Mangunwijaya demonstrated his understanding of the Church by incorporating the Second Vatican Council's concept of the Church into its architectural design.

The church was completed in 1968 when the euphoria of the renewal of the Second Vatican Council marked the Catholic Church in that era. One significant paradigm shift was the ecclesiological understanding of the Church as 'the people of God'. Before the Second Vatican Council, most church architecture was cross-shaped (†) and used valuable pre-modern materials such as marble. The shape shifted following the Second Vatican Council. Semi-circular forms began facilitating active participation in the liturgy, as required by the Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC 124). There is a widespread belief that changes in Church architecture have significantly affected liturgical architecture. Changes in the liturgy will also affect the architectural form of the Church. However, according to Duncan G. Stroik, there is very little evidence in the history of church architecture to suggest that changes in the liturgy influenced changes in church architecture. What is certain is that churches have always had to adjust to the existing liturgy. However, the church is more than just a place for worship; it is also a 'holy place' (1 Kings 9:3), 'the house of the Lord' (Gen 28:17), 'the house of the church' (Rom 16:3–5), and 'the body of Christ' (Col 1:18).

First and foremost, Mangunwijaya believes that the church edifice is 'God's dwelling' or 'sanctuary'. He recognised that this universal Christian concept corresponded to the Javanese concept of a dwelling. A house is more than just a physical structure for habitation in Javanese culture. It represents the Javanese people's social structure, family values and spiritual beliefs. A Javanese house is based on a traditional philosophy that sees the cosmos as a harmonious and interrelated totality. This viewpoint is reflected in the Javanese house, which emphasises balance, harmony and spiritual importance. Typically, the house is designed around a central courtyard as a gathering space for family and friends.

The layout of the Javanese house is also important. Typically, the front of the house is reserved for guests and visitors, while the back is reserved for the family. This distinction between public and private areas reflects the Javanese emphasis on hierarchy and social order. A Javanese house is distinguished not only by its physical layout but also by its spiritual significance. It is believed that ancestral spirits and other supernatural beings inhabit the house, and proper rituals and offerings are required to keep their favour. Offerings of rice, flowers and other items, for example, are made to the spirits on a regular basis. The Javanese house reflects humans' relationship with their neighbour and God. Mangunwijaya designed St. Maria Assumpta Church as a 'house of God' and a 'house of people' based on this concept. The section that represents the 'house of God' contains the main service hall, the altar, and the tabernacle. The section representing the 'house of people' is the hall with a lower roof. This space can be used for any purpose other than liturgical ceremonies.

I once took some Muslim students from a nearby state university to St. Maria Assumpta Church. Following the visit, I inquired about their impressions of the church. They all felt at ease in the church and did not feel out of place being Muslims in a Catholic church, so I concluded that the Javanese house concept used in the church's architectural design served its purpose well: fostering humane communication across religious divides.

The dynamic and informal design of the church building also influenced the Muslim students' impression. A typical church layout has one main door leading to the altar in the centre. Furthermore, most church facades are prominently designed, with one section serving as the front face. This style is better suited to churches built in the city centre or in the city square. However, St. Maria Assumpta Church is not in the city square but on the outskirts of the 'kampung'. Kampung is a particular type of neighbourhood. Historically, a kampung was where the locals were separated from the Dutch. As a result, they are typically found outside city limits. Cities engulf these kampungs as they grow. A kampung is a neighbourhood of ordinary people: some middle-class, many lower-class and some poor. It is densely populated, with many young migrants from rural areas seeking a better life in the city. Mangunwijaya considered these circumstances when designing St. Maria Assumpta Church, which did not have a single main facade. He imagined a church with its face turned in all directions because the Church is open to everyone and because St. Maria Assumpta Church was in the heart of the village; Mangunwijaya wanted to avoid drawing attention to himself, preferring to be present with humility and simplicity.

Conclusion

Considering the context provided in this paper, I conclude that a theological method for evaluating contemporary church architecture is required. Architecture should be interested in theology, and theology should be interested in architecture. In this case, I draw on Bert Daelemans' observation that a theology interested in architecture is a reflection on God, who communicates with humans through their creations. This theology is interested in humans not in abstracto but as placed beings who do not mind being placed somewhere. As a result, a theological method aids in revealing the theological depth of contemporary church architecture.

Unfortunately, Mangunwijaya's approach to church-building design does not appear widely accepted by the local church hierarchy. As a result, Mangunwijaya's architectural works must be studied to determine their theological-ecclesiological, sociocultural and architectural meanings in the Indonesian sociocultural context.

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