

The Akhlak Revolution: A Triadic Interplay Between Piety, Islamization, and Neoliberal Ethics

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Naeni Amanulloh¹, Muhammad Nurul Huda², Hanifa Maulidia³

^{1,2}Department of Sociology, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

³Politeknik Imigrasi, Jakarta, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines the efforts of a group of middle-class urban Muslims in cultivating piety. It traces the working logic of the formation of the pious subject, as a point of departure to comprehend the increase of religious zeal of the middle-class urban Muslims. By exploration of the activity of the employee and leaders of a number of companies in the Santri Eksekutif program, we argue that the effort to be a pious subject is often in relation to and interplay with the aspirations of Islamization of public institutions and with neoliberal ethics. Furthermore, we argue that more than a quest for identity, religious expressions that are publicly displayed are a form of requirement to be an ethical and pious subject. Through this article we aim to describe a form of the ethical and pious subject, explore the formation process of the ethical and pious subject, and accentuate the interplay and complex relationship between the process of cultivating piety, aspirations of Islamization of public institutions, and neoliberal ethics. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Jakarta and Bogor.

Keywords

akhlak (moral); ethical subject; Islam; neoliberal ethic; pious subject; urban Moslem revival

INTRODUCTION

“My friend, there are seven keys to salvation, so that we are safe, so that we can go to heaven easily. Please memorize these keys”. Amir arrived at the keynote of his morning sermon, while the congregation who had been following the sunna praying series since 03:00 AM until dawn prayer, was sitting and listening intently. With a deep voice, Amir invited the congregation to repeat his words. “Come on, all together! First, keep a good relationship with Allah.” Simultaneously the congregation follows, “keep a good relationship with Allah!”. Amir continued, “Second, be grateful to Allah!” The congregation repeated the second key to salvation. “Third, show good faith to Allah.” Until the seventh, every key to salvation was

voiced simultaneously by the congregation. Amir then elucidated the significance of each key while emphasizing that these keys to salvation are the essence of each verse of the surah Al-Fatihah, a surah that represents the entire content of the Qur’an. That morning sermon session was ended by re-voicing the keys and reciting Surah Al-Fatihah. To memorize it easily, this time the congregation was asked to imitate Amir’s gestures. Then the congregation was directed to gather on the bridge that faces the Sukawangi hills, to recite the dzikr *al-ma’tsurat*.

The paragraph above is an excerpt

Corresponding author

Jl. Duri Raya Masjid Al Uchwah II No.24, Kedoya,
Jakarta 11520, Indonesia

Email

naeni@unusia.ac.id

from a description of the peak of overnight stay event at the boarding school (*pesantren*) which is carried out by the executives. The participants of the event, which is called 'the executives' by the organizer, were employees and leaders of a number of private and state-owned companies (BUMN) in Jakarta. Under the guidance of Amir, the tutor of the Islamic boarding school Fath Darut Tafsir and the chair of the Fath Institute foundation, they performed obligatory prayer congregationally and regularly, improved sunna praying, and listen to religious sermons. Some of them accompanied by their spouses and children, including babies, to stay for three days at the Fath Darut Tafsir Sukawangi boarding school in Bogor.

This article discusses the efforts of Amir' and his students', the executives, to become a pious subject. For the executives, their participation in the Santri Executive program is a means to answer the meaningful questions: How do I become a true Muslim while I am an employee/company leader? While as an ustadz, or the teacher, Amir gave the answers, or at least a hint of answers. This question from the subject's point of view is important to be explored in order to find an elementary insight to comprehend the increase of the religious spirit of the middle-class urban Muslim phenomena.

The increase of the religious spirit of the middle-class urban Muslims (Azra 2017; Heryanto, 2015) has become an interesting phenomenon in recent years. At least, during the last two decades the world witnessed the rising wave of the global religious revival (Asad 2007) including in Indonesia. In Indonesia the religious revivals emerge as *hijrah* groups, *majlis ta'lim*, Islamic learning groups, Islamic hobby groups, and mass movements whose participants come from professional workers, academics, celebrities, and government officials. These trends give rise to the question on why, as society moves in an increasingly secular direction, the religious zeal is flourishing. As quoted by Kumar (2007, p. 79), Steve Bruce, a sociologist, once predicted that as a social phenomenon religion would become more irrelevant and

lose its appeal in modern life, because the institutions that had been considered effective in transmitting religious practices and beliefs (church, family) lose their traditional function. However, instead of losing its appeal, the religious public continues to grow both in daily life and through the latest features of the information technology media (Kumar 2007; Ardhianto 2016; Alimi 2018).

Some findings link this phenomenon to the theme of identity. These findings argue that the movements are basically a phenomenon of the quest for identity among middle-class urban Muslim, whether through interactions with symbols of modernity (Jati 2015; Heryanto 2015), counter-public movement in social media (Ardhianto 2016), or by exploring and arranging Islamic identity from the local traditions to strengthen the legitimacy of sharia implementation (Alimi 2014). Others say that enrolling children in modern boarding school serves as mean to preserve the Islamic identity of middle-class urban Muslim (Astuti 2017). In this narrative of the quest for identity, the middle-class urban Muslim must overcome and incorporate the symbols of modernity or local traditions to express Islam's relevancy. But the opposite could happen. Due to the same effort, Islam can be swallowed by the wave of market logic and being transformed into commodities (Pribadi and Ghufroon 2018).

This article focuses on the series of activities for the executive that guided by the Fath Institute through the Santri Eksekutif (*Executive Santri*) program. Through exploration of these activities, this article will trace the working logic of the Santri Eksekutif program by putting the piety cultivating project as the point of departure. Instead of responding to the 'who am I' question which directs our attention to identity, this article will approach the fundamental questions that are always assumed in the Islamic discursive tradition (Asad 2007, p. 92): how to be a true Muslim? What should 'I' do? In what ways does 'I' become a pious Muslim? How and what should a good Muslim do at the workplace?

As will be shown in the discussion below, the project of piety cultivating by the

Fath Institute was carried out through the transmission of the Qur'anic insights as the foundation of the moral knowledge of the executives. The Qur'anic insights are seen to shape the dispositions, behavior, and actions of the executives; also applied as a center for otherworldly orientation and as a source of meaning of all executives' activities in their work. In our exploration of the project, we encountered various forms of intersection and interplay between Islam, aspirations of Islamization, and neoliberal ethics. We argue that the intersection between the three is an important part of the symptoms of urban Muslim religious revival. By putting these intersection in the midst of the project of piety and ethical subject cultivation, we try to shift away from the theme of the quest for identity. This starting point allows us to see a series of practices and activities from the perspective of the subject or actor and then trace the working logic within it.

Through the following exploration, we aim to (1) describe a form of the ethical and pious subject, (2) explore the formation process of the ethical and pious subject, and (3) accentuate the interplay and complex relationship between the process of cultivating piety, aspirations of Islamization of public institutions, and neoliberal ethics.

METHODS

The data and information that we presented in this article were obtained through observations and interviews with Fath Darut Tafsir Islamic Boarding School caretakers and chair of the Fath Institute. Interviews were conducted with participants of the Santri Eksekutif program, community figures, as well as several Kalibata Pulo residents. We made observations on the activities of Santri Eksekutif in the Fath Darut Tafsir boarding school Bogor and in Kalibata Pulo South Jakarta. These two data collection techniques are complemented literature review, which is online news media and Fath Institute's official website and YouTube channel.

The fieldwork for this article uses ethnographic approach with the aim to obtain an empirical portrait as a basis for abstracti-

on. The ethnographic approach is suited to this research which stresses on the process of piety cultivating. However, even though ethnography promises a deep understanding through its thick description (Geertz 1973a), we cannot claim that the results obtained through our research have and fully captured the reality. We reorganized the many field stories according to the coherence of information through a coding process, so there is always a possibility that important parts in the field are not captured or even eliminated. In addition, it is recognized methodologically that the stories from the field are basically are part of the ongoing social process. These field stories are dynamic, and always refuse to be summarized in a single and permanent interpretation or meaning (Vidich and Lyman 1998).

The following discussion is divided into three sections. The first part is about the profile of the Fath Institute and its relationship with its surrounding community. It will be followed by the description and explanation of the Santri Eksekutif program. Finally it will discuss Islamic ethic or *akhlak*. Conceptual analysis and discussion are applied to each field story.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

'All-in-One': Fath Institute Profile and Relations with the Surrounding Community

Explaining the model of the Fath Institute's activities, Amir used Alfamart, the Indonesian convenience store chains, as comparison, "The principle is [like] Alfamart. Alfamart is small but there's everything inside, right? Small but all in one... That is what I want; this is a small boarding school but everything is there". That night we talked in a semi-open space in the Fath Darut Tafsir boarding school complex, located in Sukawangi, Sukamakmur District, Bogor Regency. We sat in the living room which, separated by a kitchen bar, served as a kitchen. Several students were busy preparing food, which includes boiled cassava and corn, fried rice, and hot coffee which were then

served to us. Behind us stood two standing banners, one of which read 'Let's take an Islam *Kaffah* learning class, Santri Eksekutif Fath Institute'

Like the 'all-in-one' of Alfamart, the Fath Institute offers a variety of programs for various segments of the urban community. The organization runs a charity program; by opening several bank accounts to collect donations from donors through the Fath Peduli program. The donation was used to finance the construction of the pesantren dormitory and support the poor and orphans studying there. Another domain of the Fath Institute is a combined activity between business and *da'wah*, through publishing and *Umrah* travel services. The Fath Media, the publishing unit of the Fath Institute, has published several religious books written by Amir as well as *Al-Ma'tsurat*, a collection of prayers and *dhikr* composed by Hasan Al-Banna.

Santri Eksekutif and Fath Mulazamah are two educational programs prepared for middle-class urban Muslims. In addition, there are also Fath Alim, Fath Muslimah Mengaji, and Iktikaf Center. Santri Eksekutif and Fath Mulazamah are intended for white-collar workers who are not likely to attend daily study, let alone staying overnight likes a regular santri who lives in boarding schools. The main difference is that in Fath Mulazamah each participant has to attend the learning activity once a week for two years in Jakarta, while Santri Eksekutif only requires participants to stay for two nights at the Fath Darut Tafsir boarding school in Bogor.

This variety of activities is what Amir referred to as 'all-in-one' like Alfamart. In addition to having their respective goals, the whole program was basically held to sustain the educating and nurturing prospective memorizers of the Qur'an (*hafidz*) as the main program of the Fath Institute. This main program is centered at the Fath Darut Tafsir boarding school in Bogor. After the pesantren building in Bogor was established, the Fath's santris who previously lived in Kalibata Pulo began to migrate. Amir explained, "There [Kalibata Pulo] is the

corporation, here [Sukawangi Bogor] is the factory." From this pesantren, he continued, "will be born '*Alim* [master of Islamic sciences], who are *hafidz*, mastering Arabic, English" and ready to be distributed as mosque imams throughout Indonesia and abroad. Amir aspires that in the future "there will be an Imam from the Fath Institute graduates in every mosque." The concentration on this main objective influenced the Kalibata Pulo community's acceptance of the existence of the Fath Institute and specifically of Amir.

Amir was born in Sumenep. He often appears on private television as a religious preacher and a judge on *Hafidz Indonesia's* shows. He pursued primary and secondary education at the Al-Amin Madura boarding school, a place where he gained basic Islamic lessons, such as *nahwu* and *shorof* which he continues to benefit from. After attempts at applying to universities in Mecca and Medina were not successful, Amir was accepted at the International Islamic University in Islamabad Pakistan and started his study in 1989. He obtained his doctoral degree in Qur'anic science major. Sixteen years of living in Pakistan have left a deep impression on Amir about the future of *da'wah* and Islamic education. He described that the International Islamic University is a project of the Islamic world that should be prided; Al-Azhar University has a very good reputation, but as a symbol of modernity and unity of the *umma*, it is the campus in Islamabad that should be referred to as a representation of the Islamic world. He felt the unity of Muslims since he was a student and during an opportunity to teach the Qur'anic interpretation on several campuses after he achieved his master's degree. Amir said, "When I was in college, the students were from many nations. From America, Africa, [they lived in] one room. I felt the miniature of the world for Muslims there. [It was] really a pride".

In Pakistan Amir met a student from Betawi who later became his wife, who is the daughter of a religious leader in Kalibata Pulo. They got married in Pakistan and had a child who later died. Returning from Pakistan in 2005, Amir taught at several religious

universities and gave lectures at a number of state and private companies in Jakarta. He was also invited to lecture abroad through a network formed during his studies in Pakistan. "Perhaps there is not an inch [of place] in the world that I have not yet visited," Amir said, describing the extent of his lecture audience outside Indonesia. From those times Amir got inspiration and influence for the program, methods, governance, and vision of the Fath Institute which he founded in 2015 at Kalibata Pulo.

"This Islamic boarding school is a new invention made from the results of my long research since I was studying in Pakistan. I saw firsthand how to memorize the Qur'an. I was invited to America; I saw campuses in the world. On those campuses there is always a very neat mentoring program. I took the mentoring program for the self-formation program."

Kalibata Pulo is a Muslim Betawi *kampung* located in the middle of the urban area of South Jakarta. Despite being called as a 'Muslim Betawi *kampung*', Kalibata Pulo is a plural, both ethnically and religiously. There is one church and one temple (*pura*), while there are 14 mosques and 20 *musala* scattered throughout the *kampung*. The religious atmosphere of the *kampung* is felt through the soundscape that stretches most of the day from dawn until the evening prayer. The sound of calling for prayer (*adzan*) five times a day, sermons in *majlis ta'lim*, or Qur'an recital is heard alternately through the funnel of loudspeaker. In certain months, such as Ramadan and Maulud, this religious soundscape increasingly crowded, imbued with mass-scale religious learning activities. The source of the soundscape comes from at least 39 *majlis ta'lim* and two pesantren besides the Fath Institute (Maulidia 2011, p. 52). This number continues to grow. When our fieldwork was conducted, there were 73 religious learning activities in one week in the neighborhood of the Fath Institute. But all of these busyness of the religious activities only took place outside the fence of the Fath Institute. Amir kept his santri stay focused on their own main activities.

The relationship between the stu-

dents and the surrounding community and the personal relationship between Amir and Kalibata Pulo community leaders were actually relatively good. Amir often visited the local religious leaders. Likewise, the santri, like other santris in pesantren in general, do their daily grocery shopping activities in stalls around the pesantren and contribute to the community's economy (Hadi 2019; Dhofier 2011). For santris of the Fath, this is their main moment to interact with the surrounding community. But even so, and despite the fact that Amir is the son-in-law of a prominent figure in the Kalibata Pulo community, Amir's existence as a religious figure has not been fully considered. Haji Anwar, a community leader, said that Amir had never been asked to become a mosque imam or preacher at the *kampung* mosque. Amir's qualification to become a mosque imam or Friday preacher was recognized by local figures, but they still have doubts about the Islamic ideology brought by Amir. The doubt comes from Amir's involvement in an Islamic political party as a legislative candidate in the 2009 general election. They feared that Amir's involvement in politics would disrupt the consensus of religious leaders who agreed not to bring political agenda in the *kampung's* religious life.

There was one more important reason they considered. It was related to the participation of the Fath's santris in religious activities in Kalibata Pulo. The santri were considered loof from community activities. Amir admitted that he indeed forbade his santris to participate in religious activities such as *tahlil* and *maulid* which were carried out almost every night. The reason was that the Fath Institute has its own curriculum and targets that requires full concentration of the santris.

"Not that I dismiss, no. I do not dismiss the tradition [tahlil, maulid, marawis]. But my pesantren does not have time; my santris do not have time for it, or to organize it. Because [these activities – tahlil, maulid, marawis] takes time"

Let us consider some aspects that accentuate the description above. First, Amir

used Alfamart and corporate metaphors. Instead of looking at big (or small) Islamic boarding schools or similar religious institutions, Amir uses Alfamart as a metaphor for his pesantren's trajectory. Furthermore, the Fath Institute is described as a corporation that offers various programs as 'commodities' with the pesantren as its factory. The question is, why Alfamart and the corporation?

We argue that neither of them was chosen arbitrarily. As a metaphor, Alfamart and the corporation is an ideal image of the format of a modern Islamic educational institution that was built from Amir's learning and missionary journey, from Madura, other major cities in Indonesia, and Pakistan and other places abroad. Alfamart and the corporation are chronotopes that serves as a node that expresses the inseparability and connection between discourses, spaces, and times (Bakhtin 1981, p. 84) experienced by Amir. As chronotopes, these two concepts become bridges between 'the actual world with the world presented' (Rudyansjah 2009, p. 34). Alfamart and corporate, as concepts, bridges the experience of learning and lectures Amir went through, his vision of the future, the present activities of the Fath Institute both at Kalibata Pulo and Sukawangi, as well as, to borrow Appadurai's term, a global audience (2005, p. 60) aimed by graduates of the Fath Institute. As a chronotope, Alfamart and corporation also become concepts that accommodate various discourses at the same time: Islamic *da'wah*, corporate insight, and vision of Islamic modernity.

With this approach, the social distance between the Fath Institute and the surrounding community can be comprehended. The ideals of the Fath Institute are built from chronotopic characteristics that differ from the religious traditions of the people that surround them. While the religious characteristics of the Kalibata Pulo are built on the continuity of religious traditions of the Betawi people that have roots in the past, the Fath Institute projects a future urban society that will be filled by its graduates. What will be fulfilled by graduates of the Fath Institute is not the actual urban sociological reality,

i.e. the surrounding community at present, but the upcoming urban society; the urban as a horizon, as a possibility of the future reality (Lefebvre 2003, p. 16-17).

We argue that the Fath Institute is indeed moving outside the Islamic religious traditions that live around it. As a 'corporation', the santri must follow the curriculum strictly so that as candidates of knowledgeable scholars, they are ready to be distributed in the international Islamic market; while the *ustadz* must serve and manage various programs with participants from various urban circles who come from outside the Kalibata Pulo. The Fath Institute, with all its programs, has been designed from the beginning for the needs/demands of the future urban Islamic market, not for the types of people with Islamic religious traditions currently living in their environment. These different orientations have created distance and separated the Fath Institute from the surrounding community.

Becoming Santri Eksekutif: Transformative Process and the New Ethical Subject

Santri Eksekutif as a transformative process
Santri Eksekutif is organized for the middle-class urban Muslim. Amir called this group the executives, which consists of employees and heads of companies, especially state-owned companies. The executives have a passion to join in religious learning but do not have enough time to study routinely and directly to the *ustadz (talaqqi)*. Their motivation varies, ranging from wanting to improve in reciting the Qur'an, becoming a prayer *imam*, being able to speak Arabic, or to be a Friday prayers sermon. Amir described that the executives, especially the Santri Eksekutif participants, were social groups that lack religious knowledge. However, they are well-learned and educated people who already have a normative understanding of good and bad even though those normative understandings are still partial. In addition, Amir emphasized, they are 'great people' in their respective companies.

The main activity of the Santri Ek-

sekutif program is an overnight stay at the Pesantren Fath Darut Tafsir. During three days, the participants were guided to perform obligatory prayer congregationally and regularly, improve sunna praying, improve Qur'an reciting (*tahsin*), listen to religious sermons, memorize short Surahs, and mingle with the regular santri (lived santri, *mukim*). The program consists of fifty participants in a class year as a group. When the fieldwork for this article was conducted, the Fath Institute was carrying out activities for the fifth group; the sixth and seventh group will soon follow.

Overnight stay activity is intended to foster a sense of Islamic solidarity and brotherhood. Amir explained that he was following the Prophet in forming solidarity and a sense of brotherhood among his companions. The Prophet formed a sense of brotherhood through various trips to the battlefield; Amir did so by inviting the executives to stay at the pesantren. Islamic solidarity and a sense of brotherhood are important bonds that must be fostered as the basic bonds of Muslims. "Those executives... may not have time to live in the pesantren. But by being brought here two days, they will feel that 'I have a brotherhood'. That's what we build. Just two days they [will get the] feel of being santri." Amir's statement indicates two transformative experiences among the executives, namely the formation of the ties of Islamic brotherhood as the basis of solidarity and the process of becoming a santri.

First, the executives gain the shared experience and sense of communality through rites and activities (Turner 1991, p. 138), i.e. the sense of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwah islamiyah*). The Islamic brotherhood that was initially only imagined as an abstract idea becomes concretized with the executive's experience of being together in any activities and rites in two days. The executives gained experience of Islamic life as a reference to the imagery of the unity of the *ummah* that transcended the nation-state concept. Second, the executives attained a new status, i.e. santri, a status for a person who learns Islam seriously in a pesantren. Staying overnight at a pesantren is a trans-

formative process in the sense that through this activity there is a shift of status (Alatas 2016, p. 609-610) from the people who are just curious of Islam to become the people who study-Islam. By achieve the santri status, the executives have place in the configuration of the pesantren tradition, the oldest Islamic learning tradition in Indonesia.

The overnight stay activity is also motivated by fulfillment of the ethical principle in religious learning. Amir retold his words to the executives about the requirement to come to the pesantren and stay overnight at the pesantren.

"If I come to your company, you are not my santri. You make me your employee. But if you come to my pesantren, you are being a santri. And you will use 'ilmu [Islamic knowledge]. And the 'ilmu that will get in your heart is the 'ilmu that comes [because you visit it]. There is an utterance, 'al-'ilmu yu'ta wa la ya'ti'; that the 'ilmu is visited, not visits you. Imam Al-Ghazali said that knowledge is like water. You must be modest, and then he will flow to you. Water does not flow to the plateau. Do not be arrogant to the 'Ilmu'."

Amir's statement indicates some points. First, the overnight stay changes the relationship between the executives and Amir. For Amir, lectures delivered in the workplace (i.e. participants' companies) are basically a form of relations between employees and their superior. In such activities, although a speaker or *ustadz* becomes the center of attention whose words are to listen to, his capacity is no more than a person who is paid to speak to give a lecture. He said that the relationship between lecturer and listeners in an assembly held in workplace, basically, is not the relationship between people who study religion (Islamic student, santri) and the teacher. This view reinforce the opinion of the importance of the position of religious teachers in the Islamic learning tradition, especially the centrality of kyai/ustadz position in pesantren (Pramono 2018; Hadi 2019; Kafid 2014; Horikoshi 1987; van Bruinessen 2012; Dhofier 2011). Through this shift of relation, Amir's religious authority as religious teachers that

based in pesantren, extended to a wider circle: the executives who in daily life do not normally interact with the pesantren.

Second, the requirement of the executives to stay overnight at the pesantren is also motivated by ethical reasons; concerning the sacredness of the *'ilmu* as the object that connects Amir with his congregation. He said that the *'Ilmu*, or Islamic science, is something noble and must be glorified. People who really wish to obtain the *'ilmu* must be prepared to make extra efforts to "visit" the *'ilmu*. In this context, visiting the *'ilmu* is being translated by going to pesantren, precisely by visiting and pursuing it directly to Amir. Only when a person comes to the place where the *'ilmu* is, then the *'ilmu* would come near to be a part of that person: 'and the *'ilmu* that will get in your heart is the *'ilmu* that comes'. Pesantren and kyai in this context are no longer serves as a vehicle for *'ilmu*, but an embodiment of the *'ilmu* itself, which is, as embodiment, necessary for the process of learning to be an ethical subject (Mahmood 2005, p. 29; Amanulloh 2012). Amir's view on the requirement to come and stay overnight at the pesantren asserts the inseparability between Fath Darut Tafsir and Amir with the *'ilmu*; both of them no longer serve as a vehicle for the *'ilmu* that can be exchanged, but rather an embodied form of the *'ilmu* itself.

'The Champion of Islam': the new ethical subject

The Santri Eksekutif program has an important agenda: cultivating an agent of community change towards religious life and fostering an Islamic commitment. In general, this agenda is carried out through all of the Fath Institute programs, including the Santri Mulazamah program which goes hand in hand with the Santri Eksekutif. For a moment, our attention will be directed to the Santri Mulazamah program to see the meeting point between the two.

Mulazamah is an Arabic word which literally means attached or intense. The phrase Santri Mulazamah refers to those who study under religious teachers in the pesantren intensely. At first glance this desc-

ription reminds us of the term *santri kalong* in traditional pesantren (Hadi 2017; Dhofier 2012). But both have quite important differences. Santri kalong is described as 'santri from villages around the pesantren' (Dhofier 2012, p. 89; see also Hadi 2017, p. 78-79), in contrast to Santri Mulazamah who comes from a distant area from the Fath.

Identical to Santri Eksekutif, Santri Mulazamah is targeted at 'the executives and the general public who want to learn the Islamic teachings but are hampered by their job'. With this target, the Santri Eksekutif program participants basically can also participate in Santri Mulazamah. Both are distinguished in two ways. Firstly, Santri Mulazamah participants are required to attend the program once a week regularly for two years. Secondly, Santri Mulazamah has more sophisticated pedagogical devices than Santri Eksekutif, including a systematic learning curriculum and measurable learning outcomes.

For two years the participants learned eleven subjects, (1) *tahsin* and *tahfidz* Qur'an (2) science of Qur'an, (3) *Fiqh Syafi'i*, (4) *Sirah Nabawiyah*, (5) *Ushul Fiqh*, (6) *Qowaidul Fiqhiyah*, (7) etiquette and *akhlak*, (8) *da'wa*, (9) *Ulumul Hadith*, (10) *Ulumul Quran*, and (11) Hadith. These subjects were taught by Amir and six other religious teachers. Amir explained that the study plan in the Santri Mulazamah program was based on *kitab* learning, while the Executive Santri was thematic learning. With the thematic learning he meant, as will be elaborated in the next section, the Qur'anic messages delivered in his sermons.

Beyond these fundamental differences, there are many similarities between Santri Mulazamah and Santri Eksekutif, especially in the agenda of the cultivation of social change agent who are committed to create a religious society. Amir argued that the executives are part of the urban middle-class who can potentially be expected to accelerate in realizing Islamic society. Becoming a santri is the initial stage for the executives to be born as a Muslim generation who are committed to championing Islam. The following is Amir's explanation.

“Islam was revealed to regulate life. So, you live in a mosque, you pray; you live in a house, you become a good leader; you live in an office, you are professional [by following] the procedure; you must be honest if you are a merchant. That’s it. You become an official [then you have] to champion Islam so that people are interested [in Islam]. So it’s not just ‘I enjoy Islam myself’. There are people who enjoy Islam; there are people who champion Islam. Now if people enjoy Islam, they only enjoy their prayers, fasting, it is calming... calming. But he [just] enjoys Islam, doesn’t he? But is he championing Islam?! See, we want to build a civilization in which Muslims do not just enjoy Islam, but they also champion Islam, so that people become sympathetic to Islam.”

The excerpt above explained the types of Muslim. There are two types of Muslims, those who are devout in practicing their worship only for self-fulfillment and those who are devout in practicing their worship, living in harmony with the social environment and Sharia’s rules, and having the spirit of propagating Islam. The first group is referred to as ‘those who enjoy Islam’ and the second ‘those who champion Islam’. Those who ‘enjoy Islam’ are the most populous group among Muslims in Indonesia. Muslims in this group are described as only seeking inner peace through prayer, fasting, and other obligatory worship or sunna but do not have a concern about the practice of shari’a in public spaces or in their immediate surroundings. Cultivating the zeal to champion Islam is the agenda of the Santri Eksekutif.

The main key to cultivate the zeal to champion Islam is to foster *akhlak*, or morals. A person with good morals will instinctually pay attention to the piety condition in his surroundings. “So, when he has a noble character, he will automatically apply his morals to his employees. Then finally employees pay attention to their prayers, as soon as employees pay attention to their prayers, company’s turnover increases,” Amir said. Amir shows one of his students as an example of the champion of Islam.

“Pak Hafidz, after joining the khalaqoh

[Santri Eksekutif], implemented it at the workplace. In his workplace, at ten minutes before Dhuhr there may not be a meeting. It is announced directly through loudspeakers. That is the result of khalaqoh... there are many people like Pak Hafidz in his workplace. “

These two quotations illustrate the profile of the champions of Islam, and their influence on their social surrounding. First, the champion has adequate motivation to improve the personal piety of the people around him, and then he will incorporate Islamic values and practices to the rules of the company. As pious subject, the champion of Islam has the duty of *da’wah* and among the most important in that task is to create an Islamic atmosphere in the place where they work. This pattern is typically found in *da’wah* organizations, which encourages the general public to be pious and transmit this piety in the broader context of society (Hwang 2009, p. 12; Hamdi 2006). But in the context of these executives, the measurement of the incorporation of Islamic values and practices is not limited to company sociality and company policy; but is also measured by the improvement of company’s financial performance. We will return to this statement in the next section.

‘Those who champion Islam’ are the new ethical subject who are cultivated and fostered in the Santri Eksekutif program. The executives are transformed from being ordinary subjects ‘who only enjoy Islam’ to be the champion of Islam who have the awareness, zeal, and commitment to conveying the Islamic messages to their environment.

Qur’anic Insights, Moral Formation, and the Corporate World

The akhlak as an insight and its formation

The *akhlak*, or moral, occupies an important position in Islam. The *akhlak* is the purpose of Muhammad’s appointment as a prophet and a sign of the level of religiousness of a Muslim (Bisri 2017). A better *akhlak* indicates a better Muslim. The *akhlak* serves as an indicator of a Muslim’s religiousness. Quraish Shihab said that the core of the Is-

Islamic teachings is none other than *akhlak* (2019). According to him this means ‘that there is the *akhlak* in the *aqidah* and sharia, as well as in the guidance that is not related to the *aqidah* and sharia’ (Shihab 2019, p. 303). The *akhlak* includes as well as being the main content of every principle of Islamic teachings. For Amir, the significance of the *akhlak* is illustrated in the following.

“No matter how sophisticated the institution is, if the toilet is dirty, it’s zero. Because [the clean toilet is] *akhlak*. The Qur’an recital equals to zero, being ‘alim equals to zero, affluence equals to zero, handsomeness equals to zero, being an official equals to zero. Is there any value? No. What is the one? *Akhlak*. Put it as the [number] one, so then all of these have meaning... Islam is basically *akhlak*.”

Amir used a pair of binary numbers (0 and 1) to illustrate the superiority of the *akhlak* over every other advantage Muslim might have. He gave *akhlak* a 1 (one) score and every other advantage 0 (zero). Every advantage will only be meaningful if it is preceded and accompanied by the *akhlak*. Amir gave an example, the score of a person who memorized the Qur’an (*hafidz*) is zero, but accompanied by the *akhlak* that person’s score is 10. When the person is also knowledgeable (*‘alim*), the score increased to 100 (with the *akhlak* and being *hafidz* and *‘alim*), and so on. All the advantages possessed by Muslim will add the score to the high value if only preceded by *akhlak*, and also because of the *akhlak* all the advantages become meaningful.

Akhlak is the plural form of *khuluq* in Arabic. Etymologically it means as a measure, practice, and habits (Shihab 2016). According to Shihab, *akhlak* can be grasped through human activities and actions, while *khuluq* is a substance, an inner disposition that does not appear by itself except through something else, namely *akhlak* (2016, p. 5). Between *akhlak* and *khuluq* is mutually referring, resembling two sides of the same coin. Citing Imam Ghazali’s view, Shihab said that ‘*khuluq* (*akhlak*) is a steady inner condition, the base of various activities that are carried out naturally, without having to

think about it’ (2016, p. 5). However, it must be understood that the various activities, deeds, or good behavior must emerge as an expression of obedience to God, or a form of actions carried out ‘for the sake of Allah’ (Shihab 2016, p. 14). In short, this view of *akhlak* shows that the *akhlak* is a concept that connects the interrelationship between a steady inner disposition state with behaviors, deeds, or actions as an expression of obedience to God and is carried out for/because of God.

The question is how to cultivate the *akhlak*? Furthermore Quraish Shihab suggests two ways of *akhlak* cultivation, by habituation and following a role model (2016, p. 90). To follow a role model, a Muslim needs to imitate the actions of the noble deeds of individuals who are considered better in the *akhlak*. The habituation or *takhalluq* (derived from the same root word as *akhlak*), is the process of doing something repeatedly and continuously so it becomes a habit. In other words, the *akhlak* is cultivated through continual habituation of good things, so that it is engraved and shaped in inner disposition; borrowing Saba Mahmood’s term, ‘exteriority as means to interiority’ (2005). This kind of the *akhlak* cultivation process is the most common route found in the traditional pesantren. In this article, we will use that *takhalluq* scheme to contrast the *akhlak* cultivation process in the Santri Eksekutif program.

First of all, let’s return to the previous claim that the executives are well-learned and educated people who have a normative understanding of good and bad. The executives are assumed to have certain moral qualities to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong. They have certain moral knowledge and certain disciplines. But at the same time, because the nature of their understanding is still partial, they have not been connected directly yet with the broader Islamic insights, precisely from the Qur’an. This normative and partial understanding becomes an important basis for Amir in the *akhlak* cultivation agenda. It only takes one more step to guide the executives into comprehensive insights; the insights of *Islam*

kaffah.

Amir said that the *Islam kaffah* insight is the Qur'anic insight, which is an insight derived from the Qur'an. Amir concluded that the contents of the Qur'an are essentially insights. "Nothing in the Quran that are practices, all of its contents are insights. There is no technical guidance on how to pray; or how to do Hajj in the Qur'an," Amir said. Practical and technical instructions of any worship are formulated through the sunna, while the Qur'an itself encourages Muslims to become 'people of great insight'. The great insight will bring big steps; the greater the insight, the greater the value and orientation of one's action. The teaching of the Qur'anic insight, is the main point for Amir in cultivating the *akhlak* of the executives. He theorized, "From understanding will be born insight ... and insight shapes behavior."

The sermon after the dawn prayer is a moment where Amir delivered Qur'anic insight to the executives. More in-depth research needs to pay attention to the choice of time, rhetorical style, and dramatic aspects in the sermon that are useful to comprehend better how a sermon enables moral messages engraved and formed a 'steady inner state'. But, in this article it is enough to point out that the sermon after dawn prayer is a moment for teaching the Qur'anic insight as a foundation and framework for ethical behavior or morals (*akhlak*). The Qur'anic lecture in the sermon transcends all of the activities organized in the previous two days. This sermon becomes the culmination and the amalgamation of various normative and partial understandings that the executives used to have.

For executives, the Qur'anic insight is a way to get the meaning of the Holy Qur'an that they recite every day. The insight taught by Amir gives them a reference of meaning through the language they understand and provides a new way to interpret their work as a religious matter. Finally, the insight serves as general principles of what can and must be done as well as what is not allowed or prohibited.

The *akhlak* cultivation approach as

carried out by the Fath Institute seems to be close to the Kantian logic of moral action that characterized the modern educational paradigm. According to Immanuel Kant, "A moral act could be moral only to the extent that it was not a result of habituated virtue but a product of the critical faculty of reason", (Mahmood 2005, p. 25). A moral action, in Kant's view, is an action that comes from critical reasoning, not produced by the habituation process. Lectures and a series of activities throughout the overnight stay can be understood as the process of instilling insight into what God wants and does not want in the executive's daily lives. It is the cultivation of moral knowledge (Campbell 2019), which is the base of critical faculty of reason. This kind of moral cultivating method seems to be different from the *tak-halluq* method described previously. In the Fath's method, improving moral knowledge through Qur'anic insight teachings is a route to cultivate an ethical subject. The *akhlak* and moral acts are assumed to emerge after the Qur'anic insight is taught.

The akhlak revolution in the company

Hafidz is a leader in a fuel company that is a subsidiary of a stated-owned company. He had been attending Amir's lectures for a long time before finally joining the Santri Eksekutif program and becoming a senior participant. His experience which will be narrated follows, will illustrate the link between the realization of Champion of Islam as ethical subject and the neoliberal ethic operating within the company.

In the beginning of the decade, in 2010, Hafidz was assigned to improve the financial performance of a subsidiary of the company where he worked – which made it Pertamina's subsidiary of subsidiary company. The company's financial condition was very bad; there is no cash flow and the profit decreasing. The core problem he encountered was the prevalent fraud and corruption. He concluded that the base of these problems is the *akhak*. Hafidz said.

"The first is a matter of behavior. It is the problem of akhlak. So we keep honest person. We will try to persuade the dishonest

ones but if they refuse, they have to get off from the bus. So we have to really choose good people to be [kept] on the bus, bad people have to get off the bus. Because they will mess up if they don't get off the bus... unless they repent."

Hafidz's statement offered several important points. First, he saw what was happening in his workplace as a moral problem. Second, consequently, the solution to the problem is approached with the *akhlak*. He chose people who are morally good, which are honest, and persuaded people who are dishonest to repent (*taubat*). If the final persuasion failed, those people would be repositioned or dismissed.

Hafidz's information shows how the Qur'anic insights are used as an analytical framework in mapping problems and solutions. He kept those who were honest, while those who were dishonest must repent. This research did not get enough information on the technical steps taken by Hafidz in his effort to persuade the dishonest people to repent. But from the way Hafidz analyzed the problem as a matter of morality, we can recognize how the *akhlak* as Islamic ethics is translated in such a way so that it became compatible with neoliberal ethics, i.e. accountability as honesty. Further story is as follows.

About four years later, Hafidz's efforts began to show results.

"Alhamdulillah, my colleagues could be encouraged to be more righteous ... After we implemented the akhlak [approach], the akhlak improvements, they were incredible. At the beginning [the profit] was around thirty billion [Indonesia Rupiah] but the cash was at minus, next year it jumped to fifty billion and there was cash. The following year it increased to seventy-five billion. The following year it increased again to 113 billion. Finally, was even crazier, more remarkable, Masha Allah, the profit surged from 113 to 203 billion."

When Hafidz arrived at this part, Amir interrupted enthusiastically: "it's the *akhlak* revolution in the company!"

The correlation between the various efforts made by Hafidz and the profits

achieved by the company in four years can be interpreted in many ways. But the affirmation by Amir has made the achievements over the past four years appear as a result of the *akhlak* change. Without a doubt, Amir defined it as the success of the *akhlak* revolutionary change. The reason is that the environment of employees around Hafidz itself has changed. As mentioned by Amir earlier:

"Pak Hafidz, after joining the khalaqoh [Santri Eksekutif], implemented it at the workplace. In his workplace, at ten minutes before Dhuhr there may not be a meeting. It is announced directly through loudspeakers. That is the result of khalaqoh... there are many people like Pak Hafidz in his workplace. "

The story of Hafidz and Amir's assertions above are the expression of the working logic that Islam and the principles of corporate work are not contradictory. Furthermore, this way of thinking leads to the viewpoint that there is compatibility between the *akhlak* and neoliberal ethics, especially in the characteristic of economic calculations in neoliberalism (Rudnycky 2010; Mittermaier 2013). In his research on religious approaches in the corporate reform program at Krakatau Steel, Rudnycky offered the concept of the spiritual economies to explain how neoliberal reform and restructuring were understood and handled as a matter of religious piety and virtue (Rudnycky 2009, p. 105). It is identical to Hafidz's way of thinking when he perceived the company's problems and their solutions as the *akhlak* problems.

On the other hand, Amir's assertion of increasing corporate profits as a manifestation of the *akhlak* revolution shows how the *akhlak* signs are no longer only associated with good behavior. The *akhlak* or moral act within the company is translated into supportive behavior for the company's main goal, which is to increase profit. Meanwhile, the divine promised rewards from all good behavior do not need to wait in the afterlife, but can be measured and accepted in cash in the form of increased company profits in this worldly life.

Satisfaction appeared in Amir's face when he heard the story of Hafidz's success – which he seemed to have heard many times. Hafidz has proven that being a pious person does not mean being a person who struggles with the demands of capitalistic works. On the contrary, the economic calculation that is necessary for the neoliberal rules of the game is embraced as part of the great narratives that he builds, namely the pious and ethical subject.

CONCLUSION

Observed at a microscopic level, the increase of the urban middle-class Muslim's religious zeal will generate various explanations. As a point of departure, we understand that the phenomena, as we explore through our case, are an expression of the efforts of urban Muslims in increasing their piety. But the effort to be a pious subject does not take place in the vacuum. As we have shown, in the increasingly modernized and secularized society, a certain intersection and mutual influence between efforts to be pious with public issues and with neoliberal ethics are inevitable. By describing the efforts of the executives, we expose that the Islamization of public institutions and the formation of ethical and pious subject can walk hand in hand with the neoliberal ethic, by translating *akhlak* as something commensurable in the neoliberal economic calculation standards.

Furthermore, what was done by the Fath Institute with its executives can be read as a way for a group of urban Muslims to maintain the relevance of religion (Islam) in the midst of the current secularized society. The link between morals (*akhlak*) and piety with neoliberal ethics, intentionally or not, appears to be a manifestation of the, in Heryanto's term, 'dangerous liaisons' between religion and the capitalist market logic that religion must face if religion wants to continue to survive (Heryanto 2011, p. 77). But whatever the meaning of the danger, such intersection and interconnection will always occur on the agenda of piety cultivation – with the various possible outcomes

that follow. Religious people probably do not worry too much about the survival of religion, but they care more about the question: how to be a pious person in the present-world?

Democracy allows various types of religious forms to grow and coexist with one another. Some of the religious forms are considered threatening for the community and some are considered convenient for the plural society. In this context, a deeper academic research agenda needs to be done by putting the piety cultivation as the starting point. With the development of society, the flourishing information technology media, and other modern life facilities, the modes of piety cultivation will continue to evolve. Such an approach is important not only to embrace the opportunity to broaden the academic horizon on humanity, but also to be useful as a basis for reflection on the situation of our religious life.

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