




Unity in Diversity: An Exploration of the Indonesian Concept of 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika' According to the Bible

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Abstract

This research explores the concept, principles, and implementation of 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,' the official national motto of Indonesia, according to the Holy Bible. The objective is to enable Christians to biblically evaluate and implement the values of 'Bhinneka Tunggal Ika' in the context of the nation. The research methodology involves a combination of literature review and theological study. The findings indicate that the Holy Bible teaches the concept of diversity in three categories: uncreated diversity, created diversity, and diversity resulting from human sin. The second type of diversity should be appreciated, while the third type should be accepted as it is. The Holy Bible does not address the unity of believers with individuals of different religions but emphasizes unity among the people of God. Nevertheless, the Holy Bible teaches one to appreciate and not belittle anyone of a different faith, maintaining a neutral stance towards their religion – neither demeaning nor respecting it. Christians, in fostering unity within the national context, should operate within the social sphere rather than the religious one. While Christians should be exclusive in their faith in Jesus as the Saviour, they should be inclusive in their social interactions with all people as 'God is love'..

Keywords: Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, Unity, Diversity, Bible, Indonesia

Introduction

With the establishment of "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" as the official motto and even as one of the pillars of the foundation of the Indonesian state (Laura & Rahman, 2023), it affirms that this motto carries profound and robust significance in the context of realizing unity within a diverse society. The fundamental meaning of this motto is "unity in diversity" (Farisi, 2014; Hartanti & Ardhana, 2022), akin to the motto of the United States, "e Pluribus Unum," signifying unity amid diversity, various but singular (Pursika, 2009).

Previous research indicates that historically the concept of "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" has been utilized at least since the eighth and ninth century in the territory now called Indonesia (Farisi, 2014). However, it must be emphasized that Bhinneka Tunggal Ika is a universal principle, that can be explained philosophically and metaphysically, as articulated and practiced by Humaidi and Lestari in the context of philosophy and Islamic teachings (Humaidi & Lestari, 2023). Thus, this research will explore whether the concept of "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" is present in the Bible, written long before the eighth and ninth century, and subsequently, how its principles and



implementations align with the teachings of the Bible. This constitutes the distinction and uniqueness of this research from previous studies.

The study of the concept of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in the Bible has not been previously undertaken. Earlier research conducted by Han, Sukamto, and Pramono focused on the concept of solidarity in Christianity to advocate for “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*”, drawing inspiration from the parable of the compassionate Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) (Han, et al., 2023). Several studies on unity in diversity according to the Bible, unrelated to the Indonesian motto, include works such as “*Unity in the Presence of Diversity in the Biblical and Contemporary US Cultures: What Jesus Teaches about Social Cohesion Based on Matthew 5:3-12*” by Alina Wreczycki (Wreczycki, 2021); “*Diversity in Unity: An Analysis of Multicultural and Multi-Religious Diversity in a Biblical Gender Perspective*” by Nuniek Ernaningrum (Ernaningrum, 2022); “*Unity in Diversity: The Gospel and Ethnicity*” in *Counter Culture: Following Christ in an Anti-Christian Age* by David Platt (Platt, 2017).

Research Methodology

The research method employed in this article involves a focused literature review on the meaning or main concept of *Bhineka Tunggal Ika*, combined with a theological study of this concept. The steps undertaken are as follows: firstly, elucidating the meaning or main concept of *Bhineka Tunggal Ika*; secondly, conducting a theological study of the concept; thirdly, presenting its application for Christians in implementing the biblical values of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in the national context of Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

The Concept of “*Bhineka Tunggal Ika*” in its Historical Context in Indonesia

This motto does not emerge without historical context. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the history of the emergence of this motto to expound its main meaning or concept. Farisi delves deeper into the origins and meaning of the motto. According to him, “the concept emerged during the Sailendra or Sanjaya dynasty in the eighth and ninth century for the purpose of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between Buddhism and Hinduism” (Farisi, 2014). As evidence, the two largest monuments, namely the Borobudur Temple (Buddhist) associated with the Sriwijaya kingdom, which had a large empire extending beyond Java with a maritime spirit, and the Prambanan Temple (Hindu) associated with the Majapahit kingdom, which extended to every corner of Javanese culture (Lestari, 2019).

Furthermore, Farisi recorded:

After 200 years, King Airlangga established the Kahuripan kingdom in East Java to unite the two religions using the same principle. This is elucidated in the *kakawin* (ancient Javanese poem) *Arjuno Wiwaha* or *Arjuna Wijaya* (the marriage of Arjuna) written by Mpu (poet) Kanwa around 1030 CE. This principle is also found in the *kakawin Sutasoma*, written by Mpu Tantular during the reign of King Rajasanagara (Hayam Wuruk) of the Majapahit Kingdom in the 14th century (Farisi, 2014: 47).

Putri and Mubarok argue that “the *Sutasoma* manuscript was revised by Sri Ranamanggala between 1365 CE and 1369 CE, during the rule of Hayam Wuruk” (Putri & Mubarok, 2003).

Farisi explained the situation that occurred at that time as follows:



At that time, Hayam Wuruk faced opposing forces between Hinduism (Shiva), the official religion of Majapahit, and Buddhism as the second religion. These conflicting forces began to destroy each other, leading to a problematic situation that was detrimental to the Majapahit kingdom. The king then instructed Mpu Tantular to write a *kakawin* to foster tolerance on both sides. Thus, this poem is a doctrine of reconciliation between Hinduism and Buddhism to promote tolerance between Hindu (Shiva) and Buddhist followers (Farisi, 2014: 47).

The presence of the Bhineka Tunggal Ika concept before Majapahit is also justified by Maftukhin, Firdaus, and Khamami, who later found the motto explicitly stated in the *kakawin Sutasoma*. The term is mentioned in verse 5 of the traditional poem 139, as follows:

Jawa Kuno	Terjemahan Indonesia
Rwāneka dhātu winuwus Buddha Wiswa,	Buddha and Shiva are two distinct entities (essences).
Bhinnêki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen,	Indeed, they are different, but how can they be recognized?
Mangka ng Jinatwa kalawan Śiwatatwa tunggal,	For the truth of Jina (Buddha) and Shiva is unity.
Bhinnêka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa.	Diverse yet fundamentally one, there is no duality in their truths.

Inspired by this motto, the founders of the Indonesian nation proposed and adopted it as the national motto of Indonesia (see Constitution NRI 1945 chapter 36 A; Law 24/2009 chapter 46; Law 12/2011 chapter 6 verse 1; Government Regulation Number 66 chapter 5, 1951). The reason behind this decision is rooted in Indonesia's pluralistic and multicultural society, characterized by linguistic, cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial diversity among its people. Through this motto, the Indonesian people strive to realize unity and harmony (Rahman & at al., 2020) and this is essential for national sustainability. The meaning of unity ("tunggal ika") in Bhinneka Tunggal Ika reflects a rational emphasis on similarities rather than differences. Unity is a depiction of an ideal. It is considered an ideal because unity represents a hope or aspiration to lift or place the elements of diversity inherent in the Indonesian nation into a shared common receptacle, namely the Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia (NKRI). Unity is an effort to create a receptacle capable of unifying the diversity (Pursika, 2009).

The motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" constitutes a single phrase". The word "Bhinneka" is a polymorphemic combination of the words "bhina" and "ika." In its original language, Sanskrit, "bhina" is derived from the word "bhid," meaning "different." Subsequently, the word "bhid" evolved into "bhinna," which was then combined with the word "ika" (that). Therefore, 'Bhinneka' means "that which is different." "Tunggal ika" means 'that which is one.' Thus, structurally, the phrase "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" can be interpreted as "that which is different, that which is one" (Riyanto & at al., 2023).

Another analysis suggests that the word "bhinneka" consists of the elements "bhinn-a-eka." The element "a" means not, and "eka" means one. So, the word "bhinneka" can also mean "that which is not one" (Pursika, 2009). In Indonesian, this motto can be interpreted as "different yet still one." In this sense, it encompasses two aspects. First, the phrase "different yet still one" can be understood quantitatively as "there is more than one," and qualitatively as "being different."



Second, the phrase "still one" implies that across past, present, and future, it "does not change into not being one." In the context of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* as a motto, the aspects of "different yet still one" are related to the conditions and life of the people (Riyanto & at al., 2023).

From the above description, from a historical perspective, it can be concluded that the concept of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* emerged in the context of a desire to live in unity between two different religions (Buddhism and Hinduism) at that time, based on the belief in *tan hana dharma mangrwa* (there is no dualistic truth). The word *dharma* can also be interpreted as God. Later on, the context became more general when this motto was adopted and established as the official motto and one of the pillars of the Indonesian nation, signifying the aspiration to live together in diversity of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and more, through the framework of the Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia (NKRI) in the context of being the official motto of the Indonesian nation.

The concept of "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" in the Bible

Diversity in the Bible

In relation to human existence, diversity in the Bible can be categorized based on its nature: diversity that is uncreated, diversity created by God, and diversity caused by sin. First, uncreated diversity is exclusive to the one Triune God alone. The Triune God is diverse in Person, yet singular in essence or being. As articulated by Geisler: "Secondly, the diversity created by God includes gender diversity, namely male and female (Genesis 1:26-27) (Wenham, 2017); diversity in roles, with women as helpers (Genesis 2:20), men as the head of women (1 Corinthians. 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-23), and as husbands and wives; diversity in physical forms; and diversity in ethnicities (?) (Acts 17:26)."

Thirdly, diversity caused by sin is the diversity that arises after humanity falls into sin, or can also be referred to as the consequences of sin itself. Examples include linguistic, cultures, customs, and beliefs or religions diversity (Genesis 11:1-9) and diversity in social strata: some are poor, some rich, some middle-class (Genesis 3).

Thus, the Bible does not assert that every sort of diversity is a gift from God, as claimed by some in the context of diversity in Indonesia (Kewuel & at al., 2017; Adomassana, 2017; Widodo, 2019). The diversity created by God is the true gift. On the other hand, diversity that arises after the fall of humanity and is a consequence of that fall into sin is not a gift. All religions are forms of diversity that emerged after humanity fell into sin, and can even be considered as consequences of sin itself. Religions are attempts initiated by people to win God's favor in the hope that God will understand and respond by giving his favor. Although Christianity is considered one of the world's religions, it differs from other religions in one remarkable way. Christianity emerged as a belief system based upon God's own initiative in dealing with human sin and its consequences, in the coming of God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ to seek and restore the broken relationship with humanity. Thus Christianity presents a new and effective way to resolve sin, namely through individual human beings responding in trust and gratitude to the initiative of God to reconcile us to himself. Sin cannot be resolved by human initiative, no matter how sincere or well-intentioned. It can only be resolved through human atonement and the sacrifice of Christ as a sinless human being on the cross and accepting that he took our judgment upon himself.

Unity in the Bible



The command for unity in the Bible is exclusively related to the unity of the people of God or his nation termed -the *laos tou theou*. (Nicolaidis, 2010). For example, the people of God in the Old Testament, namely Israel, were commanded to live in unity. Similarly, the people of God in the New Testament are also instructed to live in unity, even though each member is diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, tribe, language, education, and other aspects. This is because Christ has reconciled and united everyone who believes through His sacrifice on the cross (Ephesians 2:13-19). Believers become one in their faith, brothers and sisters of one family with one heavenly Father. Each person abandons previous beliefs that are in conflict with the teachings of Jesus and is willing to unite in faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Therefore, what unites every Christian is their faith in Christ, their confidence in the efficacy of his death and resurrection from the dead, and their allegiance to him. Therefore, what unites every Christian is their faith in Christ. Or they unite in their faith in Christ.

The term "unity" in the Greek New Testament related to the unity of believers is "*henotes*" (Ephesians 4:3, 13), derived from the word "*heis*," meaning "one" (Danker, 2021). *Henotes* means a state of unity or being in harmony and concord. The idea is: (1) there is an object that unites or something that is one, namely faith in Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of sinners. Thus, faith must be unified, not diverse, meaning contradictory beliefs from other religions are excluded; (2) it is preserved, not created, by believers, because the Lord Jesus is the one who creates or provides unity. Believers are commanded to preserve it; (3) it is not uniformity. It still recognizes other diversities such as gender, tribe, language, culture (as long as these do not contradict the word of God).

Unity in Diversity in the Bible

Several examples of unity in diversity or diversity in unity can be found in the Bible. First, the Trinitarian Godhead, who has distinct Persons (*bhinneka*), namely the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit or Comforter the Paraclete (Nicolaidis, 2010). However, the three are oneness (unity) in essence; they cannot be separated and are not mixed. Second, the books of the Holy Bible, were written by different authors, in different times, under different circumstances, addressed to different audiences, yet they have unity in their message – the salvation of humanity from God through Jesus Christ (Liefeld, 1982). Third, the diversity of believers in relation to their roles is depicted as the diversity of members (organs) of the body, each with different functions but forming one body (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Fourth, the diversity of believers in relation to their backgrounds, yet they are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Therefore, the concept of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity) has been expressed in the Bible long before its usage in the eighth and ninth centuries in the history of Indonesia.

Biblical Attitude in Achieving Unity in Diversity in Indonesia

The diversity created by God should be appreciated, while the diversity resulting from sin should be accepted as it is, as a consequence of human sin, without using it as a means to degrade one another. One remaining issue is related to unity in religious diversity. The question is, what does the Holy Bible teach about it? Does the Holy Bible teach unity in religious diversity? How should Christians approach it?

The Holy Bible never commands the realization of unity among religions (i.e., religions merging to form a new religion) because this would be syncretism. The Old Testament is very exclusive regarding religion. The nation of Israel was forbidden from forming alliances with other nations



due to their differing beliefs. Similarly, in the New Testament, the church is prohibited from forming alliances with other religions (2 Corinthians 6:14-16). However, in a social context, the Bible teaches us to love all people (Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:19), to pray for all people, for kings and rulers to bring about peace and tranquility (1 Timothy 2:1-3), to respect everyone and honor kings (1 Peter 2:17), to submit to and not rebel against authorities (Romans 13:1), and to seek the welfare of the city where believers reside (Jeremiah 29:7).

Therefore, the efforts of Christian individuals as Indonesian citizens to achieve unity in religious diversity should be carried out within the context of social relationships or interests, rather than within the context of religious relationships or interests. The focus of unity is in relation to shared social interests, not religion interests. Thus, the correct attitude for Christians is to love and appreciate people within that religion, and take a neutral stance toward their religion, neither degrading it nor affirming it as true. Mohler, Jr. expresses a similar idea, "We are called to love and respect Muslims, *people of other religions* (my addition), not Islam or *other religions* (my addition)" (Mohler Jr., 2009). When Jesus Christ met the Samaritan woman who had a different religion, He did not have a demeaning attitude nor did he express appreciation for her religion. Instead, He interacted with her by revealing the truth that she had not yet possessed (John 4:1-26). Similarly, Paul addressed the idol-worshipping people of Athens (Acts 17). This attitude should be adopted and practiced by every believer towards those of different religions. In this regard, the Indonesian concept of implementing the values of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* differs from the teachings of the Bible, especially in implementing unity in the context of religious diversity. Indonesia requires citizens to respect and not insult the religion of others. Meanwhile, the Bible teaches a neutral attitude towards the religions of others because the object of respect, that is not to be demeaned, is the person, not the religion. While the Bible specifies the object of respect is the person, not the religion, in the Indonesian conception, the object of respect is the religion, not the person. The two principles of implementing the first pillar of Pancasila prove this: "respecting other people's religions and not insulting the religion of others." The object of these two principles is the religions, not the people.

Conclusion

The concept of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* has deep historical roots, particularly in the context of a desire for unity between two different religions (Buddhism and Hinduism) in the eighth and ninth century. This concept was later adopted as the official motto of Indonesia, emphasizing unity in diversity of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and more.

The concept of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is already present in the Bible long before the eighth and ninth century. In the biblical context, diversity is discussed in three categories: diversity not created, diversity created by God, and diversity caused by sin. The Bible does not state that all diversity is a gift from God; diversity created by God is a gift, while diversity arising from sin must be accepted as a consequence of human sin. Meanwhile, the command for unity is only related to the unity of the people of God who must continue to live together despite having diversity in all aspects. What unites them and the context in which they unite is their belief or faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This unity is obtained through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and believers must preserve it by mutually respecting and considering one another (1 Corinthians 12), as well as living in peace (Ephesians 4:3).

Both the Bible and the laws applicable in Indonesia do not command the unity of religions to create a new religion where everyone unites. This is syncretism, which is rejected in the Bible. Biblically, Christian efforts to implement *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in Indonesia should be done in the



context of social interests, not religious interests. Christians should love and appreciate all people because they are social beings created by God and in his image. However, they should take a neutral stance towards other religions, meaning not showing a demeaning attitude but also not uncritically accepting them as true. Evangelical Christians should be exclusive in their faith in the Lord Jesus but inclusive in their social interaction with all people. For Christians, this social interaction is a means or opportunity to lovingly proclaim the salvation that is in Jesus Christ alone to those who are not yet saved.

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