

Aliens and Strangers (1Pet 2: 11-12) in Indonesian Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Epistle of 1 Peter and the experiences of its recipients, who were labeled as aliens and strangers living in Asia Minor during the Roman Empire. The paper explores the reasons for their labeling and the struggles they faced due to their faith in the first century, including persecution from non-Christians and those in power. The paper also delves into the literal and contextual usage of the terms and elaborates on the persecution faced by the recipients. The author of the letter uses the paraenetic style to communicate his admonition to the recipients, encouraging them to live good lives in the hope that their opponents would be ashamed. Furthermore, this paper draws a parallel between the experiences of the recipients of 1 Peter and contemporary Indonesian Christians in establishing their places of worship. A minority of Indonesian Christians face difficulties when moving from their homeland to areas where Muslims are the majority. Establishing places of worship requires permits from non-Christian neighbors, and their sanctuaries are often closed and attacked by radical Muslims, possibly due to political motivation. The paper suggests that the wise response for Christians is to live good lives and establish harmonious relationships with other religious followers, in the hope that their non-Christian neighbors will understand the importance of their need to worship God.

Keywords: *aliens, strangers, persecution, paraenesis, religious discrimination, religious minority*

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1. Introduction

The Church is sent into a world where believers exist as outsiders and foreigners, consequently exposing them to inhospitable treatment and persecution from their surroundings. Coping with such negative behaviors requires the adoption of wise strategies. This paper aims to examine how the Epistle of 1 Peter exhorts its recipients, who are foreigners and strangers, to conduct themselves honorably and responsibly in the face of persecution. This analysis will be used to underscore how Indonesian Christians should respond to hostile treatment from their surrounding community. The paper will first discuss the Epistle of 1 Peter, including its epistolary form, the concept of foreigners and strangers, and their interaction with non-Christian outsiders. This examination will provide insight into how the author utilized the epistle as a means of admonishment to his recipients. The paper will approach 1 Peter 2:11-12 literally and contextually in order to gain an understanding of the text's voice within its first-century situation. Secondly, the paper will examine how Indonesian Christians navigate their shared struggle of existing as a minority and seeking permission to construct churches. This section will draw comparisons between the struggles of first-century believers and contemporary Indonesian Christians, using synonymous parallelism.

2. First Peter as a Paraenesis Letter

1 Peter is an epistle with a conventional opening (sender, addressee, greeting) and closing (greeting, doxology, benediction). The sender of the epistle is identified as being in Babylon (5:13), and the recipients are in Asia Minor (1:1). Although it contains a homily, 1 Peter is unmistakably an epistle.³ In the first century, personal letters were a common means of communication used by preceptors to connect with their followers over long distances for the purpose of encouraging, consoling, teaching, and so on.⁴ The debate surrounding the recipients

³ T.W. Martin, *Metaphor and Composition in 1 Peter* (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1992), 41-42.

⁴ D.F. Watson, "Letter, Letter Form," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Leicester:

of the letter indicates a growing consensus that they were Gentile Christians. Several texts within 1 Peter identify the recipients as Gentiles (1:14; 1:18; 2:9; 4:3-4). In particular, the use of the phrase *ethnos agion* (“holy nation”) in 2:9 refers to the recipients as Gentiles, with the word *ethnos* being a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament *goyim* which is used as a technical term for the Gentiles. By contrast, the term *’am* is used as a technical term for the holy people or Israel.⁵

There is a scholarly consensus that the epistle was written to Christian communities in Asia Minor who were experiencing affliction and suffering. The author’s purpose was to provide strength and comfort to the recipients during this difficult time through the medium of the epistle.⁶ The paraenetic genre of the letter reinforces this idea. T.W. Martin⁷ asserts that, from a form-critical perspective, there are three characteristics of 1 Peter that establish it as paraenetic work. Firstly, the letter contains twenty-eight imperatives, which along with their corresponding participles, shape much of the content of the epistle.

Secondly, 1 Peter exhibits prescriptive language, which is an essential feature of paraenesis. This prescriptive language can be found in motivational statements (1:16; 1:18; 1:23; 2:13,21; 3:18; 4:1) that are based on and supported by Christological statements. The letter also contains moral examples where the readers are encouraged to imitate the Christian model that the letter describes (2:18; 3:18; 4:1). Thirdly, the character of 1 Peter as a piece of a paraenesis is further demonstrated by the use of the term *parakalo* (2:11; 5:1,12) which means “I encourage you”. This term is an important indicator of the paraenetical genre of the document. In 5:12 the author comments on the epistle, starting that he wrote it to “exhort” and “testify” to the recipients. Both of these terms indicate that the author intended to write a paraenetic epistle.

Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 649-650.

⁵ Betram, “Ethnos,” *TDNT* 2: 365.

⁶ E. Lohse, “Paraenesis and Kerygma in 1 Peter,” in *Perspective on First Peter*, ed. C.H. Talbert (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 42; T.W. Martin, *Metaphor*, 105-106; E. Richard, “The Functional Christology of First Peter” in *Perspective on First Peter*, ed. C.H. Talbert (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 136.

⁷ Martin, *Metaphor*, 85-102.

Further, the paraenetic genre of the letter can be seen from its social context.⁸ There are two factors that indicate the social setting of the letter as paraenesis. The first factor is that 1 Peter demonstrates a relationship between the preceptor and those who are exhorted (1:1). The author relates himself to the recipients in a fraternal language such as “I encourage you” (2:11; 5:1,12), “dear friends” (2:11; 4:12), and “brotherhood” (5:9). He is qualified to give this paraenesis because he is a co-worker and a witness of the suffering of Christ, as well as a partner of the glory, to be revealed (5:1). This brotherhood relationship between the preceptor and the readers is a crucial indicator of the epistle as paraenesis. Similar relationships are also observed between philosophers and their students in the Greco-Roman world.

The second factor indicating the social setting of the letter as paraenesis is the separation between the preceptor and his students. Due to this distance, the recipients may be at risk of experiencing moral decline as a result of persecution. The preceptor communicates with them through his paraenesis letter to provide comfort and encouragement. References to the trials, persecution, and suffering of the recipients are mentioned (1:16; 2:12; 4:12; 5:9), and yet the preceptor persists in exhorting them to live according to their Christian beliefs. The approach of paraenetic exhortation differs from that of Paul, who often expresses his intention to visit his followers (Rom 15:22-25; 1 Cor 16:5-9). In contrast, the preceptor in 1 Peter hints at their future meeting in the eschaton, when the glory of Christ will be revealed (1:7,11; 5:1). This means that the author of 1 Peter encourages the recipients with an eschatological motivation.

The paraenetic genre of 1 Peter can be discerned through the concept of “glory”. In Greco-Roman society, the primary function of paraenesis was socialization, in which one could attain a state of glory through good conduct. However, in 1 Peter, the attainment of glory is distinct from this traditional Greco-Roman concept, and instead reflects the unique eschatological focus of Christian paraenesis in the New Testament. The most prominent means of paraenetic socialization in 1 Peter is the use of persuasion and dissuasion to encourage the recipients towards a state of glory (1:7,11; 5:1). In its attempt to persuade and

⁸ Martin, *Metaphor*, 103.

dissuade, 1 Peter only recommends principles of conduct that are generally accepted and uncontroversial (1:12).⁹

The use of metaphors in 1 Peter is emphasized by Martin¹⁰ in order to see the thematic motif of the letter. This is rather different compared to J.H. Elliott¹¹ who understands the metaphors in 1 Peter as literal speech. According to Martin,¹² the controlling metaphor of 1 Peter is the “diaspora”. This metaphor is announced in the prescript and reiterated in the greeting section of the epistle. The word “Babylon” at the end of the epistle is simply the counterpart to diaspora at the beginning. So, from the beginning of the epistle to its end, images and concepts from the Jewish diaspora dominate the material. The term “diaspora” denotes those Jews who for one reason or another were domiciled in foreign countries and abounded in Asia Minor from an early date.¹³

3. Aliens and Strangers (1 Pet 2:11)

The author of 1 Peter sends a letter containing words of exhortation and confirmation (5:12) to fellow Christian visitors and resident aliens (1:1; 2:11) in five Roman provinces or regions of Asia Minor who are currently suffering from various types of hostility, conflict, and trials of faith (1:6; 2:12,19-30; 3:14-16; 4:1,4,12-16,19; 5:9). In the letter, the author admonishes his readers to “abstain from the desires of the flesh” and to “conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentile,” urging them as “aliens and strangers” (2:11-12; NRSV). According to Elliott,¹⁴ who approaches 1 Peter from a sociological-exegetical analysis, the designations of the recipients as “aliens and strangers” (*paroikos kaiparepidemous*; 2:11) indicate the readers’ interaction within their social environment. Thus, both terms provide insights into the social condition of the recipients and the socioreligious response offered by the epistle.

⁹ Martin, *Metaphor*, 108-112.

¹⁰ Martin, *Metaphor*, 141.

¹¹ J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 129.

¹² Martin, *Metaphor*, 311.

¹³ Charles Bigg, *The Epistle of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 70.

¹⁴ Elliott, *A Home*, 22-23.

In a broad sense, the term *paroikos* refers to an individual who is a stranger, foreigner, or alien. They are individual who lack a sense of belonging or native roots in the language, customs, culture, or political, social, and religious allegiances of the people among whom they reside. The term *par-oikos* derives its meaning from the *oik*-root and related terms such as *oikos*, *oikia*, *oikeo*, and *oikeios*. The term *oikos* (home) represents one of the most fundamental social, economic, political, and personal realities of the ancient world. It refers to a house and home with all its personnel and property, family, and lineage as well as an individual's identity, place of belonging, and exercise of personal and communal rights, responsibilities, and moral obligations. In contrast, *paroikos* (alien) depicts the displaced and dislocated person, the curious or suspicious-looking alien or stranger. Schmidt¹⁵ notes that the term *paroikos* is specifically used with a technical, political-legal meaning to denote the fate of a resident alien without civil or native rights.

In the Septuagint, the combination of “alien” and “stranger” (Gen 23:4; Ps 38/39:12) is present, and there is evidence to suggest that in certain cases, “alien” is used as an equivalent of diaspora. This precedence is reflected in the later text of 1 Peter (1:1; 2:11). While “alien” specifically designates the resident aliens with their attendants with restricted rights and social status, “stranger” refers more generally to a transient visitor who is temporarily residing as a foreigner in a given locality. Selwyn¹⁶ correctly notes that “stranger” highlights the transitoriness of the sojourner's stay in a place, whereas “alien” emphasizes their legal status as a non-citizen.

The *paroik*- root appears in only two other New Testament texts aside from 1 Peter 1:17 and 2:11, specifically in Ephesians 2:19 where the Gentiles Christians addressees are declared to have ceased being “strangers and resident aliens” to the people of God and have become “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”. This usage conveys the conventional sense of living as a resident alien in a foreign environment or away from home. It is also clear that the political, legal, and social limitations of *paroikos* status were understood to constitute the conditions according to which union with and fidelity

¹⁵ K.L. and M.A. Schmidt, “Paroikos,” *TDNT* 5:842.

¹⁶ E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 118.

toward God were tested, relinquished, or affirmed. 1 Peter 1:17 and 2:11 similarly acknowledged the political-legal and social condition of the recipients' situation as resident aliens in Asia Minor and encourage their acceptance in faith and obedience to God's will. Furthermore, the resident aliens and transient strangers should use their situation as an advantage in establishing their distinctive religious identity.

Thus, following an elaborate description of the readers as the elect and holy people of God (2:4-10), the author exhorts them to manifest the religious dimensions of their social stranger hood: "Beloved, I exhort you as resident aliens and visiting strangers to keep apart from the fleshly passions (of their Gentile background and environment) which wage war against you" (2:11). This negative warning is followed by the positive encouragement: "Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles (as in 1:17), so that although they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12).

As resident aliens and strangers, they experienced a shared the same vulnerable condition in Asia Minor and throughout the Roman empire. Legally their status within the empire, according to both local and Roman law, imposed restrictions on intermarriage, commerce, property succession and land tenure, participation in public assembly and voting, taxes, and tribute, the founding of associations, and susceptibility to more severe forms of civil and criminal punishment.

The recipients' denotation as aliens and strangers connotes their social strangeness. Additionally, the use of the term diaspora, which is associated with strangers in 1 Peter, implies historical and religious aspect of their situation. The term diaspora is used three times in the New Testament (Jn 7:35; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1), to geographically and socially circumscribe a group of people living beyond the borders of Israel. In John 7:35, it identifies either Greek in whose territories the Jews live or Hellenistic Jews from abroad currently in Jerusalem. However, in James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1, the term diaspora is used for the first time as designation for Christian who, like their Jewish counterparts, now also live outside Palestine. Thus, the designation of Christians as the people in the dispersion indicates their religious identity and roots, as well as

their social condition of displacement and estrangement. As the heirs of Abraham, Christians share in the fateful history but also the unique honor of the people of God.

Several scholars (Beare, Kummel), as noted by Elliott,¹⁷ take the contrast in 1 Peter 2:11-12 as the cosmological one in which between present life on earth and a future life in the heavenly one. The phrase “the desire of the flesh” is understood as belonging to the order of earthly existence, now alien to readers, and must be given no place in their new, heaven-centered life. However, Elliott¹⁸ understands the contrast as a sociological one. This means that the Christian community is set apart from and in tension with its social neighbors. The phrase “the desire of the flesh” refers to the typical lives of the Gentiles who are non-believers (cf. 4:1-6). Here the contrast is drawn between the Christian conduct in accordance with the will of God and living by “selfish desires” which characterized the recipients’ former pre-Christians behavior.

In 1 Peter 2:11-12, the author provides a balanced approach to the Christians’ socioreligious stance as strangers in their unbelieving social environment. The negative admonition in verse 11 urges the readers to abstain from the vices of their Gentile background and environment. The positive thrust in verse 12 encourages them to maintain good conduct among the Gentiles and let their good works lead to the glorification of God, despite the slanderous accusations they may face. Both verses emphasize the importance of the Christians’ exemplary behavior and distinguished conduct among the unbelievers in their midst. Elliott¹⁹ argues that in addition to their condition as strangers and aliens, it was their religious allegiance, with exclusiveness that such allegiance required, which had incited the suspicion and hostility of their neighbors. Bearing the name “Christian” at that time had already been declared a crime by official Roman policy (cf. 4:14-16).

It is clear from 1 Peter that outsiders were not neutral in their attitude or behavior toward the Christian sectarians. The nature of the popular reaction against the Christians in Asia Minor was due to their

¹⁷ Elliott, *A Home*, 42-44.

¹⁸ Elliott, *A Home*, 42-44.

¹⁹ Elliott, *A Home*, 73.

novelty and exclusivity, which bred contempt rather than familiarity. The public reactions that the Christians encountered and suffered included ignorance (2:15), curiosity (3:15), suspicion of wrongdoing (2:12; 4:14-16), and aggressive hostility (3:13-14,16; 4:4). The outsiders seemed to have little specific or accurate knowledge concerning the religion or morality of these strangers. Even where the good conduct of the believers was evident (2:12; 3:16), the deliberate “ignorance of foolish men” (2:15) had led to the suspicion of immorality, including civic disloyalty (2:13-17). For bearing the name and professing faith in Jesus as the Christ, the outsiders found them worthy only of reproach (4:14). Such ignorance, suspicion, slander, and reproach had engendered sorrow (1:6; 2:19), fear (3:14), and suffering (2:19,20; 3:14,17; 4:1,15,19; 5:10) on the part of the Christians.

The specific terminology of these references and contexts of these references do not refer to anything other than the social pressure, religious discrimination, and local hostility that natives typically directed against inferior aliens and exotic religious sects. Colwell, as cited by Elliott,²⁰ notes that such incidents were typical of the popular reactions against Christianity in the early Roman empire. These reactions were prompted not because of any official proscription of Christianity by Rome but by the sectarian exclusiveness of Christianity itself.

From the Biblical exegesis point of view,²¹ it seems to be clear that the author of 1 Peter wrote his paraenesis letter as means of consoling and comforting the recipients in facing their difficulties and suffering in Asia Minor. In the first century, personal letters were one of the most common means of personal communications, which was written in a straightforward manner and vary in content and form depending upon the degree of familiarity existing between the senders and receivers and the content to be communicated.

From the discussion above, the author of 1 Peter and his readers shared a common world, common frames of reference, and a common understanding and use of words particularly “aliens and strangers”.

²⁰ Elliott, *A Home*, 80.

²¹ John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 7-9.

Therefore, by encouraging the Christians to abstain from the desires of the flesh and to maintain the good conduct among the Gentiles, the author of 1 Peter kindly asked them to be inclusive and let the outsiders openly know the good fruits of their fellowship. This will serve as a means of communicating their existence as believers among the Gentiles, with the hope of receiving hospitality from the surrounding people. In other words, believers were not only expected to be good ambassadors of Christ Jesus but also good communicators of their presence through their good behaviors in their respective context.

4. The Common Struggle of Indonesian Christians

As minority groups in Indonesia both Catholics (3.07 % = 8,5 million) and Protestants (7.26 % = 20,5 million),²² face a common problem: difficulty in building churches. This difficulty is shared by other minority groups in Indonesia, such as, Buddhists, Hindus, and Confucians, who struggle to construct places of worship in a predominantly Muslim country. In fact, Muslims make up 87% of Indonesia's population of 275.77 million in 2022 and making Indonesia the largest Moslem country in the world.²³ As such, the voice of Indonesian Moslem carries significant weight within global Muslim community, and they expected to serve as a beacon for Islamic civilization around the world.

The main difficulty for Christians in building their places of worship lies not in finance, but in obtaining permits from local authorities and communities. This struggle has persisted since Indonesia's independence in 1945 and has continued to escalate, with thousands of churches being burned by irresponsible persons since the reformation era that began in 1998 after President Suharto stepped down.²⁴ According to the report issued by the Councils of Protestant and Catholic Churches, from 2004 to 2007, there were 108 churches

²² "Kekristenan di Indonesia" (*Christianity in Indonesia*). <https://id.m.wikipedia.org>. Accessed on February 6, 2023.

²³ Monavia Ayu Rizaty, "BPS: Jumlah Penduduk Indonesia Sebanyak 275,77 Juta pada 2022" (Center of Statistic: The Indonesian Population is 275,77 millions in 2022), <https://dataindonesia.id>

²⁴ *Sinar Indonesia Baru* (Newspaper) (2015). "Hentikan Kekerasan di Aceh Singkil!" (Stop the Violence in Aceh Singkil), October 15, 2015.

destroyed in Indonesia including those had fulfilled the necessary regulations.²⁵ Despite the Indonesian Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion and worship for all citizens, this is still a significant challenge for Christians. In fact, President Jokowi²⁶ lamented the difficulties that religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians, still face in carrying out their worship. He urged governors, regents, and mayors to implement the constitution within their respective administrative areas to ensure religious freedom. Therefore, the struggle for Christians to practice their religion freely in Indonesia is far from over.

The difficulty arises in provinces where Christianity is a minority. Out of 35 provinces, only four have a Christian majority: Papua, West Papua, North Sulawesi, and East Nusa Tenggara. All these four provinces are located in the eastern part of Indonesia and have populations less than 7 million. There are only two provinces where Christians make up around 50% of the population – North Sumatera and Maluku. Many populations from these provinces move to other provinces and islands in search of employment. For example, there are more Batak Christians to which the writer belongs, living outside the Batakland in North Sumatera than inside it. When they move to new places, they always establish their own churches. For Batak Christians,²⁷ the understanding of the Church as the assembly of saints, who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit in them, serves as a strong motivation to build their churches in their new locations. In addition, cultural motivation such as the use of the Batak language in worship are also factors. This is the main reason why churches are scattered throughout Indonesian archipelago, whether in cities or villages.

²⁵ Ahmad Gaus AF, "Kebebasan Beragama dan Hak-Hak Minoritas in Indonesia" (The Freedom of Religion and the Rights of Minorities in Indonesia), 4, in <http://www.pdf-search-engine.com/pluralisme-beragama-pdf.html>. See also *Suara Pembaruan* (Newspaper), December 16, 2007.

²⁶ Wardhany Tsia Tsia, "Highlights on the Prohibition of Building a Place of Worship, Jokowi: Sad, Hard to Give People to Worship?" <https://voi.id/en/news/245370/highlights-on-the-prohibition-of-building-a-place-of-worship-jokowi-sad-hard-to-give-people-want-to-worship>.

²⁷ See Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 173, See also Sutan M. Hutagalung, "The Church in the World," *Africa Theological Journal* 9, No. 1 (1980): 46-64.

The challenge faced by Christians in Indonesia pertains to obtaining a permit to construct a church, as regulated by a joint decree issued by the Minister of Interior Affairs and the Minister of Religion Affairs in 1969, which was subsequently revised in 2006.²⁸ The decree stipulates that both Christians and Muslims must fulfill specific requirements for building their prayer houses such as churches and mosques. However, in practice, Christians often face obstacles in obtaining permits from their Muslim neighbors, especially in provinces where Muslims are the majority. In accordance with the decree, 90 adult Christian members must prove their identity cards to construct a church, and obtain 60 signatures from the local society, including Muslim neighbors, in support of their plan.

Research done by Amos Sukamto²⁹ and his colleagues reveals that the joint decree issued in 1969 was a response to the rapid growth of the Christian population in the mid-1960s, following the attempted coup by the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965. To curtail Communist power, the Indonesian government mandated that every citizen join to one of the five state-recognized religions, namely, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Consequently, many nominal Muslim groups, known as *abangan*, who supported the Communist Party, converted to Protestantism or Catholicism to escape persecution. The sudden rise in the Christian population caused dissatisfaction among some Muslim groups, who accused the Churches of exploiting the political situation for their benefit. This led to attacks on Christian Churches in some areas, resulting in conflicts and chaos in Indonesia. These conflicts that emerged called for state intervention to manage religious life in the country, leading to the formulation of a policy decision in constructing places of worship. The policy aimed to regulate religious life and had a significant impact on the development of Christianity in Indonesia, which is still felt today in obtaining permits to build churches.

²⁸ *Peraturan Bersama Menteri Agama Dan Menteri Dalam Negeri No. 9 Tahun 2006 Tentang Pendirian Rumah Ibadat* (The Joint-Regulations of Minister for Religion Affairs and Minister for Interior Affairs No. 9 the year 2006 Regarding the House of Prayer).

²⁹ Amos Sukamto, Nina Herlina, Kunto Sofianto, Yusak Soleiman, "Impacts of the Religious Policies Enacted from 1965 to 1980 on Christianity in Indonesia," *Mission Studies* 36, no. 2 (2019): 191,199, 213.

The challenge encountered by Christians in establishing a place of worship outside their homelands, such as Batak land, Ambon land, Papua land, etc., is widely recognized as a common struggle. This observation is not intended to generalize the issue throughout Indonesia, but rather to highlight the shared difficulties experienced by Indonesian Christians. The Department of Religious Affairs has conducted research in several major islands in Indonesia, which appears to acknowledge this struggle encountered by Christians in establishing their place of worship.³⁰

The majority of churches in Indonesia are built without the necessary licenses, rendering them illegal. These unauthorized places of worship are at risk of being demolished at any moment by radical Muslims, and authorities such as the police and military are often unable to prevent such violent acts.³¹ A recent study conducted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide attributes the rise of religious intolerance in Indonesia in recent years to additional government rulings, such as the 2006 joint ministerial decree pertaining to houses of worship and the 2008 joint ministerial decree banning the Ahmadiyah, a minority Islamic sect, from spreading their beliefs.³² The state's apparent inability to prevent acts of violence has caused significant concern and fear among Christians who must worship in these illegal prayer houses.

The central question at hand is whether it is feasible for Christians to obtain permission from Muslim neighbors to construct a church? According to the research conducted by PPIM in 2007,³³ 51% of Muslims in Indonesia object to the idea of a church being built in their vicinity, and 55% oppose Christian worship taking place in their neighborhood. Muslim citizens provide several justifications for their refusal to allow churches in their communities. Firstly, Christianity is

³⁰ Wahyu Iryana (ed.), *Persoalan Pendirian Gereja di Indonesia* (The Problem of Building a Church in Indonesia) (Jakarta: Litbangdiklat Press, 2020).

³¹ Bambang Muryanto, "Residents, Muslim Groups Attack Yogyakarta Church," in *The Jakarta Post*, June 2, 2014.

³² Bambang Muryanto, "Study Blames Govt for Rising Religious Intolerance," in *The Jakarta Post*, June 11, 2014.

³³ "Islam dan Kebangsaan. Temuan Survey Nasional" (Islam and Nation: The Finding of National Survey). Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM). Universitas Islam Nasional, Jakarta, 2007.

associated with the Western world, which elicits a sense of resentment since Indonesia was colonized and exploited by the Dutch for an extended period. Secondly, their memory of the Crusades lingers, reminding people of the historical animosity between Muslims and Christians. This animosity is exacerbated by the interpretation of Quranic verses that highlight differences between the two faiths. These factors contribute to the demolition of unlicensed Churches, which is often perceived as an act of religious obligation.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that many Muslims in Indonesia have limited knowledge about Christianity, particularly with regards to the concept of a church. Their understanding of Christianity is often vague, and they tend to rely on hearsay rather than factual information. In this regard, many Muslims are perplexed as to why Indonesian Christians insist on building numerous church buildings even though their congregations consist of fewer than 100 members. Muslims typically gather in the same mosque for Friday prayers, and they fail to comprehend why Christians require separate churches for different denominations, languages, and cultures. Consequently, the proliferation of church buildings is often interpreted as an attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity, which is vehemently rejected.

An Alvara Research Center³⁴ study reports that “the majority of the Muslims in Indonesia supports the construction of worship places of other religions in accordance with applicable procedures.” However, as previously discussed, obtaining a permit from Muslim neighbors is one of the procedures that poses a challenge. The study found that 45% supported the establishment of worship places of other religions, while 24.3% were neutral, and 19.2 % did not support it. In other words, two of ten Muslims in Indonesia did not support the establishment of worship places of other religions in their vicinity. This research also highlights that the older generation is less supportive of the construction of worship places of other religions than the younger generation.

It is evident that the constitutional provision differs from the

³⁴ Hasanuddin Ali and Lilik Purwandi, *Indonesia Moslem Report 2019: The Challenges of Indonesian Moderate Moslem* (Jakarta: Alvara Research Center, 2019), 35-36.

actual situation on the ground in Indonesian society. The practice does not align with the theory, which presents a challenge for Indonesian Christians and other minority groups. Despite this, the Churches in Indonesia are committed to promoting harmonious coexistence with other religions. For instance, the Communion of Indonesian Churches (PGI) conducts an inter-faith dialogue with the Muslims, and other religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and local religion. However, this approach is not commonly adopted by other Protestant Churches, including Evangelical and Charismatic ones. The mainline Churches in Indonesia, which are the members of PGI, argue that the Muslims' misunderstandings about Christianity can be resolved through dialogue, which aims to clarify that Christianity is not a Western religion, building a church is not an attempt at Christianization, and the construction of churches is due to denominational, linguistic, and cultural preferences. These dialogues have helped improve Muslim understanding of Christianity. Nevertheless, achieving a harmonious life among followers of different religions requires time and concerted efforts.

The preservation of harmonious religious coexistence can be disrupted abruptly by radical groups, often fueled by political motivations. A recent incident that made national and international news was the burning of a Lutheran Church (HKI Church) in Aceh Singkil on August 13, 2015. The attack resulted in one fatality and five injured among the radical attackers and forced over 6,000 Christians refugees from Aceh province to flee to North Sumatera Province.³⁵ Following the burning of the HKI church in Sukamakmur village, the mobs proceeded to Dangguran village to burn another Lutheran church (Pakpak Church). However, the Pakpak Church members attempted to protect their church by pleading with the mobs not to burn it. When their pleas went unheeded, they reportedly shot one of the attackers, resulting in the attacker's death and escalating the already tense situation. The incident had the potential to provoke a religious conflict similar to what happened in Maluku Province in the 2000s. As a result, most of

³⁵ "One Dead in Aceh Brawl Over Church Burning," *The Jakarta Post*, October 13, 2015. See <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/10/13/one-dead-aceh-brawl-over-church-burning.html#sthash.4jnsRFll.dpuff>. See also Imran, "Tragedi Aceh: Isak Tangis Kala Gereja Dibongkar" (The Crying out When the Churches were Demolished) in *Tempo*, October 20, 2015.

the local people, who were predominantly Christians, fled the Singkil District in North Sumatera Province for four days. Finally, it led the local people, mostly Christians, to move out from the Singkil District in Aceh Province for Manduamas District in North Sumatera for four days, from Tuesday to Friday, August 13-16, 2015. They only returned to Singkil Aceh after the government and security personnel, including the military and police, ensured their safety.

The Singkil Aceh refugees comprised Lutherans, Catholics, and Evangelicals, with the majority being Lutheran. Upon their arrival in Manduamas, they were warmly welcomed by their Christian brothers and sisters in the district. In this location, the Lutherans worked hand in hand with Catholics to assist the refugees by providing their accommodation, cooking their meals, and attending to their needs. Undoubtedly, the diaconal ministry performed by Lutheran Churches in Manduamas demonstrated their identities as a loving, caring, and cooperative Church.

However, the problem still remained intense for Christians after returning to Singkil.³⁶ The local government had demolished 8 Lutheran and 2 Catholic churches, stating that they would only grant permits for 10 out of the 23 churches belonging to all Christians in Singkil District, under pressure from their Muslim counterparts. This meant that 13 churches would have to be demolished, despite the fact that there was only one church that had been granted permission since before independence in 1945. These 9 churches, including the burnt church, had six months to fulfill the requirements according to the regulation in Aceh province. If they were unable to meet these requirements, their churches would also face demolition.

Rev. Ewen Silitonga, a Lutheran Pastor whose church was burnt on August 13, 2015, in Singkil Aceh, sent a message to the HKI Church Head Office informing them that they had gone to the local government office to apply a permit for their church, as they had 90 signatures from and 60 signatures from Muslim supporters, as required

³⁶ Rev. Ewen Josua Silitonga, *Tragedi Intoleransi Singkil, Aceh* (“Intolerance Tragedy in Singkil, Aceh”). A paper report presented at the meeting of Church Leaders in North Sumatera, in Pematangsiantar, November 9, 2015, 1-6.

by the joint Minister regulations. However, the local government firmly told him that since they lived in Aceh, which has autonomous policies to apply the Muslim sharia, they had to follow the regulations of the Aceh Province. The number of signatures, that is, 150 signatures, must all come from Muslims. This Pastor felt weak and confused due to the difficult struggles he was facing to obtain the permit from the Muslim neighbors. As a result, until now, the members of the demolished churches in Singkil Aceh have to set up tents under the palm oil trees every Sunday as the places for Sunday services. The church building is not there but the communion of the believers keeps going on.

This case obviously indicates how difficult it is to establish a place of worship for Christians. The difficulties in Singkil Aceh are also discerned by the researchers³⁷ from Minister for Religion affairs by entitling their research “The Leaning Tower of the Four Basic Agreements of National Life in Aceh Singkil.” The four basic agreements are Pancasila (Five Principles as the Foundation of Indonesian State), UUD 1945 (Indonesian Constitution), Menjaga NKRI (Defending the Indonesian State), and Bhineka Tunggal Ika (Unity and Diversity) that would be firmly followed by any Indonesian citizen. According to the Indonesian Constitution, everyone has his or her right to practice his or her religion or belief. Moreover, the United Convention says that one’s right to practice his or her belief cannot be prevented by anyone. In short, the researchers underline that the Christians in Aceh Singkil are not supposed to face such religious discrimination that prevents them to build their places of worship.

5. Coping with Religious Challenges and Going Forward

In the face of difficult circumstances, how can Churches effectively express their existence and identity? As Christians, we may feel like strangers and aliens in our own country (cf. 1 Pet 2:11), especially

³⁷ Adang Nofandi and Wakhid Sugiarto, “Miringnya Menara Empat Kesepakatan Dasar Hidup Kebangsaan di Aceh Singkil” (The Leaning Tower of the Four Basic Agreements of National Life in Aceh Singkil) in *Persoalan Pendirian Gereja di Indonesia* (The Problem of Building a Church in Indonesia), Ed. Wahyu Iryana (Jakarta: Litbangdiklat Press, 2020), 41-62.

when we move to other provinces where we are in the minority. There is a striking parallel between the challenges faced by the original recipients of 1 Peter in Asia Minor and those experienced by contemporary Christians in Indonesia. The wise counsel given to the readers of 1 Peter is relevant for Christians in Indonesia as well. They are encouraged to maintain harmonious relationships with followers of other religions, avoid violence, behave honorably, and resist evil desires.

In such situations, Churches must consider how to express their existence and identity. Christians in Indonesia, especially minorities in other provinces, face similar struggles as the recipients of 1 Peter in Asia Minor did in the first century. The wise admonition in 1 Peter, such as maintaining harmonious relationships with other religious followers, conducting oneself honorably, and abstaining from evil desires, are relevant for contemporary Christians in Indonesia.

The Church can express its presence and care for its neighbors by maintaining friendly relationships with them. This can include practicing choir sessions at appropriate times to avoid disturbing neighbors, using public transport or pedicabs to minimize noise and congestion, and supporting neighbors by contributing to public festivals. By doing so, the Church can be seen as inclusive community that cares for its neighbors, with the hope of receiving their care in return.

According to reports,³⁸ the hostility towards Church communities is partly due to their ignorance of their neighbors, which can be resolved through dialogue. Dialogue can eliminate negative characteristics such as exclusivism and a priori assumptions, leading to a harmonious relationship between the Church and its neighbors. Martin Lukito Sinaga³⁹ emphasizes the importance of religious moderation, which promotes

³⁸ See Batara Sihombing, "Interreligious Relations In Indonesia".

Unpublished Paper Presented on Pre-Conference Workshop, Luce Hall, 5 March 2009, New Haven-USA, Yale University by Yale Indonesia Forum.; "Pengenjilan Di Masyarakat Majemuk" (Evangelism in Pluralistic Society) *Journal Teologi Tabernakel* 29, no. 1 (2008): 48-49.

³⁹ Martin Lukito Sinaga, "Moderasi Beragama: Sikap Dan Ekspresi Publik Muktaahir Agama-Agama Di Indonesia" (Religious Moderation: A Public Presence and Expression of Religions in Contemporary Indonesia). *Journal Masyarakat Dan Budaya* 24, no. 3 (2020): 332-344.

respect for human dignity and the common good. Such moderation can guide religions to address social extremism and religious exclusivism more effectively.

With respect to this, the Churches in Indonesia should take the initiative to start dialogue with the followers of other religions in their respective contexts even if they are not all facing hostile treatments from their neighbors. The Churches' involvement in dialogue is understood as extending care towards their neighbors which is part of proclaiming the Gospel or the good news of Christ in this world. Evangelism or extending the Gospel is the main task of the Churches given by the Lord (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 25:45-49; Jn 20:21-22). The Gospel is the salvation in Jesus Christ (Rm 1:16-17; 1 Pet 1:12) that should be extended in holistic form or complete salvation: spiritual and physical, now and here, which sometimes take times to realize due to pietism traditions that focused only on spiritual salvation in heaven brought by Western missionaries to Indonesia in the past. The Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI)⁴⁰ has formulated the complete Gospel to be applied in the Indonesian context, which emphasizes not only the proclamation of salvation but also the prophetic voices such as justice, equality, repentance, well-being, peaceful relationship, and so on. This principle aligns with the concept of salvation today voiced by the World Council of Churches (WCC)⁴¹ in Bangkok in 1972, in which salvation is understood to redeem spirit and body, personal and society, human beings and other creation. Therefore, salvation is being felt and enjoyed in the here and now. This means that dialogue as a means of establishing religious harmonious coexistence could be understood as part of the work of extending the Christian Gospel.

The concept of religious dialogue in Indonesia was introduced by Mukti Ali,⁴² the former Indonesian Minister for Religious Affairs, as

⁴⁰ PGI, *Lima Dokumen Keesaan Gereja* (The Five Documents of the Oneness of the Church) (Jakarta: BPK, 1994), 41.

⁴¹ James A. Scherer, "A Lutheran Perspective on Mission and Evangelism in the 20th Century," in *LWF Report* 11/12 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1982), 91.

⁴² Mukti Ali, "Menatap Hari Depan Dengan Hidup Rukun Antar Umat Beragama" (Looking Forward to the Future by Living Out Harmonious Coexistence Between Different Religious Followers) in *Keadilan Bagi Yang Lemah* (Justice for

a means to foster peaceful relationships among followers of different faiths. Ali proposed four types of dialogue to achieve this goal. The first type is the dialogue of life, which involves individuals of different religions living together harmoniously while practicing their respective beliefs. The second type is the dialogue of social cooperation, where people of different faiths collaborate on projects for the benefit of all, such as environmental cleanup or poverty eradication. The third type is the inter-monastic dialogue, where the leaders of Christian and Muslim faiths are invited to visit and stay in each other's monasteries or pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools). This exchange is aimed at promoting appreciation and understanding between different religions. Finally, the dialogue of theological colloquium is intended to promote the role of all religions in achieving the Indonesian vision, with the state upholding the freedom of religion. This type of dialogue involves a discussion between different religions and the state to deepen their understanding of their respective responsibilities.

According to Mukti Ali, dialogue for harmonious coexistence is not optional but imperative. As previously discussed, Indonesian Christians should engage in dialogue willingly, responsibly, and honestly, as it is seen as an extension of the Gospel. In a pluralistic society, any a priori characteristics that seek to Christianize other religions must be eradicated, as they are not conducive to establishing religious harmonious coexistence. It is important to note that Hans Ucho⁴³ underscores the fact that religious harmonious coexistence does not preclude the task of evangelism. However, the goal of evangelism should not be to monopolize or dominate the beliefs of other religious followers in order to expand Christendom. Rather, the salvation of Christ is extended by exemplifying the life of Jesus Christ in one's own actions and behavior, inspiring others through the power of one's own example.

Exclusivism is another characteristic that is similar to the a priori characteristics discussed earlier, as it attempts to separate itself from its environment. In the context of religious pluralism, exclusivists, due to

the Weak), eds. K.P. Erari et al. (Jakarta: BPK, 1995), 234-236.

⁴³ Hanks Ucho, "Rethinking Mission in a Pluralistic World," in *Membangun Tubuh Kristus* (Building the Body of Christ), eds. J.R. Hutauruk et al. (P. Siantar: STT HKBP, 1996), 407.

their strong allegiance to their religions, often isolate themselves in order to avoid any interaction with followers of other religions. However, in today's globalized world, where people rely on one another in many aspects of life, and in light of the Church's mission to engage with people of different religions, exclusivism is not a suitable choice. According to Dieter Becker,⁴⁴ being human means understanding the world, fostering fellowship, and acknowledging one's tasks and responsibilities. Human beings were created as social beings (Gen 2:18) and are meant to establish relationships with other creatures and people. This view is shared by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF),⁴⁵ which emphasizes that "dialogue is deeply rooted in the nature of Christian faith. The Christian faith is based on communication, as it participates in the movement of communication in the nature of God." Thus, dialogue is at the heart of Christian faith.

In Singkil, Aceh Province, where churches have been demolished and burnt down, Christians have taken several actions to respond to the situation. Firstly, the Lutheran Communion in Indonesia held a meeting of Lutheran leaders to discuss how to handle the problems in Aceh Singkil.⁴⁶ The meeting stressed the importance of Christians avoiding any violent responses to the angry mobs who destroy their Church buildings and instead maintaining harmonious relationships with their Muslim neighbors. Secondly, the meeting recommended that all Church leaders in North Sumatera write a letter to the Indonesian President to request assurance that Christians in Singkil, Aceh can build their places of worship as Indonesian citizens. Additionally, Church leaders were encouraged to call on Christian politicians and legislators to review the regulations pertaining to church construction in Aceh Province. Thirdly, the Lutheran Churches are exploring the possibility of sharing a Church building among 3-5 Churches for Sunday worship. This type of cooperation has been successfully implemented by Lutheran Churches in Java Island where it is challenging to construct churches.

⁴⁴ Dieter Becker, "Finding the Truth by Living Together the Religious Dialogue with Strangers," in *Membangun Tubuh Kristus*, eds. J.R. Hutauruk et al. (P. Siantar: STT HKBP, 1996), 329.

⁴⁵ J. Paul Rajashekar (ed.), "Religious Pluralism and Lutheran Theology," in *LWF Report 23/24* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1988), 181.

⁴⁶ These leaders meeting have been done twice, October 26 and November 9, 2015. This meeting is also supported by the Communion of Indonesian Churches in North Sumatera.

In essence, the Churches in Indonesia, as the body of Christ, are called to faithfully follow Jesus Christ in their own context. It is Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, who has placed Indonesian Christians living in Indonesia with its various struggles. Martin Luther asserts that true theology is the theology of the cross (LW 31:40). Therefore, Indonesian Christians ought to faithfully follow Christ and discern the works of God through suffering and the cross. The mission of the Church, which includes living in harmony with non-believers, peacefully proclaiming the Gospel of peace, kindly administering the Sacraments, wisely contributing to nation-building, and faithfully educating Church members are practical tasks that should be carried out with integrity.

6. Conclusion

The receivers of 1 Peter, who resided in Asia Minor, were labeled as aliens and strangers in their community. As member of the early Church, they were subjected to persecution and hostility due to their faith. In light of their suffering, the author of the paraenetic letter sought to strengthen and console the recipients so that they could live out their faith among the Gentiles. Today, Indonesian Christians face similar challenges as a religious minority in predominantly Muslims areas when seeking to establish a place of worship. To address these difficulties, Indonesian Christians are advised to maintain a harmonious relationship with adherents of other religions and to exhibit exemplary conduct that might persuade their Muslim neighbors to appreciate the necessity of having a place of worship. In this manner, the Christian community can communicate its presence through positive interaction with non-Christians.

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