THE POSSIBILITY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: A PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION

Risalatul Hukmi

Fakultas Filsafat, Universitas Gadjah Mada
Email: risalatulhukmi@ugm.ac.id

Abstrak

Kemungkinan dialog antaragama tergantung, setidaknya, pada justifikasi eksistensi agama itu sendiri. Dengan demikian, teori konstruksionis agama menjadi persoalan mendasar dalam mengonstruksi kerangka teori dialog antaragama karena agama diekspresikan sebagai eksistensi imajiner, dalam arti hanya merupakan konstruksi sarjana dan akademisi. Jika keberadaan agama itu sendiri tidak dapat dijustifikasi secara ontologis, berarti dialog antaragama tidak mungkin terjadi. Oleh karena itu, untuk menjawab persoalan tersebut, kita harus membuktikan secara ontologis eksistensi agama tanpa harus menolak teori konstruksionis. Dalam tulisan ini, penulis menggunakan analisis ontologi sosial yang dikemukakan oleh John Searle dan teori ontologi historis yang dikemukakan oleh Ian Hacking untuk membuktikan bahwa agama sebagai realitas sosial yang dikonstruksi eksis secara objektif. Dengan demikian, dialog antaragama dimungkinkan dalam kerangka hermeneutika eksistensial yang mengandaikan suatu proses pemahaman yang terus berubah sesuai dengan ontologi historis sebagai landasannya.

Kata kunci: *Dialog Antar Agama, Ontologi Sosial, Hermeneutika Eksistensial, Teori Konstruksionis.*

Abstract

The possibility of interreligious dialogue depends, at least, on the justification for the existence of religion itself. Thus, the constructionist theory of religion becomes a fundamental problem in constructing a framework of interreligious dialogue theory because religion is expressed as an imaginary existence, in the sense that it is only the construction of scholars and academics. If the existence of religion itself cannot be justified ontologically, it means

that interreligious dialogue is impossible. Hence, to answer that problem, we inevitably have to prove ontologically the existence of religion without having to reject the constructionist theory. In this paper, I use the social ontology analysis proposed by John Searle and the historical ontology theory proposed by Ian Hacking to prove that religion as a constructed social reality exists objectively. Thus, interreligious dialogue is possible within a framework of existential hermeneutics that presupposes a process of understanding that changes continuously in accordance with historical ontology as its foundation.

Keywords: *Interreligious Dialogue, Social Ontology, Existential Hermeneutics, Constructionist Theory.*

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INTRODUCTION

The very idea of interreligious dialogue, according to Swamy (2016), relies on two interrelated fundamental problems; whether religion is perceptible as a distinct phenomenon and whether the 'world religions' category is an adequate framework to comprehend religious pluralities. The first problem implies that the ontological status of religion is required to justify that the existence of religious is plausibly brought into dialogue, while the second problem assists to the way we deal with the pluralities of religious traditions so that they might communicate reciprocally.

The existence of religious phenomena has been recently questioned by some scholars in the religious studies called Social Constructionist Theory of Religion (SCTR). Jonathan Smith, for instance, states that, "There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy (J. Smith, 1982: xi). Following Smith, Fitzgerald also said that "the category of religion never really had any reference in reality, he only referred to general illusion which must therefore be abandoned (Fitzgerald, 1997: 14, 104)." SCTR succinctly argues that the very

notion of religion is invented, constructed, and imagined by Western scholars (Hukmi, 2021: 24).

If we agree with SCTR thesis that the reality of 'the religious' is indistinguishable phenomena, then the interreligious dialogue consequently would be impossible since we cannot single out religious dialogue from any other dialogues. In short, interreligious dialogue would pick out nothing from any socio-cultural phenomena. In this understanding, the possibility of interreligious dialogue will subsequently be limited to the theoretical framework used to approach religion. On the one hand, the social construction thesis of religion is barely refutable. On the other hand, religious practices are there without any hesitation. Hence, we need to examine whether or not the construction of religion proposed by SCTR implies an eliminativist ontology of religion.

However, justifying the ontological status of religion is not enough to defend the interreligious dialogue. Supposed that religious phenomena do exist and are real, how do we deal with the religious pluralities that bring out the communication problem among religious traditions? Are their concepts and practices of belief truly comparable so that allow them to comprehend one another?

In view of those problems, we need to take Swidler's proposition into consideration. Swidler (2013: 14) stated that the basic idea of interreligious dialogue genuinely relies on the assumption of an epistemological ignorance. Different from the notion of epistemic ignorance in feminist discourse which has a negative connotation (Hidayat, 2018: 147), Swidler defines it as a presumption that "nobody knows everything about anything." This assumption can be apprehended in two interpretive models at the same time; as a reason why dialogue should take place and as a condition for how the dialogue might occur. That is, since we do not have knowledge about what other people believe and think, the only way is to invite them to dialogue. In order for the dialogue to reach the point of understanding, each must position himself in

ignorance by retarding prejudices and letting others speak for themselves.

In this sense then interreligious dialogue inevitably needs to assume the phenomenological approach of religion. As stated by Pratt (1994), if the dialogue between religions is intended to go beyond mutual mis-conception and obtain a correct understanding of the beliefs of others, then it requires some tools of the phenomenologist of religion. Through a phenomenological approach, everyone involved in a dialogue is supposed to correctly establish their ability to 'hear' (Pratt, 1994: 5-7). In other words, this understanding is only possible if we believe that the "religion" really exists ontologically and is manifested in belief systems called religion. If dialogue is understood as a conversation, while conversation presupposes a language as a bridge so that the translation process is possible, it is only possible to build on the assumption that there is truly comparable in every belief. To quote the popular words from Max Müller, "He who knows one [religion], knows none (Stone, 2016: xix)." That is, our understanding of one religion becomes impossible if we do not find something that we can compare with other religions.

At this point, we can conclude that interreligious dialogue can only be constructed in two assumptions: epistemological ignorance and ontological phenomenology. However, these two assumptions still posit one serious problem, namely the possibility of 'misunderstanding'. The assumption that we do not really know about what other people believe can lead us to false prejudices. As well as the assumption that 'the religion' really exists, it might assume exclusive claims of truth with the supposition: "If the practice of other religions is also a form of religiosity, which is the most correct form?" In light of this problem, we need ethical conditions as to how this 'misunderstanding' does not occur and is potentially destructive.

Departing from such problems, we inevitably have to consider the proposal of Catherine Cornille, the Belgian theologian, about conditions for interreligious dialogue. To realize the possibility of

mutual understanding, learning, and creating space to foster understanding of the truth of others, in her book *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (2008), Cornille formulates two essential conditions; epistemological humility and generosity or hospitality. In addition to the two conditions, Cornille also proposes three other conditions; commitment, interconnection, and empathy (Cornille, 2013: 21-28).

In light of these problems, through this paper, I proposed two philosophical ways to defend the possibility of interreligious dialogue. The first is arguing the ontological status of religious phenomena and the second is providing a hermeneutical foundation to allow the dialogue among religious traditions possible. To come to this conclusion, I will use Searle's social ontology and Hacking's historical ontology to justify the mode of existence of religious phenomena. Following that ontological strategy, I will employ Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutic theory and Heideggerian existential hermeneutics to analyse how the possibility of dialogue can be justified ontologically, epistemologically, and ethically.

'THE RELIGIOUS' AND CONSTRUCTIONIST THEORY

The claims proposed by constructionists clearly presuppose eliminative ontological implications, namely rejecting the existence of religion in reality and only accepting it as a category constructed by both society and academics. This theory is very popular among contemporary scholars of religion scholars who use the Foucauldian genealogical and Derridean deconstructionist approaches. These two approaches presuppose religion as something that is always changing and being constructed. Even Fitzgerald said that:

> "The whole subject of religion is based on a chimera. The notion of 'religion in all its complexity' being studied by complementary 'approaches' builds into the equation right from the beginning of a reification, a preexisting entity that manifests itself in special forms, a presupposition, an illusion, or a theological construct that, when unpacked, reveals a belief

in a transcendent intelligent being who gives the ultimate meaning to human history. 'Religion' is itself the misconception that lies at the heart of the debate (Fitzgerald, 2000: 49)."

Fitzgerald equates our belief in the reality of religion as much as belief in chimeras (mythological animals). The similar look that compares the existence of religion with the existence of a chimera was also expressed by Dubuisson (2003: 11). Such point of view envisages that the concept of religion is just a construction that exists in one's imagination and never really exists because it does not have any reference in the real world. This is proven by Taira (2013: 26) and Arnal (2013: 128) in their study which states that religion is an empty signifier that does not have any reference and does not state anything because it is always constructed socially, historically, and ideologically. If we accept the assumption of Asad (2001: 209) which states that something that only exists in the world of imagination then considers it to exist in the real world is a mistake, then we must also accept that religion actually never exists other than through the imaginative category.

All study results produced by constructionists at least lead us to the same conclusion, as stated by W. Smith (1963: 326), "there is no such entity. . . In any case, the use of a plural [religions], or with an article [a religion] is false." In a similar vein to Smith, Fitzgerald also stated that "the word has no genuine analytic work to do and it continues to use only contributes to the general illusion that it has a genuine referent. . . [A] kind of analytic study of the word [religion] must be effectively abandoned (Fitzgerald, 1997: 14, 104)."

The consequences of constructionist theory clearly lead to skepticism about religious studies or even interreligious dialogue specifically. If the religion category does not exist and does not represent any reality, what does the dialogue really consist of? As envisaged by Stowers (2008: 434), stating that the term 'religion' does not have any reference in the real world presupposes the logical consequence that the study of religion has no object study,

and the material consequence is leaving religious studies as a scientific discipline. In line with the criticism of constructionists, we can assume that interreligious dialogue never existed and would not have been possible without sticking to the theoretical framework and categories we use to describe social reality as religious. Eventually, according to this view, we are trapped in a conceptual vicious circle. That is, we create a category of so-called religion, then we look for social realities that fit that category, then when there is a dialogue between different social groups we call it interreligious dialogue.

To answer that problem, we inevitably need to prove that the constructionist theory of religion does not immediately presuppose the elimination of religion as a category. This proof demands a study of social ontology from religion, as conducted by Kevin Schilbrack. Through the critical realism approach adopted by Roy Bhaskar, Schilbrack criticized the eliminativist views of constructionists. "I agree," he said, "that the term [religion] is a social construction, and that some uses of the term are problematic, but I argue that the criticisms of the term should lead scholarship to refine and not abandon the term (Schilbrack, 2010: 1117)."

From the criticisms of constructionists, Schilbrack sees at least three main points proposed. *First*, constructionists make claims that religion is a social construction. *Second*, religion is a term that distorts the cultural phenomenon. *Third*, the construction of religion is ideologically motivated. Schilbrack essentially agrees with all these criticisms, but he rejects the eliminative view that religion does not have any reference in the real world. Schilbrack insisted that although no one used the label or labeled themselves with it, the reality without the label still existed (Schilbrack, 2010: 1125). The errors of the constructionists, represented by Fitzgerald and Smith, were caused by binary ontology views. That is, if the existence of something is not independent of humans in the sense that it does not exist in the real world then it is an imagination or illusion. Schilbrack argues that social types, like religion, do not lie in these two binary presuppositions, religion is the third choice. Like state

boundaries, it cannot exist without language and humans but it still exists in a convention; whether I agree or not, those boundaries still exist (Schilbrack, 2013: 109).

The criticism raised by Schilbrack against constructionists also seems to be confirmed by Engler. Constructionist scholars of religion, according to Engler, are confused between constructionism and relativism. Constructionist views do not necessarily require being an anti-realist who rejects the existence of religion in the real world (Engler, 2005: 29). At this point, Schilbrack considers that the realism approach becomes important. In "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion" (2016), Schilbrack offers a solution by borrowing the analytical framework proposed by Bhaskar about the separation of the transitive and intransitive dimensions. Within the framework of the analysis, Schilbrack argues that the transitive dimension in religious studies includes claims made by scholars about religion. In this dimension, the constructionist theory of religion can be accepted in the sense that the concept of religion is indeed a category constructed by scholars or academics. However, the intransitive dimension of religious studies remains an objective reality that makes construction and conceptualization possible. Without these objective conditions, the conceptualization of religion would not be possible (Schilbrack, 2016: 8).

At this point, we can conclude that the constructionist theory of religion does not necessarily presuppose an eliminative ontology view which has consequences for the impossibility of interreligious dialogue. But we still have problems with how to prove that there is something called 'the religion' that is objective in society. How can we justify that every person or every group of people has a religious dimension that can be brought together in a dialogue? I will answer that problem through the social ontology theory framework proposed by John Searle and further evaluate it using the existential hermeneutic approach.

However, this problem will be even more complicated if we accept the fact that social kind is an interactive kind, as stated by Ian Hacking. Interactive kind is assumed that the object that we study

is not a passive object as in natural science. The objects of social science, including religious studies, are interactive objects that can influence the conceptual framework that we build about reality itself. In this case, Hacking reminds us that:

"*What was known about people of a kind may be false because of that kind has changed in virtue of how they have been classified, what they believe about themselves, or because of how they have been treated as so classified. There is a looping effect* (Hacking, 1999: 104)."

That is, our conception of social reality, including religion, can affect the objects that we include in the conceptualization. When we classify a society into religious categories, they can change according to or even deny the classification we constitute. In the case of interreligious dialogue, for example, our concept of interreligious dialogue may actually cause people to force themselves to meet the criteria that we create as a form of interreligious dialogue, while in reality, it is, for example, a political or economic transaction which is then wrapped up with arguments religion to look like an interreligious dialogue.

In this case, Hacking offers a solution through its concept called dynamic nominalism or historical ontology. Hacking holds that the looping effect presupposes us to always track historically the changes that occur in our conceptions or classifications of reality. Through this tracking, it is still possible for us to capture the actual reality. Hacking realizes that classifying people provides the possibility for them to become self-destructive or even self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, Hacking states:

> "In fact, "ontology" turns out to be perfect, for we are concerned with two types of being: on the one hand, rather Aristotelian universals—trauma or child development—and on the other hand, the particulars that fall under them—this psychic pain or that developing child. The universal is not timeless but historical, and it and its instances, the children or the victims of trauma, are formed and changed as the universal emerges. I have called this process dynamic nominalism, because it so strongly connects what comes into

existence with the historical dynamics of naming and the subsequent use of name. But it is not my plan to hang a philosophical activity on nomenclature taken from the fifteenth century, and which recalls the glory days of late scholasticism (Hacking, 2002: 27)."

Departing from Foucauldian assumptions, Hacking defines historical ontology as a way that provides possibilities for choices, and to become, appear in history (Hacking, 2002: 23). In light of this idea, Hauswald proposes casual property clusters (CPCs) as a metaphysical conception of real kinds that enables us to become realists without falling for essentialism (Hauswald, 2016: 208). That is, we can still justify the reality of religion as something objective but in its ever-changing possibilities related to theories, classifications, concepts, and developing discourse that can be the cause of change itself.

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND HERMENEUTICS

Justification for the existence of social kinds, according to Searle, can be answered through the question, "what is the mode of existence of social entities? (Searle, 2010: 5)." In order to answer that question, Searle chose to explain it through the ontology of a particular class of phenomena that he calls 'institutional facts' or 'institutional reality.' Institutional facts, according to Searle, are facts that inhabit the same world of physical and psychic phenomena; like money, the Pope's initiation rites, and pilgrimages. Meanwhile, institutional reality is created by attributing functions to objects and people where both of them cannot demonstrate these functions only through their physical structure (Searle, 2010: 7).

In light of this assumption, we can understand the importance of the concept of language within the framework of the social ontology theory proposed by Searle. Language allows us to change institutional facts into institutional reality through what is called collective intentionality, which is a set of individual intentionalities in a society which is then manifested in language. To justify how

this individual intentionality might become collective intentionality, Searle said:

> "We live, as my colleague Donald Davidson likes to put it, in one world at most. That is enough for us. And the basic structure of this world is pretty much as described by physics and chemistry. Ultimate reality consists of entities we find it convenient to call 'particles. They are organized in systems. These systems are defined by their causal relations, some of those systems are organic systems, some of the organic systems have consciousness. With consciousness comes intentionality, and when we have consciousness and intentionality, we have reached the evolutionary stage of animals, mammals, and especially primates like ourselves, who form social groups (Searle, 1998: 144)."

Searle believes that if we live in one world, in the sense of the physical world, then it is possible for us to have the same intentionality. With this assumption then we can understand the concepts of the social world imagined by Searle to be right above or supported by the physical world. The philosophical assumptions put forward by Searle presuppose that if we are both metabolized, have the same senses, and experience the same suffering and happiness, we are also very likely to have the same intentionality.

We can justify that if there is an individual who has a specific intentionality called 'the religion', then it is very likely that the intentionality is shared by other individuals. From the similarity of intentionality then collective intentionality emerges and exists as a social entity through the bridge of language, and only through the language of that entity is its existence guaranteed. Thus, religion as a collective intentionality can also be objectively justified by its existence as a social entity.

Through ontological arguments put forward by Searle about language as the mode of existence of social reality, we obtain a foundation to state that interreligious dialogue is philosophically possible to be done with the assumption that there is something

comparable from all belief systems in society. We only need language to bridge every collective intentionality manifested in different forms. For example, Jews have the concept of Jehovah's collective intentionality, and Muslims have the concept of Allah; through language, these two collective intentionalities can be bridged by the word 'God'. This is the way, according to Searle's theory, interreligious dialogue works.

However, we still have issues about how the bridging process between collective intentionality is possible. In this problem, we inevitably enter into the problem of 'how to understand' which is the main concern of hermeneutics. We need philosophical foundations on how the process of translating language is possible. If dialogue is understood as a conversation, while conversation calls for an understanding, dialogue in itself will always presuppose hermeneutics.

At this point, we should consider the conception of existential hermeneutics proposed by Heidegger. With the word 'existential', Heidegger presupposes a hermeneutic that leaves the interpretation model towards an ontic understanding of something. That is, hermeneutics as a fundamental ontology is treated as a direct and authentic way of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) than solely as a way of knowing (Heidegger, 1962: 125). Heidegger emphasized a mode of understanding, which emphasized being-with human relatedness, which he later called 'a special hermeneutic of empathy' to replace the 'other minds' model of understanding inherited by classical hermeneutics, such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey (Agosta, 2010: 20).

In line with Heidegger's view of hermeneutics, Gadamer also explicitly stated that the hermeneutical experience itself is a dialogue. Gadamer uses Plato's dialogue as a model of how a hermeneutical process takes place. In a conversation, someone needs to seriously listen to the claims issued by other partners within a conversation. Understanding something for Gadamer is a give-and-take process that is only possible from the question-

answer process, which means that it occurs in a dialogue (Gonzales, 2006: 322-323).

From Heidegger and Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics, we can say that dialogue is a hermeneutical experience through which understanding can be obtained. To arrive at this understanding, a dialogue needs to be understood and carried out in a condition of relatedness, which means demanding a direct existential experience about something. Understanding through dialogue is not obtained by positioning oneself as someone else, but by directly experiencing it with others. For example, if we want to know the taste of honey, we have to taste it ourselves. We will never really have an understanding of the taste of honey only through the description given by others. Likewise, with the wisdom of Christians who sing spiritual songs in the church, we will not get an understanding of that wisdom without directly experiencing it.

In light of this understanding, we can then understand the main concern of gender problem in the interreligious dialogue discourse. As Speelman said, women are more likely to talk about their lives when they talk about religion, while men tend to discuss religious doctrines (Speelman, 2010: 267). This means that the understanding gained in a dialogue is of higher quality when we talk about daily life because we all experience existentially first-hand so the process of sharing will be much easier. This indeed could explain why women are more effective in becoming agents of conflict reconciliation, as happened in Ambon, than men (Weldemina & Febby, 2019).

Accordingly, we can assume that to reach an understanding in interreligious dialogue, we need a phenomenological approach that presupposes us to directly experience something that we want to understand and let the object speak to us. As Ludwig put it:

> "Expectations about the results of religious dialogue depend on how one views the relationship between the common human religious experiences, on the one hand, and the

concrete, specific forms taken in different religions, on the other. (Ludwig in Pratt, 1994: 6)"

This phenomenological approach is indirectly an ethical formulation in a dialogue. As Pratt said, "interreligious dialogue requires each party both to articulate carefully their respective positions and to hear carefully and attend to the position of their dialogical partners (Pratt, 1994: 6)." It means that we need to formulate epistemological conditions that allow this phenomenological approach to work in interreligious dialogue. Without the formulation of these conditions, the phenomenological approach will only stop at ethical attitudes about how we should dialogue.

In view of that, we need to consider the formula proposed by Cornille regarding the conditions of interreligious dialogue. At the very least, Cornille formulated five conditions, which in my opinion are ethical provisos: 1) Humility, which is a condition that presupposes a humble recognition of the limitations of the way to obtain the ultimate truth of one's religion; 2) Commitment, which is a condition that distinguishes dialogue between religions from personal exploration of religious teachings of others; 3) Interconnection, which is a condition which presupposes that all religions have the same problem, in the sense that they are confronted with the same fundamental and existential questions; 4) Empathy, which is a condition that presupposes the possibility to understand one another across religious traditions; 5) Hospitality, which is a condition that requires recognition of truth in other religions, in the sense of humility towards the truth that is believed by others (Cornille, 2013: 21-28).

CONCLUSION

The five ethical formulations proposed by Cornille are actually in the same vein with what I have discussed earlier about the ontological and hermeneutical justifications that I can at least formulate as such: Religion is possible to become a collective

intentionality because we live in the same world that presupposes the same problems. Collective intentionality then presupposes an epistemological limitation that must be bridged by language. Language is what allows us to be able to understand one another across religious traditions. Meanwhile, to arrive at an understanding of the intentionality of others, we need a hermeneutical experience that presupposes us to be directly involved in the dialogue process. That involvement presupposes a phenomenological attitude to give other people space to talk about their beliefs and acknowledge the truth of what they believe.

Thus, the possibility of interreligious dialogue can be justified philosophically through the framework of social ontology and existential hermeneutics. The issue of religious dialogue which cannot be distinguished from other dialogues cannot be the reason for the impossibility of interreligious dialogue just as we cannot separate economic conversation from social, political, and cultural problems; because they all have a causal role. In fact, a healthy interreligious dialogue is possible if it involves everyday conversation since it presupposes more or less the same existential experience so that sympathy and empathy are easier to develop.

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