

RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA AS HEGEMONY STRATEGY DEPICTED IN *AGORA* (2009)

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Abstract

This paper entitled "Religious Propaganda as Hegemony Strategy Depicted in Agora (2009)" aims to find out the hegemony occurred in Agora movie that is reflected through religious propaganda. In conducting the research, the researcher uses the theory of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. The data collection was based on the dialogue of the movie, which then supported by books, journals, and articles depicting the hegemony and the social setting of the movie. In conducting the research, the researchers found that the hegemony depicted in the Agora movie are reflected in the religious propaganda in the form of condemnation towards other religion and the preaching of the Christianity itself.

Keywords: *Agora, Alexandria, hegemony, propaganda, religion*

Abstrak

Makalah berjudul "Religious Propaganda as Hegemony Strategy Depicted in Agora (2009)" bertujuan untuk menemukan bentuk – bentuk hegemony dalam film Agora yang direfleksikan dalam bentuk propaganda agama. Dalam melakukan penelitian, peneliti menggunakan teori hegemony Antonio Gramsci. Sementara, data yang terkumpul berasal dari dialog film yang didukung oleh berbagai sumber seperti buku, jurnal dan artikel. Dalam melaksanakan penelitian, peneliti menemukan bahwa hegemony yang ada dalam film Agora ada di dalam pengutukan agama lain dan dalam dakwah agama Kristen itu sendiri.

Kata Kunci: *Agora, Alexandria, hegemony, propaganda, agama*

INTRODUCTION

Religion is actually a path that guides people to salvation and safety. By believing in religion, people will be guided to live peacefully and wisely. It is religion that guide people in doing good actions in everyday life. Religion is also the one that keep humans to have faith and belief towards their creator. Thus, seeing the importance of religion in life, many people decide to obey the religion and its law in order to get peaceful life and salvation.

When people have finally chosen to obey religion, it would be seen that everything has finally set well. However, as the reality says, there are problems with differences in the societies, including in religion. This difference between religions automatically will result different opinions and point of view in the society, and if tolerance cannot be maintained, it can sometimes be a problem, which finally led to the use of religion as a tool or propaganda to justify something in the society; including political power, control of some people, race, or ethnicity, or even a tool to make people do what they want.

The use of religion as a tool to gain power in society as it is mentioned above can also be defined as hegemony. Hegemony is the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas. The dominance may come in the form of social, cultural, religious, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group.

The use of religion as a tool to dominate the society can also be found in a film by Alejandro Amenábar entitled *Agora* (2009). In the film, the issue of hegemony is depicted to be done by the Christians. There, hegemony can be seen in the form of condemnation and preaching which were done by the Christians.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the issue that the researchers take in this chapter is the religious propaganda which is used as a strategy of how certain group or people do hegemony to others. Hence, the researcher will use the theory of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci (in (Storey, 2009: 79-80), hegemony is a *condition in process* where the dominating class allied with other classes or class factions in an effort to rule and lead a society through "intellectual and moral leadership". Furthermore, Storey (2009: 79-80) added that instead of using the force of coercion, in hegemony, the dominating group uses consensus to subvert their interests and make it the interests of everyone.

In other words, we can say that in this discourse, instead of forcing the society to do what the dominating group wants by using military power or force of arms, they use the way of consensus or general agreement to make the interest of the dominating class to be the law, culture, or tradition of all people, so that the dominated people are indirectly and unconsciously forced to obey those laws.

What must be underlined from Gramsci's notion is that in hegemony, before the dominating group began their dominance against the dominated group, they made an agreement first so that the hegemony that they do will be accepted by the dominated group. As an example, when a government wants to spread a doctrine to hate its enemies, it will expose and create the flaws and the bad side of its enemies to the people, so that they will be brainwashed by the notion, instead of forcing the people to believe the doctrine by forcing them under the threat of execution.

Besides, Hegemony is not always in the frame of politics. However, hegemony can also be included in the matter of ideology and culture, including in the matter of moral and religious virtue that exists in certain society.

METHODS

The data of this research are acquired from the dialogue of *Agora* movie that can be included in the issue of Hegemony. Besides, as a secondary data, the researchers also use several supporting data and theory acquired from books, journals, and articles both from the library and the internet containing the issue of hegemony or the social setting of the movie. Furthermore, after the collected data are acquired, the researchers interpret the data on the theory of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the fourth century AD, after years of persecution and torture under the Roman emperors, Christianity was on the rise in the Empire. The once minor religion was finally became the empire's biggest religion as it gained more followers from time to time. Ultimately, Christianity reach its gory when Emperor Constantine I declared it to be the Roman Empire's new canon religion at the 300s AD; thus, uniting the once pagan Empire under the new religion (Lun-Rockcliffe, 2011).

Even more, when reign of Theodosius I began, Christianity was widespread across the empire. Theodosius I was known as a devout Christian. As a consequence, the Christians were becoming braver, and the formerly pagan empire was drastically changed to be a Christian empire. This change from pagan to Christians affected the whole territory of the empire, including Egypt, to be exact city Alexandria, in which it had been becoming a city with strong pagan culture for centuries (Kristensen, 2009: 158).

The change of religion in the city of Alexandria apparently became a problem that slowly but steadily erupted. It was because the difference of doctrine between the teaching of Christianity and Paganism. Christianity believes that every worship to God must not be done through the media of symbols or idols. Hence, the doctrine makes the Christianity an anti-idol and symbol religion, in contrast with the pagans, who worshipped their God by using the media symbol and idols, including statues and other physical objects (2009: 160-162).

In the movie, it is depicted that the conflict between those two religions was seen in the beginning of the movie, in which the Christians was conducting their effort to spread their religion. In spreading the Christianity, the Christians was making a consensus and conviction to the people of Alexandria about the other religions.

If this issue is interrelated to the theory of hegemony by Gramsci, in which the dominating people are making a consensus or agreement with the people instead of using coercion, it can be concluded that the way of how the Christians in the movie can be considered as hegemony. For it is depicted in the movie that the Christians used their condemnation and mockery towards the pagans to support their argumentation in order to gain influence from the people of Alexandria, instead of using violence to make the people of Alexandria convert themselves into Christianity. Besides condemnation and mockery, the Christians were also using the preaching of their religion to make the people of Alexandria believe and agree with them. In other words, it can be said that consensus or hegemony done by the Christians can be seen in two ways, which are the condemnation to other religion and the preaching of Christianity itself.

In *Agora*, the first kind of hegemony done by the Christians in spreading their religion can be seen in their condemnation to other religions. In our findings, we found that there are there are two forms hegemony depicted in the movie. Those can be seen in the statements of three Christian characters: Theophilus, Ammonius, and Cyril in three different situations.

At the beginning of the movie, the problems dealing with the hegemony has already occurred. In the beginning of the movie, the condemnation of other religion can be seen when there was a debate between a pagan philosopher and Ammonius, one of the Christian fanatic monks or known as Parabolani occurred,

Ammonius: "Know this, you who console yourself with pagan images; men, women, birds, reptiles! Serapis! Who could trust the God need a flower pot for a crown?" (Agora, 2009: 00:06:54-00:07:28)

In the statement above, we can see that Ammonius used the physical appearance of the pagan Gods as an object of mockery. In his statements, Ammonius used the word "who could trust the God need a flower pot for a crown." In order to plant the seeds of doubt in the heart of the pagans. By using this statement, Ammonius was trying to persuade the people of Alexandria that the pagan God was nonsense because of its ridiculous appearance in his opinion. This is in accordance with the theory of hegemony by Gramsci. In his statement Ammonius uses the strategy of consensus by making persuasion to the people of Alexandria. His word at first did not really affect the opinion of the people of Alexandria. However, when he walked across the pyre in the Agora (City Centre), and managed to survive

without any harm or scratch, the people started believing his words and some of them managed to convert to Christianity.

After the conversion of some people of Alexandria, the condemnation of other religion was becoming more and more massive. The Christians who once just condemning by verbal language, now dared themselves to commit some actions in addition to their verbal condemnation as they gained more followers in Alexandria through conversion. This action was portrayed in the movie when the Alexandrian Christians, led by Theophilus, the Bishop of Alexandria, which made him the Christians' leader at the time were mocking the statues of the pagan Gods in the city center. In this scene, the Christians were also throwing the statues of the pagan God besides mocking them verbally. An action that later triggered religious riot in Alexandria.

Theophilus: "Let's listen to her now! Do you hear any complaints? This one has lost her voice too. Their mouth do not speak. Their eyes do not see. Their nose do not smell. Yet still, pagans come here and kneel before them. What madness is this?" (Agora, 2009: 00:28:40-00:29:26).

We can see in the notion, Theophilus, who was the bishop of Alexandria during the time of the movie was mocking the pagan God to be incapable in doing anything by saying that even the statues of the pagan God did not even raise their voices to what the Christians did. In addition to strengthen the propaganda, the Alexandrine Christians was throwing things at the statues in order to convince the people of Alexandria that the pagan God cannot even avenge what the Christians did to them. Thus, the action became a trigger that led the pagans to fight the Christians back. An event that caused the religious war in Alexandria.

When the second hegemony occurred, in which the Alexandrine Christian committed an act of mockery towards the pagan Gods. The pagans were punished by the Emperor Theodosius for attacking the Christian first. Thus, the christian's position was strengthened by the Emperor because of this order. As their influence became more and more massive, the Christians did not stop their propaganda. Thus, they stoned every Jews in the theater for playing music on the Sabbath day, a day, in which God took rest after creating the universe, and the day that the Christian consider to be sacred and must be respected by all.

Eventually, the stoning of the Jews went unpunished, and as a result, the Jews retaliated by stoning the Christian in their church. This event started another religious war in Alexandria. And as a fuel for this, the bishop of Alexandria after the death of Theophilus, Cyril, continued the attempt of his predecessor to gain control over the population, and made another condemnation towards the Jews by reminding them of what the Jews had done during the time of crucifixion of Jesus, in order to incite anger in the heart of every Christian. Hence, the action helped him to gain control over the

Christian to fulfill what he wanted, to murder and exile the Jews from the city of Alexandria, in order to gain control over its population.

Cyril: "Yes, weep, weep for the Jews, those evil butcher of our lord. Because God had already condemned them that they will live like a slave. Cursed and exiled until the end of time."

In his speech after the Alexandrine Christian was stoned in the church the night before, Cyril used the history of the Christian and Jews conflict to hegemonies the Alexandrine Christians to make retaliation for this action. He reminded the Alexandrine Christians of the killing of Jesus in the hands of the Jews centuries ago to revoke the anger of the Alexandrine Christians. The Alexandrine Christians, who were mostly new converts believed the statement and was angered by the act of stoning, committed by the Jews, in which it resulted the death of their fellow Christians. Thus, the Alexandrine Christians was incited by Cyril's statement and committed murder on every Jews that they could find in Alexandria. Leading another exodus that forced the Jews to leave Alexandria.

After the departure of the Jews from Alexandria, the Christianity was the only religion that still existed in Alexandria. Hence, it eased the hegemony in Alexandria because there was only one religion left in the city.

Another form of hegemony depicted in *Agora* is in the form preaching of religion. Actually, every religion teaches peace and kindness. There is no religion that teaches evil deeds. However, there are people who misuse the religion for the sake of their own interests such as gaining power over something or someone. This interrelating to the issue depicted in *Agora*, Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria is the one that misuse the religion to achieve his personal goal, which is to gain the political power.

In this paper, the researchers have found two data regarding the use of preaching or holy words from the holy book. Those are to discredit Hypatia's role in the political aspect. For at the time, Hypatia, who was the ex-teacher of the current Prefect of Alexandria, had a strong influence over him. Besides, the preaching is also used to limit the role of women in case there will come other 'Hypatias'. Here, firstly the hegemony can be seen in the prohibition in the use of expensive clothes and jewelries as it is stated in the recitation as follow:

Cyril: "Reading from the first letter of Paul to Timothy, I desire therefore, that everywhere men should lift up holy hands in prayer without anger or disputing. In like manner, I desire women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds." (Agora, 2009: 01:28:33-01:29:11).

The prohibition in the beginning seems to be directed to all women. However, as Cyril continued his preaching, the real intention of his was becoming clear. It is to strip off Hypatia's influence in Alexandria especially towards the Prefect, Orestes. This is shown in the recitation below:

Cyril: "Jesus himself knew this when he entrusted his holy legacy to twelve men. Men. No woman among them. And I know some in Alexandria who admire and even trust the words of a woman. The philosopher Hypatia, a woman who declared a witch! Dignitaries. It is time for you to reconcile yourselves with Christ. This is the word of God. Kneel before it and embrace the truth."

The statement shows that by using the fact that there is no women among the successor of Jesus, Cyril was trying to make every person in the church believe that no woman may have control over man, especially those who are condemned as witches like Hypatia; thus, the words make him possible to take control over everybody in the church as all of the people present in the church obeyed him by kneeling down as a sign of obedience toward the religion whether willingly or seeking for political safety. Even though it is all actually clear to be made up by Cyril to achieve his goal in gaining and strengthening his political position in Alexandria.

CONCLUSION

After conducting the research, the researchers believes that hegemony really happened in the society as it is depicted in *Agora* (2009). Hegemony did not only happen in the political matters, but also religious stuffs as portrayed in the film. Hegemony came in the shape of condemnation of other religion, which in this case is the pagan society of Alexandria. This happened in verbal insults and evil deeds. The second hegemony is depicted in the religious preaching, which in this case is the Christians, in which the bishop, Cyril, misused the holy words of Bible to gain political power and influences. Those two are the hegemonies portrayed in the movie that interrelate each other to the theory of Gramsci's hegemony.

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