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**Title:** A Post-Tsunami Sea Change? Towards Post-Secular Disaster Response in Indonesia

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## **A Post-Tsunami Sea Change? Towards Post-Secular Disaster Response in Indonesia**

### **Abstract**

The role of religious actors in disaster response, an issue that is generally understood as being dominated by secular perspectives, is increasingly receiving attention. Surprisingly considering its likelihood to offer relevant insights, however, the concept of post-secularism has seldom been adopted as an analytical framework. In response, in this study we adopt a Habermasian lens to examine the relations between religious and secular actors in Indonesia with respect to the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami, with particular focus on domestic faith organisations. Through interviewing representatives from three prominent religious organisations and a figure from a relevant independent statutory authority, we highlight these institutions' contributions to the disaster response, alongside their struggles to legitimise their leadership potential. Thus, by demonstrating the existence of constraints on religious groups playing a consequential role in a public concern that would benefit from multiple perspectives and competencies, we exemplify how Habermas' vision of a post-secular society is playing out in a disaster context and identify areas in which collaboration between ostensibly secular and religious actors might be improved.

**Keywords:** Post-secular; disaster response; tsunami; collaborative governance; Indonesia; Asia.

## **A Post-Tsunami Sea Change? Towards Post-Secular Disaster Response in Indonesia**

### **Introduction**

We have to start providing disaster education this year, especially in disaster-prone areas. We need to utilise schools and religious leaders...The Almighty God has blessed Indonesia with fertile lands; yet, this country is also situated on the Pacific Ring of Fire and we must keep a watchful eye on it. (Joko Widodo 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Opening the National Coordination Meeting of the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) in February 2019 at the Presidential Palace, the Indonesian President, Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo, highlighted the importance of building the population's awareness that the country is vulnerable to natural hazards such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis (Iradat 2019). While a speech from a political leader concerning the need to prepare for and mitigate disasters may not appear particularly momentous, two aspects merit consideration. First, despite officially constituting a secular country, Indonesia's population manifests high levels of religiosity and fatalistic attitudes often hold sway over scientific understandings of disasters here (Adiyoso and Kanegae 2013), potentially precluding Jokowi's message from being received as desired. However, perhaps more compelling was Jokowi's request for broad collaboration in disaster response, not only involving government agencies and disaster experts, but religious leaders and other community organisations (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia 2019). Such groups have long been viewed with suspicion by ostensibly secular actors in officially secular countries, in the case of Indonesia most notably during the 'New Order' era under President Suharto's authoritarian regime (1967–1998) (Azra 2004), but also more recently in terms of the

increasingly pluralised and polarised socioreligious and political landscape of the country. For instance, considerable fragmentation between and among religious and secular groups was apparent both in the 2019 presidential election results (Aspinall 2019) and in portrayals of Jokowi in the run-up to the 2014 presidential election as ‘a secularist, communist and agent of foreign interests’ (Mietzner and Muhtadi 2018, p. 492). Although not formally stated, Jokowi’s speech intimated that to date, an insufficient aggregation of actors (including religious groups) had been included in disaster response, an issue with which all citizens are necessarily concerned. His speech thus appeared to mark a sea change in Indonesian disaster management, actively appealing to religious groups to contribute to an issue that has long been predominated by a secular worldview.

Jokowi’s speech provides a relevant jumping-off point to discuss the role of religious organisations in disaster response in Indonesia. With specific attention to the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami, which resulted in 108 deaths and 279 injuries in South Lampung, Sumatra (Antara 2018), we consider how the actions of and constraints on domestic religious actors exemplified several aspects of Jürgen Habermas’ (2008) vision of a post-secular society. We apply Habermas’ notion in order to demonstrate both the potential value of including religious organisations and perspectives in disaster response and the consequent need to facilitate rather than marginalise them. The following section briefly discusses the emergence of the post-secular concept and its potential – albeit under-explored – relevance to disaster response. After introducing the study area and the place of religion in Indonesian politics, we present the results of our interview-based inquiry. Finally, our findings in relation to the post-secular enable us to draw important conclusions regarding areas in which greater collaboration still needs to be developed between governmental and religious actors.

## **Disaster response and the post-secular**

In this investigation we build on Wilkinson's (2018a) study of secularity within the international humanitarian system to argue that aspects of Habermas' post-secular vision should be considered in domestic disaster response, in order to provide both effective and sensitive humanitarian action. Before presenting our study site of South Lampung and its relevance to Habermas' ideas, it is necessary to contextualise this philosopher's thought. Modernisation and secularisation were long understood as interrelated processes that, following the European example, would eventually be seen across the world (Weber 1905/2002; Berger 1967; see Gill 2001; Torpey 2010). Although what is today meant by 'secularisation' is not uncontested (Hervieu-Léger 2000; Bruce 2002; Taylor 2007), Casanova's (1994) three elements have come to represent a commonly recognised standard. According to Casanova (1994, p. 211), *differentiation* refers to the separation of 'secular spheres from religious institutions and norms', *decline-of-religion* corresponds to the diminution of religious belief and/or practice among the people of a society, while *privatisation* pertains to religion's marginalisation as an increasingly private rather than public matter. Although these components may not be manifested in the same way or even occur in all societies deemed to be secularising (Casanova 1994; Bruce 2002; Torpey 2010), they have provided an important frame for discussion of religion's place in the contemporary world (Kong 2010; Wilford 2010).

However, in recent decades, the long-established view that the world is proceeding on a path of secularisation has been widely challenged (Martin 1969, 1991; Stark 1999; Gill 2001), even by authors who were long proponents of the theory (most notably Berger 1999). Certainly, rather than being deemed paradigmatic, Europe – which is arguably the only continent in the world that exemplifies Casanova's (1994) three attributes to any significant extent – has come to be

widely perceived as exceptional, against the oft-perceived religious fervour found elsewhere (Martin 1991; Berger 1999; Davie 2002). Although it is again questionable whether much of the religious vibrancy identified reflects continued or even higher rates of religiosity rather than merely greater attention to ‘newsworthy’ religious issues (Bruce 2013), these debates have helped de-centre the European experience (Torpey 2010) and attend to parts of the world that have received less academic attention. Furthermore, they have prompted scholars to reconsider concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘secular’, recognising how these are culturally, spatially and temporally contingent as opposed to fixed (Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007; Torpey 2010).

In attempting to make sense of the continued prominence of religion in societies that had long been deemed secular, Habermas (2008, p. 21) has proposed that affluent countries in Western Europe in particular can now be described as ‘post-secular’. To Habermas (2008, p. 21), ‘[i]n these societies, religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground’. Furthermore, citizens here have undergone ‘a change in consciousness’ regarding the (limited) entwining of modernisation and secularisation, the growing influence of religion in national public spheres, and the challenge of integrating diverse migrant communities in an increasingly globalised world (Habermas 2008, p. 20). Given religion’s continued ‘public influence and relevance’ rather than disappearance, it must therefore be treated seriously in order to ensure that ‘social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews’ (2008, p. 21). This, to Habermas (2008, p. 22), is especially pertinent given the ‘*uneasy modus vivendi*’ that characterises secularised states, in which secular citizens often refuse to recognise the views of their religious counterparts, resulting in a lack of genuine respect for difference and the general dominance of civil society and political institutions by secular voices. To tackle this issue, Habermas (2008, p.

27; see also Habermas 2006, p. 4) suggests that ‘complementary learning processes’ are necessary, demanding that secular people willingly listen to the views of their religious counterparts and regard them of value in an inclusive civil society. To this end, ‘both sides, each from its own viewpoint, must accept an interpretation of the relation between faith and knowledge that enables them to live together in a self-reflective manner’ (2008, p. 29). Only in these ways can neutrality in the public domain be achieved and religious worldviews given due consideration.

Habermas’ argument has stimulated considerable debate. In particular, important critiques have been made of his apparent secularist stance (Dillon 2010; Beckford 2012) – which ironically he criticises – such as his recommendation that ‘all norms that can be legally implemented must be formulated and *publicly justified* in a language that all the citizens understand’ (2008, p. 28), which would continue to privilege a ‘secular’ parlance. Moreover, his strict dichotomisation of secular and religious citizens (which is itself problematic) misleadingly implies that the latter have until now been uninvolved in civil society (Dillon 2010) as well as that individuals’ identities are fixedly either secular or religious, even though many (perhaps most) people incorporate aspects of both (Wilkinson 2018a). Others have questioned whether the dynamics Habermas presents are even new (Kong 2010; Beckford 2012).

Nevertheless, Habermas’ (2006, 2008) arguments are helpful in that they recognise the general dominance of society by secular values and organisations, the responsibility of secular people to become more religiously aware in order to facilitate cooperation rather than conflict, and the associated, *continued* value of religious discourses in the public domain beyond instrumental usage for secular goals (Junker-Kenny 2011; Lee 2017; Wilkinson 2018a). Certainly, despite the fact that Habermas (2008) focuses on the Western European experience and his portrayal of a post-secular society appears most relevant to this region, increasingly scholars have considered the

possible existence of a post-secular *world* (e.g., Bettiza and Dionigi 2014). It is well-known that natural hazards afflict wide parts of the world where rates of religiosity remain high (compare e.g. Pew Research Center 2018 and Ritchie and Roser 2019); the two dynamics may even be connected (Bentzen 2019). However, although the potential value of religion in disaster response is increasingly receiving academic attention (e.g. Rokib 2012; Bush, Fountain and Feener 2015; Joakim and White 2015; Gianisa and Le De 2017) and relevant notions of collaboration between secular and religious perspectives have been applied to a range of issues, including welfare services (Cloke and Beaumont 2012) and sustainable development (Ager and Ager 2016), disaster response has very rarely been understood through a post-secular frame. Wilkinson (2018a) has offered an exception, demonstrating how following Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013), secular organisations engaged with religious beliefs and practices in varied ways, from a strict secularity that marginalised religious language and worldviews, to a degree of adaptation, such as by accommodating (although rarely actively welcoming) religious figures, prayers and rituals. In their drawing of boundaries of acceptability, these organisations' engagement with religious partners was thus somewhat limited, which Wilkinson (2018a) argues exemplifies Habermasian post-secularism, because although secular groups may attempt to behave in a somewhat culturally sensitive manner, religious groups must still make the greater effort to adapt. Furthermore, taking a theological perspective, Gregersen (2017) has called for greater attention to the potential intertwinement of religious and secular interpretations of disasters, while Eriksen (2019) has considered post-secularity by arguing that in disaster response, faith should be associated with the mental, spiritual and physical 'safe' spaces developed by believers and non-believers alike to cope with risks. Moreover, Hara (2016, p. 194) has argued that the growing role of religious figures in attending to ghost-afflicted people and coalescing psychotherapy with their traditional practice

following the 2011 earthquake and disaster in ‘largely secularized’ Japan provides evidence of post-secularity.

However, a significant issue in most studies connecting post-secularity with disaster response is that they accept the notion that we are in a ‘post-secular age’ quite uncritically. Indeed, the majority either fail to define post-secularity (e.g. Haynes 2013; Ager 2014) or do so in a very simplistic manner, referring to a resurgence of religion in the public sphere (Ager and Ager 2015; Norichika 2016) or secular and religious viewpoints working together (Gregersen 2017) without considering the highly politicised and contested dynamics beneath the surface. Others contrast this presumed post-secular society with the continued secularism of disaster response, such as by recognising the ‘functional secularism’ of the humanitarian system that privatises, marginalises or instrumentalises religion (Ager and Ager 2015, p. 9). The latter is undoubtedly an important issue, as faith actors may be compelled to adapt their language and actions, rendering them ‘ostensibly secular organizations’ in their humanitarian work (Tomalin 2020, p. 325), but without careful consideration of what it actually means to be post-secular, the conclusions of such studies are inevitably limited.

A related issue is that the majority of this research is centred on various *international* organisations and *transnational* networks *vis-à-vis* local communities, rather than adequately acknowledging the important contributions made by diverse *domestic* faith actors. Paying specific attention to national-scale or local faith actors (LFAs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) is however crucial when analysing whether a humanitarian mission exhibits post-secular traits. To be clear, this not to suggest that international faith-based organisations (FBOs) such as Caritas, World Vision International, the Salvation Army, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Muslim Hands and Muslim Aid are not important as well. These groups and others have rightly been recognised for

gathering donations, housing victims, providing food, water and sanitation and offering psychological and spiritual support in a range of contexts, such as following Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005 (Jellets 2008), the tsunamis that afflicted much of the Indian Ocean in 2004 (McGregor 2010) and Japan in 2011 (McLaughlin 2011), the major earthquake in Haiti in 2010 (Shafer 2010), tropical cyclones in the Pacific (Gero et al. 2013) and conflicts such as in Iraq (De Cordier 2009) and Sri Lanka (Clarke 2010). Nevertheless, it is striking how much more attention what are often highly visible and internationally renowned organisations have received in studies of post-secular disaster response compared to domestic faith groups. Although a range of studies have (separately) emphasised the crucial role played by the latter in disaster response across the world, whether through providing shelter and volunteers, or building community resilience through prayer and ritual (e.g. Rokib 2012; Joakim and White 2015; Feener and Daly 2016; Fountain and McLaughlin 2016; Gianisa and Le De 2017), their relationship to post-secular dynamics is in need of greater scrutiny.

The general dynamic of a prioritisation of international organisations in the literature most relevant to our post-secular focus is reflected in the ways in which domestic actors are regularly overlooked by global development and humanitarian organisations in practice. As Tomalin (2020) has recently highlighted, international religious organisations tend to be more proficient in ‘secular’ language and more likely to downplay their faith dimensions in certain interactions, enabling them to be seen as more acceptable partners to secular development actors. By contrast, domestic faith groups’ involvement can trigger scepticism or even hostility among secular international humanitarian agencies. For instance, the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief’s<sup>2</sup> third principle is to not use aid ‘to further a particular political or religious standpoint’, while the

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2014, p. 9) identifies exclusion, hate speech, incitement to violence, proselytisation, ‘harmful traditional practices’, gender stereotypes and a range of stigmas as potential challenges that may emerge when partnering with faith actors. Although there is the possibility of any or even all of these issues occurring (Kraft 2015; Gingerich et al. 2017), it is necessary to recognise that faith-based humanitarian actors are highly diverse in their approaches as well as across contexts (Thaut 2009) and that one should not generalise the actions of a few extreme cases to the entire gamut of religious organisations. Nonetheless, while the international humanitarian system adheres to supposedly secular standards and principles such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, religion is still largely deemed to fall outside this frame (e.g. Ager and Ager 2015; Kraft 2015; Wilkinson 2018a). Attending to domestic as well as international organisations is crucial to recentring the focus and recognising the contributions to disaster response that faith actors can make when given the opportunity.

One of the results of the current ‘religion–development–humanitarianism nexus’ is, as Tomalin (2020, p. 326) cogently argues with respect to global development, ‘a binary opposition between the “turn to religion” as evidence either of post-secular partnerships or of the instrumentalisation of religion by the secular global aid business’, both of which portray faith actors as somewhat passive players in development discourses. We hope to build on Tomalin’s (2020) argument and fill the lacuna of research considering domestic religious organisations’ engagement in disaster response through a Habermasian post-secular lens. Indeed, the post-secular model offers the opportunity to question the assumptions presented in the previous paragraph and to reorient attention to the role of government as well as merely international humanitarianism. In our efforts to address both the substance of the post-secular and the contributions that domestic religious organisations can contribute to disaster response when given a chance – thereby tying

Habermas' interest in (secularism in) the state to previous work on (secularism in) international humanitarianism – we focus on the role of three prominent Indonesian religious groups in aiding the victims of the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami. By highlighting these organisations' contributions to the disaster response alongside the difficulties they faced in legitimising their leadership potential, we demonstrate the continued constraints on religious groups playing a significant role in public concerns like tsunami response. In doing so, we additionally reinforce Wilkinson's (2018a) argument that interactions between religious and secular actors in disaster response evidence post-secularity, through viewing this issue from the perspective of religious rather than secular actors. Therefore, the aim here is not to gauge the extent to which Indonesia is post-secular, but rather to understand how Habermas' vision of a post-secular society is playing out in a disaster context, contrasting an officially secular government's response with that of nationally relevant religious organisations working at the local scale and identifying areas in which collaboration between these groups might be improved.

In the following section, we provide a brief introduction to some of the principle religious and secular aspects of Indonesia's contemporary political system in order to contextualise our study site. We also describe the methods utilised to collect data regarding key religious actors' involvement in responding to the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami.

### **Study site and methods**

Indonesia provides an excellent case of a country that is both prone to a number of natural hazards and whose political and social structure is characterised by a balance between religious and secular themes. Certainly, any study of politics and decision making in Indonesia must consider the prominent role played by religion – especially Islam – in most regions of the country. Although

some versions of Islam view the religion as oppositional to democracy, with any judgement ultimately in the hands of *Allah* and not an elected individual, others regard the two as compatible (Wahid 2001). Indonesia exemplifies the latter and has even been described as ‘a leading example of successful democracy in a Muslim majority state’ (Barton 2010, p. 472). Indeed, following its independence in 1945 and a protracted debate between religious and nationalist groups concerning whether the country should be Islamic or secular, its founders proclaimed that it would embody the five principles of the philosophical theory of Pancasila, of which the first is acceptance of a single God (Wahid 2001; Pepinsky, Liddle and Mujani 2012), even while chapter 1, article 1 of the country’s constitution declares that the country is a secular unitary republic with ‘sovereignty on the people’s will’. Moreover, despite this official, *general* secularity, today 87.2 per cent of the country’s population identifies as Muslim, including 95.7 per cent in our study area of South Lampung (Badan Pusat Statistik 2010).

Religious organisations play an important role in Indonesian society. The two most influential religious organisations in Indonesia are Muhammadiyah, which was established in 1912 and has historically embraced Islamic modernism, and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which was founded in 1926 in response and assumes a more traditional approach to Islamic scholarship (Barton 2010). Both have extensive educational and health care networks, but they have also long represented significant actors in Indonesian politics, even if increased scepticism towards religious groups among many political elites has prompted them to focus more on the former than the latter over time. In the post-independence period under the leadership of Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno (in office from 1945 to 1967), the country’s politics was dominated by the Nationalist Party (PNI), the Communist Party (PKI) and two Islamist parties (NU and Masyumi) (Barton 2010). Indeed, NU was primarily a political party until Sukarno’s successor, Suharto, pressured it to instead

operate as a religious organisation as part of his goal of reducing the role of religion, especially political Islam, in Indonesian politics (Azra 2004; see also Collins 2004). Consequently, community and Islamist parties had little room to publicise their manifestos – especially as Suharto additionally banned several political activities linked with Islamic streams in Indonesia – while nationalist parties were strengthened (Azra 2004). Nevertheless, despite the weakness of political Islam in this period, it was continued covertly in Islamic organisations such as NU and Muhammadiyah, whose leaders later became central to facilitating Indonesia’s political reform and development of a lively civil society sector in the democratic transition period following Suharto’s resignation as the country’s president in 1998 (Liddle and Mujani 2007; Barton 2010).

The collapse of Suharto’s New Order has facilitated greater vibrancy and diversity in Indonesian politics, reflected in the dramatic increase of parties competing in elections, from two parties and a functional organisation from 1977 to 1997, to 48 parties representing a wide plurality of ideologies and religious backgrounds in 1999 (Azra 2004). Although individuals’ voting behaviour in contemporary Indonesia does not appear to be greatly influenced by personal piety, Islam may afford some parties a political advantage (Liddle and Mujani 2007; Pepinsky, Liddle and Mujani 2012) and accordingly many candidates have started to develop stronger links with Islamist groups and institutions such as *pesantren*<sup>3</sup> (Buehler 2014). In response, under the incumbent president Jokowi (since 2014), the Indonesian government alongside various state agencies and civil society groups has worked to generally marginalise more conservative Islamic voices, which are perceived as compromising the country’s secularism and pluralism (Schäfer 2019; Fealy 2020). Simultaneously, the government has sought to partner itself with the more moderate Muhammadiyah and NU, but such efforts have been limited by its tendency to reduce them to fellow opponents of religious extremism rather than recognising the broader contributions

to politics that they hope to offer (Alvian 2020; Burhani 2020). In these ways, Indonesia provides an interesting example of a country where religion is undoubtedly public and has the potential to play a key role in politics, yet is kept somewhat in check, not dissimilar to Habermas' critique of post-secular societies.

Indonesia's Lampung province is a notoriously disaster-prone area. Prior to the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami, which was triggered by the eruption of the Anak Krakatau volcano on 22 December 2018, two major seismic events especially had already captured widespread attention. In 1883, the volcanic eruption of Krakatau off Lampung's southern coast inflicted casualties as far as 120 kilometres away (Latter 1981). Over a century later, in 1994, the 7.2-magnitude Liwa earthquake caused 134 fatalities and more than 500 injuries, mostly in West Lampung (*The New York Times*, 1994); controversially, the disaster response was compromised by a corruption scandal that prevented much of the aid reaching the victims (Tempo.co 2003). Then, in 2018, a broader corruption scandal in South Lampung undermined the relevant local government's ability to provide relief to communities affected by the Sunda Strait tsunami as well (Warganegara and Samson 2020). Although there is always the risk that the arrival of more actors will further complicate a tense and pressurised situation (Parmar et al. 2017), it may reasonably be argued that the deficiencies observed in the local authorities' responses to these events necessitates the involvement of agencies that enjoy high levels of public trust (Warganegara and Samson 2020). Religious leaders and organisations continue to be held in high regard by many people in Indonesia (Joakim and White 2015; Gianisa and Le De 2017) – not least in South Sumatra (Collins 2004) – and hence would appear to be convenient collaborators.

This potential for religious organisations to become important actors in disaster response has been recognised by Muhammadiyah and NU. Both organisations have aimed to maintain their

public relevance by becoming prominent actors in a range of ostensibly ‘secular’ activities, including health care and, crucially to this study, humanitarianism. To this end, both have established their own professional disaster response organisations: Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC), created soon after the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, and the Lembaga Penanggulangan Bencana dan Perubahan Iklim Nahdlatul Ulama (LPBI NU; Disaster Management and Climate Change Agency of NU), initiated in 2010. Consequently, these organisations present a different model of disaster response from international humanitarian FBOs like Caritas and Muslim Aid in that they are primarily concerned with *da’wah*<sup>4</sup> and have tended to evolve in response to various external political dynamics, including by *integrating* humanitarianism under their broad umbrellas, rather than having a long history of specialising in this issue. In order to understand their roles in the aftermath of the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami, interviews were conducted in Indonesian by the second author with a representative from Muhammadiyah, NU and MDMC as well as a figure from a relevant independent statutory authority, as part of a larger investigation into post-tsunami response in the area (Warganegara and Samson 2020). The four respondents were selected via purposive sampling based on criteria such as role, knowledge and experience related to the tsunami. Indeed, although this sample of religious organisations was small, the four respondents were all intimately engaged in the post-tsunami response and could be regarded as the most knowledgeable individuals in the region with respect to both the different organisations’ missions and the intricacies of the above-mentioned event. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission, transcribed, translated into English and deductively coded based on Habermas’ (2006, 2008) attributes of a post-secular society, including ‘religion active in public space’, ‘marginalisation of religious worldviews’ and ‘desire for complementary learning processes’. Ethical approval for this project (Research Protocol

#MS120319GEO) was granted by DePaul University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The following section presents the results, focusing first on issues of neutrality and impartiality and second on the potential worth of religious perspectives becoming more publicly integrated in disaster response.

### **Neutrality and impartiality**

Habermas' (2008) post-secular vision both acknowledges that secular individuals and groups cannot hastily disparage religious counterparts for a lack of neutrality and impartiality, given secularism's own biases, and provides the opportunity for religious perspectives to prove their value in broader society. Of relevance to both of these aspects, one theme that was emphasised by the representatives of all three religious organisations interviewed was *da'wah*. For example, the respondent from Muhammadiyah described how his organisation was 'established as a *da'wah* or preaching organisation that seeks to develop and Islamic values through good deeds while fighting against bad deeds'. Nevertheless, in contrast to prevalent secularist assumptions that religious groups are inevitably partial towards their own adherents instead of providing universal support (see Kraft 2015; Wilkinson 2018a), our respondents were adamant that despite their preaching missions, they would not treat their members or adherents any differently from others:

Based on our values, all humans are equal even if they are not Muslim; our humanitarian aid was not based on a religious view. (Muhammadiyah)

We helped them even if they were not Muslim. (MDMC)

We have to push ourselves to provide a benefit for the whole community, not only the Islamic community. (NU)

This raises an interesting question about proselytisation, an issue that is often perceived as a possible drawback of involving religious groups in disaster response and development activities (see McGregor 2010; Gingerich et al. 2017): although it may be operationalised to entice or even coerce vulnerable people to religion (Kraft 2015), might it also encourage religious groups to support all victims, regardless of religious background? In the case of Typhoon Haiyan, Wilkinson (2018b) found that for many religious believers, the background faith of a humanitarian organisation was unimportant as long as it took a holistic approach to disaster response, with individuals perceiving that they had benefited from the opportunities they were afforded to pray and to reflect, without feeling compelled to convert. Similarly, Nurdin (2015) recognised that in the case of Aceh following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, pan-Islamic religious relief missions that sought ‘caliphatisation’ were often welcomed, but were largely unsuccessful in proselytising in the long term. By contrast, other studies have revealed considerable competition, ‘othering’ and even conflict between religious groups during the disaster recovery period (Ensor 2003; Ha 2015; Fountain 2016). Even though interviews are limited by the fact that they do not reveal people’s behaviours, our respondents were nevertheless insistent that their Muslim faith informed their sense of responsibility to assist all people and thereby uphold a principle of universal humanity (see also Rosenow-Williams and Sezgin 2014; Baidhaway 2015), as opposed to viewing the disaster simply as an opportunity to convert others.

Additionally pertaining to questions of neutrality and impartiality, our interviewees noted that in the context of disaster response, as locally known religious figures they were able to

command considerable trust and confidence among the affected population (Bush, Fountain and Feener 2015; Joakim and White 2015; Wilkinson 2018b). MDMC in particular viewed itself as a potential ‘command centre’ in disaster response, training volunteers to cook and to provide therapy and first aid. Furthermore, Muhammadiyah noted how it ‘received many donations from the public because they trust us’ and therefore was able to ‘collect aid and assistance from various people and organisations [...including] outside Lampung’ that it could distribute. Our interviewees deemed their actions particularly important given that the local government, which was officially in charge, was unanimously perceived as ill-equipped to manage the disaster response:

I was so disappointed with the local government, and they have everything, they need to do more than us. (NU).

The local government was not competent to coordinate us. For example, there were many second-hand clothes that were not distributed properly to the victims due to the lack of coordination. (Muhammadiyah).

The lack of coordination was due to the low capacity of the local government to respond to the tsunami event ... [it] lacked the ability and skill to deal with or respond to the natural disaster. (MDMC).

These issues were reinforced by the interviewee from the independent statutory authority, who noted that ‘there was no collaboration between institutions internally and externally to handle the tsunami. There was no proper standard operating procedure...so most of them [organisations

involved] preferred to distribute it [aid] individually'. The government's ineffective response was exacerbated by a political scandal that saw South Lampung's regent, Zainuddin Hasan, arrested in July 2019 following a sting operation by the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Committee (KPK) related to a corruption case connected to an infrastructure project in the regency, while the recovery process was still ongoing. Consequently, people 'lost...trust in the local government' (MDMC), even as it continued to assume control over the different actors, leading to a fragmented process that would almost certainly have benefited from a clearer leadership role for these religious organisations. Despite the fact that many religious organisations around the world combine the benefits of having extensive networks (McGregor 2010; Joakim and White 2015; Gingerich et al. 2017) with a personal touch guided by their relational aspects (Kraft 2015) and local knowledge (Gianisa and Le De 2017), and may even be perceived as *more* impartial than their secular counterparts (Wilkinson 2018b), they can feel marginalised in disaster response due to assumptions that their motives are self-serving or particularistic. Thus, the challenge for humanitarian actors that have long been rooted in secular principles is to alter their mentality so that religious voices, rather than being presented as irrelevant (or worse detrimental) to their work, are instead perceived as potentially valuable in disaster response (Wilkinson 2018a). This will be explored further in the following section.

### **Religious perspectives: the key to post-secular tsunami response**

Ager and Ager (2011, p. 466) argue that religion can be understood as 'non-rational', bringing a lens to issues such as disaster response that differs from 'secular' organisations in its recognition that all positions can offer insights into rationality and irrationality, and which may thus be better suited in specific contexts (see also Wilson 2017). In responding to the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami,

the religious organisations embodied a post-secular approach, integrating ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ understandings of the disaster and ensuring that local communities received support that was appropriate to their needs. For instance, the interviewee from Muhammadiyah did not merely refer to the significance of *da’wah* as a form of preaching, as demonstrated in the previous section, but additionally accepted the importance of seemingly profane concerns such as money in people’s lives:

We always have regular *da’wah* activities and...we often to suggest to our members living in tsunami-prone locations to move to a safer place. For example, we advised people to relocate their homes to a higher area. But it is so difficult because the current location is a tourist attraction and it can therefore generate income for them. (Muhammadiyah).

In this way, the organisation does not limit itself to explicitly religious activities and instead recognises locals’ broader concerns. For Muhammadiyah, this is also exemplified in the concept of disaster *fiqih*,<sup>5</sup> ‘a technical mechanism that suggests how people should deal with and respond to a natural disaster event...based on some of the verses in the *Qur’an*, especially verses related to natural disasters’. Thus, even though the organisation emphasises the emotional qualities of a ‘belief in God’s destiny as Muslims’, it also stresses practical action:

We have to do something to deal with this...we provide them [members who live near the sea] with certain skills to anticipate tsunamis by explaining to them, if there

is a low tide, we need to be ready, it means that a tsunami is coming.  
(Muhammadiyah).

MDMC, as Muhammadiyah's disaster response arm, unsurprisingly takes a similar approach, organising volunteers from local hospitals and universities as well as preparing susceptible communities for future disasters so that they can react in a pragmatic as well as spiritual manner:

Philosophically, we prepare to face a disaster; this does not mean that we want to get a natural disaster. We have to realise that Indonesia is a place that is geographically fragile with natural disasters. (MDMC).

Hence MDMC regarded *da'wah* as a means of enabling people to 'realise that the disaster was not the end of everything: we tried to increase their survival spirit by using a religious approach...but we also organised social activities and an education on dealing with tsunamis in the future'. These responses encapsulate Muhammadiyah's broader understanding of disasters as *musibah*: 'calamities' that according to a fatalistic attitude are unavoidable, but whose impacts can be alleviated through a mixture of religion and practical action (Baidhawry 2015; Joakim and White 2015). For the more traditionalist NU, too, *da'wah* and teaching the community about 'bad or good deeds' could not be separated from making a 'social contribution', such as by demonstrating 'how to improve our members' [economic] situation' and providing health care. Consequently, the religious groups' responses can be regarded as integrating rational support within their distinctive religiously informed 'non-rational' approaches.

Certainly, the religious organisations played a far broader role than a simple definition of *da'wah* as preaching or proselytisation might suggest. Although the notion that 'God's destiny' (Muhammadiyah) can be integrated as one aspect of disaster response would be refuted by a strict secularist approach – 'a polemical stance toward religious doctrines that maintain a public influence despite the fact that their claims cannot be scientifically justified' (Habermas 2008, p. 27) – it is more congruent with local perceptions<sup>6</sup> and thus offered greater potential to mobilise the affected communities. While religious interpretations of disasters are still often perceived as backward and superstitious by international actors, recent research is helping to challenge the secularisation thesis' traditional association with modernisation by highlighting the fact that many people even in high-income Western nations turn to religion to explain such events (Joakim and White 2015). Religious perspectives may aid psychological coping and recovery by providing an explanation for a disaster, stimulating people to help others and potentially even see the emergence of positive impacts (Adeney-Risakotta 2009; Joakim and White 2015; Taylor and Peace 2015; Feener and Daly 2016). They may also help communities to build awareness that a disaster may occur at any time, demonstrating how religious and scientific understandings can be complementary rather than contradictory (Joakim and White 2015; Gianisa and Le De 2017; Warganegara and Samson 2020).

As noted in the previous section, despite their contributions, the potential of the three religious organisations presented here was nevertheless constrained by the local government's assumption of overall responsibility for tsunami response. It is worth noting that such a dynamic is far from uncommon at the international level, too: religious language and experiences are often marginalised in international humanitarian actions, unless they are deemed coherent with the dominant secular agenda, a clearly tokenist form of engagement (Ager and Ager 2011, 2015;

Wilkinson 2018a; Tomalin 2020). Ironically, the three religious groups were overlooked as valued actors despite reacting to the disaster more quickly (see Warganegara and Samson 2020):

We did it [provided these services] before the local government, we moved quickly to respond to the tsunami event. First, we provided many tents for a week, then we built the non-permanent shelter....Our non-permanent shelter was equipped with toilets and a prayer room [...] we gave them [the victims] vitamins and checked their health. We knew that there was still trauma so we needed to be active by visiting them. (NU).

Relatedly, the respondent from NU viewed the disaster response as a longer term process than was perceived to be true of the local government (see also Wilkinson 2018b on secular non-governmental organisations):

We made sure the victims could live there for one year and they could stay safe from the rain and hot weather. You know, instead of just being equipped with a toilet and a prayer room and a bedroom we have also provided them with a small kitchen so that they can cook. We rent the land from the landowner for one year and now it is already more than one year, it is supposed to be continued by the local government, and we are a bit worried because the rent duration has already finished, and they [the victims] might be kicked out by the landowner. (NU).

This interviewee was consequently concerned about how the local government's general failure to act would implicate victims being sheltered in rented locations, whose future at the time of our fieldwork was still uncertain. As this section has demonstrated, the organisations played a holistic role and deemed any strict demarcation between 'religious' and 'secular' humanitarianism impossible: material needs were regarded as related to faith. By contrast, Wilkinson (2018a) found that the secular organisations involved in the disaster response to Typhoon Haiyan regarded 'universal' basic needs such as water, food and shelter as separate from faith or religion. Given this disjuncture in perspectives at the levels of both international humanitarianism and the state, we believe that a post-secular approach to disaster response should recognise the common criticism that secular groups prioritise the material aspects of humanitarian response out of a concern for efficiency and rationality (despite the fact that many distribute aid in a highly bureaucratic manner), while struggling or even refusing to appreciate the importance of 'soft' qualities such as approachability, social interaction and relationship building, to which religious groups are often well-suited (see also Wilkinson 2018b). Furthermore, in the specific case of our study, the fact that the three religious organisations were compelled to adapt and seek collaboration (and thus legitimisation) reflects broader concerns that humanitarian discourse remains wedded to narrow secularist principles of universalism and modernity while limiting the potential contributions of religious institutions in unique social contexts (Ager and Ager 2016). This additionally illustrates the uneven power relationship between 'religious' and 'secular' groups as well as the latter's reluctance or even refusal to learn from the former. For complementary learning processes to occur, secular actors must acknowledge the potential of religious groups in disaster response. We will discuss this further in the conclusion.

## **Conclusion: towards post-secular disaster response**

In this article, we have related the actions of three prominent Indonesian religious organisations in responding to the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami to Habermas' (2008) notion of a post-secular society. We have considered both the ways in which the groups made valuable contributions to the disaster response and their relative marginalisation at the expense of local government actors. As a result, we have identified key areas where greater collaboration between religious and secular actors is necessary at the local scale.

In this conclusion, we would particularly like to stress the importance of complementary learning processes. In a context in which religious views remain publicly significant but are not necessarily treated with the same esteem as 'modern', 'scientific' secular counterparts, Habermas (2008) makes the case that if religious groups are to be (rightly) prohibited from discriminatory practices, the same should be true of secular society. By listening to rather than immediately rejecting the viewpoints of other citizens on the basis of religion, a more inclusive and harmonious civil society can be created (Habermas 2008). We believe that this principle applies to disaster response, which at both the international (Ager and Ager 2015, 2016; Tomalin 2020) and – as we have found – the domestic level remains dominated by secular discourses of neutrality, impartiality and material needs, while potentially limiting the role of local knowledge and understanding, long-term commitment to communities and the value of religious beliefs in resilience building. The result is that disaster response becomes a reified Western secular standard that is received with scepticism (or worse) by local communities (McGregor 2010). As Habermas (2008, p. 29) warns,

[w]ere secular citizens to encounter their fellow citizens with the reservation that the latter, because of their religious mindset, are not to be taken seriously as modern

contemporaries, they would revert to the level of a mere *modus vivendi*—and would thus relinquish the very basis of mutual recognition which is constitutive for shared citizenship.

The outcomes of disaster response are undoubtedly important, but one must also consider the processes and methods of action, within which religious actors may play an important role (see Wilkinson 2018b). Although secular groups may seek to present themselves as neutral, in reality all are subject to biases and this may take the form of a suspicion towards religious counterparts, constraining the effectiveness of local partnerships (Ager and Ager 2011, 2016; Wilkinson 2018b). Habermas' notion of complementary learning processes is helpful in this regard, as it addresses the importance of viewing religious understandings as relevant and as making contributions that are impossible of secular perspectives alone. For instance, our respondents highlighted how religious and secular understandings of disasters could be combined and thus made congruent with local perspectives. Furthermore, being informed by values of universal humanity, religious groups are often active in supporting broad populations that secular counterparts may find hard to reach. In short, as Ager and Ager (2011, 49) claim with respect to international organisations, we require 'a more sustained acknowledgement of the importance of local religious practice and belief in shaping humanitarian strategy' as well as consideration of 'the epistemological fragility of functional secularism as a foundation for concerted, sustainable and just action'.

To be clear, in contrast to commentators such as Hara (2016) and Norichika (2016), we are not arguing that disaster response is at present 'post-secular', or that it is even close. The dominance of secular voices and expectations to which religious groups have had to adapt demonstrates this (Ager and Ager 2015; Tomalin 2020), evidenced in our study by the limited role

afforded the three organisations by the local government, despite the fact that they were first on the scene and played a broad role in supporting victims. Considering the public prominence of these religious organisations in Indonesian society, it stands to reason that other faith actors are even more marginalised. Instead, our adoption of a post-secular frame has allowed us to critique the extent to which the response to the 2018 Sunda Strait tsunami was characterised by collaboration between religious and secular organisations and to consequently identify the need for greater inclusivity of religious voices among the domestic as well as international actors involved in humanitarianism (see also Warganegara and Samson 2020). We hope that our article will contribute to future debates regarding the potential of post-secularity to inform a more inclusive blueprint for disaster response. This should be characterised by the earnest consideration of religious views and a broader recognition that religious organisations are not limited to purportedly religious issues (Warganegara and Samson 2020). The sheer size of many religious groups' networks as well as the broad perception that they are highly trusted, community-oriented agents renders them capable of attracting and distributing donations and mobilising a wide range of human resources. Moreover, the fact that values of charitability and assistance are entrenched in religion (McGregor 2010; Rosenow-Williams and Sezgin 2014) should ensure that they remain important in the long term, rather than necessarily being obligated by international groups and thus potentially subject to change or decline. It is also necessary that humanitarian workers, regardless of affiliation, develop a religious literacy that can ensure their sensitivity to local needs, just as religious actors adapt to secular expectations (Ager 2014; Gingerich et al. 2017; Wilkinson 2018a). However, until secular and religious groups interact on an equal footing, disaster response cannot be regarded as more than a perpetuation of a hegemonic secular worldview.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech abridged from summaries in Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia (2019) and Kuwado (2019). The authors take responsibility for copyediting the English translation of the former and for translating the latter from Indonesian. Any errors are our own.

<sup>2</sup> Prepared jointly by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The relevant principle is stated on page 3.

<sup>3</sup> Islamic boarding schools.

<sup>4</sup> Teaching others about Islamic values and knowledge for the purpose of proselytisation.

<sup>5</sup> Islamic jurisprudence.

<sup>6</sup> Scriptural texts such as the *Qur'an* are often used to explain disasters in countries such as Indonesia (Rokib 2012). Many Indonesians additionally believe in invisible powers and legends and regard these as explanations for natural disasters (Adeney-Risakotta 2009; Schlehe 2010).