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Sumanto Al Qurtuby

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Philip Fountain. *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Sumanto Al Qurtuby*

Philip Fountain's *The Service of Faith* is an ethnographic study of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a transnational, faith-based nongovernmental organization associated with Mennonite and Brethren in Christ (as well as Amish) churches that focuses on relief, development, and peacebuilding (climate change has been added to the organization's core program). A worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, MCC is a renowned global service agency that has worked—in the name of Christ—for over a century to help with people's basic needs and building just peace.

Headquartered in North America (the United States and Canada), MCC, which was established in 1920, has offices in more than sixty countries worldwide, including Indonesia. Due to the organization's field-driven approach, MCC's programs and operations differ considerably from one country to another. This study focuses mainly on the works of MCC Indonesia, which began its activities (especially relief and medical programs) in Sumatra in 1948 after World War II, while exploring its foundational roots within North American Mennonite/Anabaptist communities. MCC is perhaps the first international service agency to have worked in Indonesia after World War II.

More specifically, this book, a product of almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia (18 months) and North America (four months), examines the historical dynamics, trajectories, changes, developments, and everyday activities of the MCC organization and Indonesian MCCers and, to some extent, Mennonite communities as the prime backbone and supporters of this "service agency." It also highlights the significant roles played by actors or agency (without neglecting organizational structures, systems, and discourses), particularly MCCers in Indonesia, in managing, brokering, translating, negotiating, and bridging MCC's various programs within Indonesia's diverse and shifting sociopolitical, cultural, and religious

* Graduate Program in Sociology of Religion, Faculty of Theology, Satya Wacana Christian University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6475-945X>

contexts.

The author analyzes negotiations conducted by Indonesia's MCC brokers and translators who were (and are) actively involved in assessing, designing, and implementing the organization's relief, development, and peacebuilding projects in the context of Indonesian social fields. Fountain also investigates the relations, connections, exchanges, communications, and interactions among Indonesian MCCers and between MCC actors and locals taking place in various cultural meetings by examining "the frictions, connectivities, and disjunctures that arise from attempts to bridge, or cross over, cultural gaps" (p. 7). Certainly, the introduction of Mennonite concepts, understandings, and theologies of service and peace into the varied social fields of Indonesia involved a multifaceted and continuous negotiation. Thus, this book is intended for readers to understand not only "what MCC is but how MCCing is done" (p. 236).

It is imperative to note that implementing MCC's general programs in an Indonesian setting is not an easy task, mainly because MCC's vision, mission, platforms, and programs are strongly rooted within the Anabaptist/Mennonite Christian tradition and the North American liberal democratic context, while Indonesian societies are dominated by Muslims and were ruled by a dictatorial regime (Suharto's New Order). Accordingly, interpreting, translating, and implementing North America's MCC projects on relief, development, and peacebuilding within the Indonesian state and society require strategic approaches, loose or flexible tactics, and skilled cultural translators and brokers. It is in this context that analyzing the creative works of Indonesian MCCers becomes significant and noteworthy.

This work deserves appreciation for some fundamental reasons. First, it examines—through the lens of ethnography—a subject that is rarely studied by anthropologists: faith-based NGOs. An ethnographic study of an NGO, either religious or secular, is challenging mainly because, as the author has noted, most NGOs are not open-minded, research access to such organizations is notoriously tough and restricted, and NGOs are highly protective of their public image (p. 27). Second, the book studies a theme that is infrequently researched by social scientists, particularly anthropologists—namely, religion and development or religion in development. For decades, perhaps due to the influences of classical secularization theories, religion was seriously neglected in much academic scholarship on development studies. By exploring how Mennonite theologies influence MCC's works, this book makes a crucial contribution to the recent debates about faith in development or religion-development connections.

The book is divided into seven chapters. It begins with a chapter on the historical relations between MCC and the Mennonite peoplehood in North America, especially the United States and Canada, by tracing how North American Mennonites gave birth to MCC and how this institution reshaped Anabaptist religious communities "by furnishing a vehicle through which Mennonites could assume a theological identity as a people of service" (p. 31). Fountain argues that comprehending the religious setting of North American Mennonites is imperative to

explore “the impulses, dispositions, theologies, and imaginations” that shape, impact, and influence MCC’s works, activities, and programs in Indonesia (p. 33). Another reason for discussing the links between North American Mennonites and MCC is that “MCC can only be properly understood with reference to Mennonite communities in North America” (p. 32). Chapter 1 underscores MCC as a peoplehood movement, though the movement should be viewed as just one of the avenues through which this religious NGO is performed and conceptualized (p. 65).

Chapter 2 focuses on an analysis of how MCC—its objects, people, programs, and notions—traverses cultural gaps by emphasizing translation practices and intermediaries. The chapter underlines the significance of the concepts of translation, brokerage, and mediation as key analytical terms in an ethnography of development. In studying the practices of translation conducted by MCCers in Indonesia, the author focuses on the workings of ambivalence, agency, and rationality (p. 68). This chapter concludes that MCC Indonesia is defined not only by its role (for instance, as a mediator in a broad patchwork quilt) but also by “the value-laden, culturally, and theologically formed approaches that MCCers take in negotiating their relationships with those other sections of the quilt” (p. 102).

Chapter 3, titled “The Missions of Development,” explores two aspects: first, MCC Indonesia’s early history as it built relationships and interacted with the country’s oldest Mennonite churches—Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa (Java’s Evangelical Church) and Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (Muria Christian Church of Indonesia, which is affiliated with Indonesian Chinese Mennonites); and second, changes in MCC Indonesia’s programs and approaches from the time the organization started its operations in 1948 until the heyday of Suharto’s New Order in the 1980s and 1990s. The author points out that MCC Indonesia first focused on its Sumatran relief program, but that lasted only a few months before it changed its regional focus to Central Java in order to support Mennonite churches and communities in this region (pp. 107–113).

From the mid-1970s until the early 1990s, MCC again changed its programs and priorities. This time it primarily worked and collaborated with Suharto’s authoritarian New Order government, particularly with the Ministry of Transmigration. Throughout this period, “MCCers were deployed as field scientists, agricultural extension workers, and project managers” to assist transmigrants in outer Java as well as to help with the Indonesian government’s transmigration policy and national development project (pp. 113–120). The MCC-New Order collaboration is striking mainly because MCC has had a long-standing reluctance to work with USAID (or the American government) on the grounds of the latter’s imperialist intentions. Furthermore, from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, MCC was also involved in “evangelistic programs” through initiating church-planting projects for Dayak indigenous communities in West Kalimantan (pp. 120–127). This shift is also interesting to analyze because MCC is not an evangelistic or mission agency and traditionally avoids proselytization and evangelism. Fountain argues that

the dramatic changes in MCC Indonesia's programs indicate "the flexibility with which MCCers adapted to changing political conditions and the impact of its field-driven approach to operations" (p. 130).

Chapter 4 analyzes the North American context of MCC's work to understand the ways MCC is positioned and framed to its main donor constituency (Mennonites and other Christian Anabaptist communities). The chapter also discusses the relationship between policy and politics in theological articulation, arguing that policy articulations are one of the main instruments through which development organizations like MCC enroll or recruit a constituency. By treating theological articulation as policy, the chapter explores "not what theology should be normatively articulated within the organization but, rather, how theological articulations (and disarticulations) work in practice" (p. 132).

Chapter 5 is devoted to scrutinizing MCC's new projects on peacebuilding and interfaith bridge building with a focus on Christian-Muslim relations, aimed at constructing bridges of mutual understanding and relationships through interreligious programs. The main factors driving this initiative were the 9/11 terrorist tragedy and its global impacts, including Islamophobia and worsening Christian-Muslim relations in the West. Fountain notes that MCC's post-9/11 peace programs aim "to translate vernacular Mennonite theologies of peace into practices of peacebuilding in Indonesia" (p. 156). MCC's involvement in peacebuilding projects emerged from the long tradition of North American Mennonite (Anabaptist) pacifism and nonviolent resistance.

Chapter 6 discusses the "politics" and normative myth of drinking tea with locals as a window or an entry point into exploring an "ideology [i.e., 'animating ideas' through which actions are made inhabitable and practicable] of guesthood that provides a distinctive imagining for MCCers for their work in Indonesia" (p. 183). The final chapter, Chapter 7, focuses on expatriate MCCers in Indonesia as they engage in services that are transformed by their living experiences. The book closes with a reflection on the theology of service, arguing that service in MCC is "simultaneously practical, embodied, ethical, and theological" (p. 237). Fountain argues that MCC's service is shaped, reshaped, and legitimated by vernacular Mennonite theologies and that "imaginings of Mennonite service as relational, quietist, activist, and peaceable arise out of the history of Mennonite approaches to faith" (p. 237).

No doubt, this book is noteworthy. It makes a significant contribution to both academic (e.g., university lecturers, students, and researchers) and nonacademic (e.g., practitioners, policymakers, activists, religious leaders, etc.) communities, especially in the fields or anthropological studies of development, Christianity (particularly Mennonites), peacebuilding, service, and religious NGOs. The book appears to be fair and balanced in analyzing the history and contemporary development of Mennonites, MCC, and MCC's work in Indonesia.

For me, the only problems with this book are the language, prose, structures, lines of

argument, narratives, and writing style, which could make the contents a bit difficult to comprehend, particularly for those who are not familiar with anthropological concepts or jargon and ethnographic narratives. Also, is it only Anabaptist theologies that shape and influence Mennonite/MCC practices in service and peacebuilding, or do Mennonites' rich experiences and practices in diverse fields also contribute to the modification, adaptation, and transformation of Mennonite and MCC's principal understandings and theologies of service and peace?