



Javanese Religious Expression Through *Kenduren* Tradition

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze Javanese religious expression which was realized in a form of *kenduren* tradition. The researcher used semiotics approach to interpret the symbols in *kenduren* tradition and expose integrative Islamic education in the tradition. The conclusion of the research was *kenduren* as one of the religious expressions for Javanese people. Through the tradition, the society integrated several Islamic teachings such as prayer, *zikir*, gratitude expression, *silaturahmi* (maintain human relationship), and human equality. Therefore, the people involved in *kenduren* was expected to have a better attitude because they have implemented the value of Islamic teachings through the tradition.

Keywords: *religious expression, javanese, kenduren tradition*

A. Introduction

Islamic education is considered successful if the teaching has become a tradition in the community. Tradition really determines the continuity of Islamic teaching. Therefore, tradition needs to be integrated with Islamic teachings. Eliminating tradition is a difficult thing, but making it a form of expression of religious teaching and making it in suitable with Islamic teaching is a wise thing that can be done by the community. Javanese people who are predominantly Muslim have not yet been able to leave Javanese traditions and culture. Javanese people who hold strongly on their religious teachings will choose traditions that are not contradictory with Islamic teachings. However, the people who do not have sufficient Islamic understanding will maintain the tradition of their ancestors and practice them in daily life, even if they are contrary to the teachings of Islam.

In Javanese tradition, *kenduren* is done by most people in the society who are Muslim. This tradition is maintained as an effort to preserve the ancestral cultural heritage

and also as a means of Islamic preach and prayers to Allah. Some people argue that *kenduren* is a ritual that needs to be abandoned because it is not suitable with the teaching of Islam and tends to lead to *shirk*, but the others assume that *kenduren* needs to be implemented as a means to keep human relationship and worship to Allah.

The pros and cons of *kenduren* or which can be referred to as a ritual to ask for blessing, continue to develop in the community nowadays. Community needs to have broad insight to be wiser in assessing and determining their attitudes about traditions that have been practiced for generations. People who are pro to *kenduren* need to review the tradition, so that they can better interpret and have strong reasons why the tradition must be preserved. People who are in contra side to *kenduren* also need to know the meaning of the tradition, so they will be wiser in judging a tradition.

B. Research Approach

This study used a semiotic approach to interpret the symbols contained in *kenduren* and reveal the integrative Islamic education in the tradition. Semiotics is a branch of knowledge that examines signs. This science assumes that social and cultural phenomena are a set of signs and each sign can have different meanings. When the same sign has been functioned and understood in a different position, it will have different meanings (Imron, 2011, p.9). Signs that are widespread in all elements of society are free to be interpreted by anyone. Critical thinking ability, broad insight, and awareness toward a phenomenon will be a capital for someone to read a sign or phenomenon.

Every single thing can be a sign, including traditions, for example *kenduren* tradition. Tradition has a broad range of meanings, depending on those who interpret it. Interpreters have different backgrounds, both background of study, scientific fields, experiences, or other differences, so the formulas and meanings they produce will also vary. The interpretation of the symbols of *kenduren* is expected not only as an insight, but also contextual and applicable and can make concrete contributions to the dynamics and developments that exist.

Interpretation of *kenduren* symbols can be done through various approaches to scientific disciplines. Traditions that have many symbols need to be studied through a semiotic approach. Therefore, the author would discuss *kenduren* through semiotic approach. The author did a critical reading of Islamic education contained in the symbols of *kenduren* by using a semiotic approach to gain deep understanding.

Semiotics is a branch of knowledge that examines and interprets signs or symbols or text. Dabagh Amirmasoud in his paper stated that “the reading of a text creates in general a new system that aims to reflect and reproduce the text” (Amirmasoud, 2015). Thus, the reading of text and symbols by using semiotics aims to study the matter deeper so that it can gain new meaning that brings many benefits and can produce new texts or symbols that are more in line with the current context of life.

Kenduren is essentially carried out not to hold a feast, but as a form of gratitude in order to get a blessing from Allah, pray for those who hold the event, and pray for the deceased person for his/her soul and good deed to be accepted by Allah SWT. Today's *kenduren* has also left things that can cause *shirk*, such as offerings for spirit and casting spells. Therefore, *kenduren* can be regarded as an Islamic tradition and has many benefits for the community.

C. *Kenduren* as A Tradition

Tradition comes from Latin word, which is *traditio* which means to continue. The term tradition is defined as a belief or habit that is taught orally through generations. A good tradition will form a good culture, and a good culture will shape good character in the individual community (Roqib, 2011, pp.100-101). Tradition is a long legacy that remains sustainable and lasts long, and develops in a society without coercion and pressure. Tradition becomes a medium for expressing ideas and socio-cultural contacts collectively and is part of a culture that is inherited from generation to generation as shared property (Endraswara, 2005, pp. 1-2). Tradition is closely related to beliefs and values, because traditions often emerge based on beliefs and values.

Javanese is a religious community that believe in a power that controls the entire universe. The religious life of the people in Java before the arrival of Islam was very heterogeneous. Before Hindu and Buddhism, prehistoric Javanese people had embraced animist and dynamism beliefs. Animism is a cult that believes in spirit as an extraordinary power that resides in humans, animals, plants, and everything in this universe. With this belief, the people worship the spirit of the ancestors. Ritual is usually done with offerings and feast. The purpose of this ritual is as a form of an asking to the ancestral spirit to provide salvation for the descendant who are still alive (Ridwan, 2008, p.44).

Besides animism, there was also a dynamism. Dynamism is a belief which see things in nature to have a supranatural power, such as tree, stone, animal, and human itself. Thus, the pre-Hindu Buddhist belief in Javanese society was the belief in unseen things (invisible). They hope that they would not be disturbed by this power (Ridwan, 2008, p.44). Even though there has been a transformation of beliefs from animism-dynamism, Hinduism-Buddhism, to Islam, most people still have mystical beliefs and still hold on to tradition. The tradition that develops in society today is a tradition that has undergone acculturation with Islamic culture and its application has been adapted to Islamic teachings.

Tradition is important to be guide to mutual association in society. Johanes said that "without tradition, mutual association will become chaotic, and human life will become barbaric" (Ridwan, 2008, p. 44). Thus, tradition becomes necessary to be preserved in people's lives. Nevertheless, humans as cultured and religious beings sometimes become hesitant to carry out a tradition for fear of deviating from their religious teaching. The

solution to this problem is to make existing traditions to be in line with religious teaching, not by eliminating or leaving the tradition.

If a tradition is abandoned, then the community will become an uncivilized society. In addition, a tradition which is abruptly removed will probably reappear in the future in the same form and will not have a positive impact on society. If the existed tradition is not eliminated, but adjusted to teaching of religion, then it will have a positive impact on society. By carrying out the tradition, the people indirectly also carry out religious teaching.

Religion is absolute, applies to every space and time, while tradition is relative and limited by space and time (Madjid, 2003, p.36). Tradition can be used as a vehicle for religious expression. *Kenduren* as a tradition can also be used as a vehicle for public expression in carrying out the teaching of Islam, as long as the tradition does not contain things that deviate from Islamic teaching. As religious people, we are instructed to learn a lot of knowledge, as expressed by Ibrahim ibn Isma'il in his book which stated (isma'il, tt, p.4):

Human is ordered to study the religion such as Ushul ad-Din, Fiqh, and others. Other knowledge here includes science and culture. Therefore, human must learn a lot of knowledge, with the hope that the knowledge learned can be associated to one another and not to be contested. Roy Killen stated in his book that “creative learners approach every life experience with the expectation that it can be unique” (Killen, 2007, p.5). It means that creative learning is a learning process that can make someone able to get a unique life experience. It is in accordance with the objectives of integrative education, which is to make someone have experience that can be applied in everyday life. *Kenduren* is expected not only to become a symbol of tradition and a ritual for the community, but can also reach its essence to get closer to Allah.

An important ceremony in Javanese customs is a feast called *kenduren* or *selamatan* which aims to eliminate difficulty and sadness, strengthen the faith, or to purify the mind. *Kenduren* is a tradition in the religious system which is generally carried out by Javanese people, usually held in the family home and attended by close neighbors who are mostly men. The tradition is mostly done at night on the front porch or front room in the house. The homeowner will move the furniture to clear out the space to get a wider space. The base used for seating is a mat or carpet and people who attend *kenduren* will sit in a row at the edge of the wall with cross-legged position (Koentjaraningrat, 1994, pp.344-345).

Kenduren is led by a community leader who is considered capable of leading prayers and directing *kenduren* ceremony, such as ulama. The order of the *kenduren* process that is usually done by the Javanese people nowadays is generally done as follows:

1. The host of *kenduren* will ask for help from the neighbors or relatives to deliver a letter or verbal message to other neighbours door to door to inform the time of *kenduren*.

2. Neighbours gather at the house of the *kenduren*'s host at the time of the invitation (usually after *maghrib* or *isya*).
3. The leader of the ceremony representing the host starts the ceremony and explains the intent of *kenduren*.
4. *Kenduren* is done by reading prayers, which is led by leader.
5. After praying, they pray *sholawat* and the host will prepare the meal.
6. After eating the meal, the leader closes the ceremony.
7. The invitees shake hands with the host, and they will bring home *takir* or *berkat* (a prepared take-home food) in which the food will vary depending on the purpose of the *kenduren*.

Kenduren is usually called as *selamatan* or *syukuran*. Even so, the word *kenduren* has a broader meaning, because this tradition can be done in the context of saying gratitude for the abundance of blessing, praying for the deceased family member, wedding celebrations or circumcisions, and so forth. By that means, *kenduren* is a tradition that can be done both for joyful moments and grieving. The term *selamatan* or *syukuran* is identical to joyful things, such as praying for new homes, wedding ceremonies, and other things. It is not called *selamatan* or *syukuran* for grieving moment. *Kenduren* is done to celebrate almost all events, including birth, death, marriage, house-moving, and many more. It is a tradition to avoid misfortune.

Kenduren can have different names in each region, but the essence of this tradition is the gathering of people to pray for host of *kenduren*. In addition, the characteristic of this tradition is the existence of shared meals (both snacks and main course), and bringing home *takir* or *berkat* (wrapped food). In the current development, *takir* or *berkat* can be in the form of processed food consisting of rice, vegetables and side dishes, can also be in the form of food in the form of rice, oil, eggs, noodles, sugar, and so forth. *Takir* or *berkat* in the form of food ingredients are commonly used for *kenduren* for the death commemoration of a person.

In the creativity of society which is manifested in the form of tradition, a universal teaching system such as religion has found its relevance to the specific and real demands of its followers. Every good tradition must have the basic ideas which is derived from the main sources of Islamic teaching. Thus, awareness of the richness of tradition and the ability of the community to create or renew traditions in accordance with Islamic teaching is needed.

D. *Kenduren* as Javanese Religious Expression

Kenduren is a Javanese tradition or culture that is carried out from generation to generation, yet this tradition has evolved over time. *Kenduren* has an Islamic ambience which cannot be separated from the role of Walisongo (the nine saints). Walisongo are

figures who gave a big contribution in spreading Islam on Java island. In spreading Islam, Walisongo optimized and used education, teaching, arts, entertainment, and other things creatively. These fields were used as *wasilah* or connection in Islamizing Javanese land which still embraced Hinduism-Buddhism and Animism-Dynamism.

In religious life, they built mosques, Islamic boarding schools, madrassas, religious education institutions, formed *tarekat* associations and made creative Islamic preach by commemorating Islamic holidays. *Selamatan* or *kenduren* which became a tradition in Java originally came from *shadaqah sunnah*, or sharing to others, which was recommended by the saints (Saksono, 1996, pp.150-151). This indicated that *kenduren* is an application of Islamic teaching that originated from Walisongo creativity in order to spread Islam.

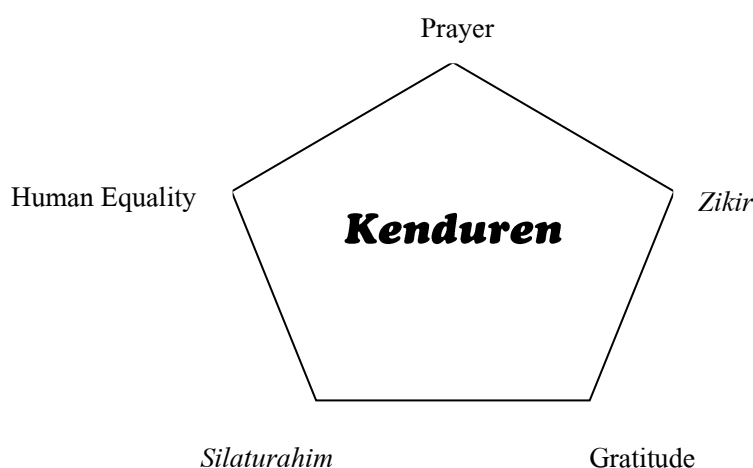
Regarding tradition or culture, Ballantine and Joan stated that “the cultural models involved tend to be very widespread around the world” (Ballantine & Spade, 2004, p.189). Culture in the world comes in different types. Human cannot be separated from the name of culture. Therefore, culture is something that must be considered by all parties. As for Muslim, our main basis is the Koran and Hadith, not culture. We as human beings and also Muslims who have the knowledge must be wise in combining common knowledge, religion and culture.

Islam came as response to various community problems. With its teachings, Islam broke the established structure of society (Sutrisno & Albarobis, 2012, p.101). As a perfect religion, Islam has teaching that contain various aspects of human life for anytime and place. In general, the basic teaching of Islam originating from the Koran and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad which can be grouped into three categories, namely Aqedah, sharia, and morality. Aqedah teaches about the belief or faith, sharia concerns with the teachings of laws, and morality concerns with the teachings of noble character. *Kenduren* is closely related to Islamic teaching, because the concept of Aqedah is believing in the power which governs the universe, the existence of superstition and the one who grants prayer, that is Allah, combined with the concept of worship such as prayer and *zikir*, then combined with moral concepts for fellow human beings.

Kenduren is held with the intention to maintain solidarity. In *kenduren*, there are aspects of the religious aspect, because it is filled with readings of prayer and *zikir*. Besides that, gathering in *kenduren* can also strengthen the relationship among the people. Islamic teachings are not only normative and formalistic, but must be implemented in daily life and must be able to deal with social reality (Syukur, 2009, p.8). Faith which is a normative teaching is actually a combination of "a series of dogmas" and "a method of life ritual", then faith and piety are actually influenced also by one's religious style (Ricklefs, 2013, pp.732-733). Regarding religious style, Javanese people uphold the concept of togetherness. Thus, in carrying out anything they tend to be together with all members of the community. In Islamic teaching, this statement is known as the concept

of congregation. *Kenduren* is a tradition that applies the concept of congregation and integrates several values of Islamic education into a whole practice.

Kenduren is a form of Javanese religious expression. In this tradition, the community integrates Islamic teaching regarding prayer, remembrance, gratitude, friendship, and human equality. Thus, people who implement *kenduren* are expected to have a better attitude, because they have applied the values of Islamic education through this tradition. It is suitable with Hergenhann and Olson's statement who stated that "learning is indexed by a change in behavior" (Hergenhann & Olson, 2006, p.2). Therefore, the learning process is identified by behavior change. *Kenduren* tradition is like a community learning process that directs individuals in society to be able to have better behavior. The integration of Islamic teaching in *kenduren* can be illustrated in the following chart:



The explanation from each Islamic teaching which is included in *kenduren* is explained as follows:

1. Prayer

Prayer is an appeal to God, and as a proof of one's recognition of the power of God, because His power and help will fulfill all requests and needs. The more often someone asks or pleads to God, then God will be pleased with that person. Prayer is a spiritual weapon. In any situation, such as sad, happy, or even sick, Muslims are told to always pray. In any circumstances and conditions, people are always encouraged to pray, to ask something to the All-Giving One (Asmani, 2009, p.86). The One and Only Giver of everything in this universe is Allah SWT.

Prayer is the call and request of the servant to the Creator for the help and the surrender of the servant to Allah SWT in every matter and problem. The prayer in the Koran contains various meanings, including *al-Ibadah* which means dedication or surrender, *al-Isti'annah* means a request for help, *as-Su'al* means a request, *an-Nida* meaning call or appeal, *ats-Tsana* means appraisal, and *al-Qaul* means expression or words (Al-Jundy, 2009, pp.11-14). Based on this definition, prayer includes the category

of worship, dedication or devotion to Allah. Islamic teaching which concerns about prayer stated in *Al-Qur'an Surah Asy-Syuura* verse 26 which says:

“And accepteth those who do good works, and giveth increase unto them of His bounty. And as for disbelievers, theirs will be an awful doom.”

From the abovementioned verse, we know that the prayers from those who believe and do good deeds will be granted by Allah. The tradition of *kenduren* is a tradition that includes elements of prayer in it. The *kenduren* leader guides the people present in *kenduren* to pray for the salvation and happiness of the world and the hereafter for everybody and especially for those who are prayed for *kenduren*. People say prayers together in *kenduren* with the hope that the prayer will be quickly heard by Allah. Everyone can indeed pray alone without congregation as practiced in the *kenduren*, but not everyone remembers praying when they are alone. Therefore, *kenduren* is also a reminder of the entire community to always pray to Allah.

2. Zikir

Zikir means remembering Allah. Zikir can be done by remembering Allah in the heart, or calling it verbally, and can also be done by thinking of the power of God in the universe. People who believe in Allah are those who have never miss to have remembrance of Him. By verbalizing a lot of zikir, the heart will be at peace. If the heart is filled with love for Him, then the tongue must be automatically reciting His name. With a lot of zikir done verbally, the heart will feel peaceful.

Zikir is the most important worship and is a way to get closer to Allah. Muslims are commanded to always do zikir as much as possible to Allah. With zikir, someone will always remember Allah, the heart will be calm and will distant someone from being immoral. Zikir is one way to eradicate sin, renew faith, grow a peacefulness. Prophet Sulaiman has also taught that one way to zikir is to remember the name of Allah, that is (*zikrullah*), both by word, heart or mind. Islamic teaching on zikir, one of which is written in *Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Ahzab* verse 41 which says:

“Hi, who believe! Remember Allah with much remembrance.”

The above verse is a command from Allah for those who believe, so that they always do zikir as much as possible. In *kenduren*, besides prayer there is also an element of zikir. The community recites *tayyibah* sentences together in order to remember Allah. *Kenduren* try to realize social piety by remembering God together, both remembering all His blessings and remembering death which is His will. The Indonesian people, especially the Javanese people, keep their awareness in remembering Allah through *kenduren*. If it is not manifested in the form of tradition, then the awareness of remembering Allah will only become an individual consciousness and not manifest into consciousness and social piety.

3. Gratitude

Gratitude can be done through many things, such as through heart, word, or deeds. People who are grateful for their conscience will never deny the blessings of Allah. Gratitude through word can be done by reading *hamdalah*, and being grateful through deeds can be done by using all the blessings given by God for good. Islamic teaching on gratitude, one of which is written in *Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah* verse 152 which says:

“Therefore remember Me, I will remember you. Give thanks to Me, and reject not Me.”

In the verse above, Allah commands humans to be grateful and not deny the blessings He has given. Gratitude will be better if expressed through actions, for example through alms or charity. Through the tradition of *kenduren*, the community applies gratitude by giving food as alms to guests who attend *kenduren*. Giving treat to guests who present in *kenduren* is intended by the community as alms and they do not consider it as a burden.

Gratitude is usually done when someone gets blessing in their life. People rarely gratitude when they are in calamity. *Kenduren* tries to make people aware to be grateful in every situation, either when they get blessing from God or when they are in calamity. Therefore, *kenduren* is not only done when someone is in joyful moment, for example when having a new home, marriage, circumcision and other happy things, but this tradition is also done when someone is mourning, for example when someone loses a family member.

4. *Silaturahmi*

Silaturahmi or maintaining human relationship is important in human life as a social being. Every human needs to be related so they can know each other. Islam encourages his believers to have *silaturahmi*, even it is the core of Islamic teaching. In Islam, *silaturahmi* is religious act among human beings. It is an easily things to be done and bring blessing. There are many ways to realize *silaturahmi*, one of which is by giving gift, have a pleasing attitude, like to smile and gather with relatives or neighbours, and so on. One of the verses which mentioned about *silaturahmi* is written in *Al-Qur'an Surah An-Nisa* verse 1 which says:

“Hi, mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful of your duty toward Allah in Whom ye claim (your rights) of one another, and toward the wombs (that bare you). Allah hath been a watcher over you.”

The above verse commands the believers to maintain *silaturahmi*. *Kenduren* is also a medium for social gathering for *silaturahmi* which brings good. People rarely gather if there is no event that gather all of them in one place. With *kenduren*, people are easily meet and communicate with each other and being closer, increasing the attentiveness, building good relationship, and finally to increase their social piety. *Silaturahmi* is a noble

act and Muslim must not neglect it. Therefore, Muslim needs to spare their time for *silaturahmi*.

5. Human Equality

One of the main teachings of Islam is the equality between humans. God created human into various nations and ethnicities so that they can know each other, love each other, and help each other. Islam measures a person's quality based on his level of devotion. Islam does not distinguish human based on blood (descent), skin color, ethnicity or nation. This is in accordance with God's command in *Al-Qur'an Surah Al-Hujurat* verse 13 which says:

“Hi, mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Allah is Knower, Aware.”

In *kenduren*, all people in the community from various group gather together, sitting together side by side, for old, young, rich, poor, doctors, teachers, labors, and so on. They do not emphasize the identity and wealth that they have and blend among the people. All seem to have equal degree and do not compete in terms of appearance, intelligence, position, etc. *Kenduren* unites all groups in society and they are considered to have the equal degree. The community follows *kenduren* with the intention of worshiping Allah and fulfilling the invitation of the host.

From the presentation of the five Islamic teachings above, we can know that the *kenduren* contains Islamic teachings which are all integrated into one act. Thus, *kenduren* is an integrative application of Islamic teachings, including the teachings on prayer, zikir, gratitude, *silaturahmi*, and equality. In this case, *kenduren* can be considered as an act that is not contrary to Islamic teachings, and even that tradition applies and integrates several Islamic teachings.

Islam does not completely reject the tradition that spreads in society. In the application of Islamic law, it is known as one of the ways to do *ijtihad* called '*urf*', namely the implementation of Islamic law within the conditions which is not contrary to the teachings of Islam in the Koran and Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. Roqib also stated that in Islamic discourse, culture or tradition is positioned as part of consideration in decision making or law, as long as the tradition is positive and does not contrary with Islamic teachings. Tradition is often used as a basis for thinking and behavior, and is used as a basis for decision making. Thus, a positive tradition can be used as a source of law or in the *fiqh* rules it is known as *al-'adah muhakkamah*.

Basically, the purpose of prayer is to establish a whole and direct relationship with God and establish relationship with fellow human beings. Human activity as a servant of Allah and as His *khalifa* on this earth is essentially in the context of worshiping or serving Allah while at the same time getting His blessing. Therefore, Islam does not tolerate any effort to create and engage in human activities in any form if it is alienating someone from gratitude, submission, and obedience to Allah as the only Supreme Being that must

be worshiped and obeyed. During this era in Indonesia, especially in Java, there are many traditions which are developed as the result of human creativity. If the tradition is contrary to the teachings of Islam, it must be abandoned, but if it is in line with the teachings of Islam, it must be preserved and developed.

E. Conclusion

Kenduren is a form of tradition done by Indonesian people, especially the Javanese community, which has been carried out for generations and has experienced acculturation with various cultures. When Islam entered Indonesia, it was spread through tradition or culture, and *kenduren* began to be adjusted to Islamic teachings. Things that refers into shirk, such as offerings and spell began to be eliminated in this tradition. The food charity is still practiced in *kenduren*, but the goal is not for offerings, but is eaten together and also taken home for the family of those who attends the event. Spells are replaced with recitation of prayer and *zikir*. Thus, *kenduren* currently includes Islamic traditions and has many benefits. The values of Islamic teachings concerning prayer, *zikir*, gratitude, *silaturahmi*, and equality, are all integrated in *kenduren* tradition. Only by applying a tradition, namely *kenduren* with the sincere intentions only to worship Allah, then the community actually has practiced some Islamic teachings at once. Apart from the pros and cons of *kenduren*, in fact *kenduren* is still maintained and the community also feels the benefits from it. *Kenduren* is a form of religious expression of the community, especially Javanese people in carrying out prayer, both for the sake of human relations with God and human relation among people.

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