



Ethics of belonging: education, religion, and politics in Manado, Indonesia

by Erica M. Larson, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2024, 254 pp., \$28.00 (pbk), ISBN 9780824899134

R. Alpha Amirrachman

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BOOK REVIEW

Ethics of belonging: education, religion, and politics in Manado, Indonesia, by Erica M. Larson, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2024, 254 pp., \$28.00 (pbk), ISBN 9780824899134

Erica M. Larson's *Ethics of Belonging* examines how schools function in Manado, North Sulawesi, a Christian-majority area in Muslim-majority Indonesia. The book is the result of seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2014 and 2018 in Manado and in the nearby smaller city of Tomohon, investigating what Larson coins an 'ethics of belonging' in everyday school life. Larson conducted participant observation in classrooms, school ceremonies, extracurricular activities and interreligious exchange programmes. She conducted in-depth interviews with students, teachers, school administrators, parents, religious leaders and civil servants involved in education and religious affairs. She also analysed school documents, curricula, textbooks and local media.

Larson focused her research on three schools: a public high school with a Protestant majority, a private Catholic high school and a public madrasah. This focus is reflected in the book's structure, which consists of an introduction that sets the scene and lays out the theoretical framework of 'ethics of belonging', followed by six chapters arranged primarily by institution and topic, and a concluding chapter. Chapter 2 depicts how schools become arenas for debate about the national imaginary and politics of difference. Larson blends a theoretical consideration of secularism, religion and education with an analysis of the shift from the authoritarian New Order regime (1966–1998) to current democratic Indonesia. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are in-depth ethnographic analyses of three different high schools, where teachers and students are involved in negotiation about moral personhood, national belonging and religious differences, influenced by the regional political context, the national curriculum and teacher interpretation. Chapter 3, on the public high school, shows how the Protestant majority shapes everyday negotiations of belonging, public religious expression and coexistence within a state school setting. Chapter 4 examines Lokon School, a private boarding school with informal Catholic affiliation, which intends to produce Christian elites from the eastern part of Indonesia. Chapter 5 turns to the public madrasah, where the approach towards teaching tolerance 'relies on a model of moral action referring to the perfection and truth of Islamic teaching' (28). Chapter 6 elaborates ethnographic data from an interfaith exchange programme that brings together Protestant, Catholic and Muslim university students. Chapter 7 takes a closer look at the tension between visions for North Sulawesi as a bastion of religious harmony and as a Christian stronghold.

During the Dutch colonial period, missionaries started Christian schools in North Sulawesi. Later, after Indonesia declared its independence, the people were confronted with the challenge to adjust their religious identity to a newly formed national attachment. In Chapter 2, Larson points out that this historical shift influenced how people in Manado perceive themselves. Christianity is not an alien foreign imposition; it is just an integral part of them. By linking education to this background, the book makes a solid case that schools can prevent unnecessary religious tensions and teach students to be good, responsible citizens.

According to Larson, '[e]ducation is undoubtedly central to disseminating notions of citizenship and circulating discourses and practices related to belonging' (15), leading to the questions '[h]ow do educational institutions circulate ethical frameworks, and how do

individuals and groups employ ...varying approaches towards religious difference and belonging?' (21). She examines how schools foster 'ethics of belonging' through deliberative dialogues on religious differences, rather than rigid rules, highlighting tensions between aspirational (inclusive) and majoritarian (majority-dependent) coexistence.

Hence, this important anthropological study shows that school environments can help bring a country together while still letting people retain their religious identity. The selected schools encourage students to interact and respect each other by having honest and respectful conversations. Larson illustrates how flag ceremonies have become a catalyst to naturally foster a sense of unity among students of different faiths, showing that being Indonesian and having religious identity can go hand in hand – in accordance with the country's motto of 'unity in diversity'. Unlike other places in Indonesia that suffered from religious conflict in the early *reformasi* era, Manado's experience was relatively relaxed. Notably, after the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime, as people were able to express themselves freely, schools in Manado became a venue to openly cultivate tolerance.

The book underscores that Christians in Manado regard people of different faiths in a positive manner. For example, Larson describes school events where students of different faiths were invited to come together for joyful celebration, learning to appreciate the beliefs and practices of Muslims and followers of different branches of Christianity. She shows how schools manage to administer children hailing from Christian and other cultural backgrounds to engage and connect with Islamic communities. Thus, this book is relevant to scholars interested in how distinct regions like Manado can take directives from national policies and customize them to local needs, resulting in the enhancement of communal inclusion.

Ethics of belonging likewise subtly highlights gender dynamics, such as female students taking leadership roles in interfaith activities, which challenges traditional patriarchal structures commonly found in religious communities. This aligns with the book's broader argument that ethical inclusion extends beyond religion to challenge patriarchal norms, as seen, for instance, in university exchange programmes. In a sphere where patriarchal rules rooted in colonial and pre-colonial habits prevail, female participants in such programmes actively possess the power to form and to voice their take on interfaith communication and agreement.

Towards the end of the book, Larson emphasizes ethical deliberation rather than a single moral formula. She writes that 'approaches toward diversity are not only explicitly talked about, they are enacted. Different ethical frameworks coexist, imbricate, and come to heads through discourse, but also through embodied practices ...' (210). Rather than imposing a single interpretive framework, Larson shows how competing ethical visions are negotiated in everyday institutional life. This is one of the book's major strengths, and it gives readers a compelling account of how belonging and religious differences are worked through in contexts marked by pluralism.

The most appealing aspect of the book is the focus that Larson puts upon the institutions she is describing – schools that allow for different groups to strike a balance between religious identity and nationwide objectives. The effect in general enriches the narrative and gives readers a sense of how different spaces can influence moral views. The investigative part seems well done and balanced with on-site observations, as well as with historical data.

All in all, there are some areas that if pushed for would contribute more to this valuable exploration. Reaching out to wider segments of society to see the minority–majority dynamics would reveal how ethical considerations are embedded into practice. The implications of Larson's findings are that they can be used as a reference to assess other communities with similar religious tensions and suggest ways to counter them. However, there are

implicit critiques of policies that prioritize uniformity over diversity, which could be an important element for non-Western scholars to be further examined in their own societies.


The book is well-positioned to appeal to both academic audiences and policymakers. It features a meticulously structured approach that illuminates the interplay between faiths. This resonates with works like Robert Hefner's on civil Islam (2000), providing a counter-narrative to pessimistic views of religious pluralism in Indonesia. Those researching in fields of anthropology or education will appreciate the value of Larson's insights. The book is methodically organized and serves as a testament to how social harmony can be subtly achieved.

Reference

Hefner, Robert W. 2000. *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

R. Alpha Amirrachman

Faculty of Education, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

 alpha.amirrachman@uiii.ac.id

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