

Religious pluralism in Asia

An Indonesian experience

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ASIA IS A CONTINENT OF DIVERSITY. On this vast landscape live innumerable communities and societies which modernity has compressed, for better or worse, into nation-states. Indonesia is one such nation-state, the largest archipelago in the world, consisting of thousands of islands – major islands, such as Sumatra, Java and Kalimantan, middle-sized islands such as the Moluccas, and a coterie of islands from Bali east of Java to West Timor above Australia. There are more than three hundred ethnic groups in Indonesia, each with its own language. Such linguistic differences mirror the diversity in history, customs and traditions of the people inhabiting the archipelago.¹

The ending of fifty years of dictatorship and imposed ‘nationhood’ in 1998 made this diversity a major issue in present-day Indonesia, not least in the local conflicts which erupted. In this article my argument is that it is essential to recognize indigenous cultural values and their interaction as the route to local harmony and conflict resolution in a society as complex as Indonesia. In Asia religion is rooted in the belief that life is part of a cosmic order; the transcendent and the immanent are inseparable. The ethics of community life is derived from such a spirituality.

A brief historical sketch will set the scene. Studies of the people’s life in the archipelago prior to centuries of colonization are still in their infancy. However, the arrivals of the Portuguese, Chinese, Gujaratis, Persians, Dutch and Japanese left considerable marks on the lives of the indigenous people. The native religious and economic systems, for instance, were compelled to interact with the newly arrived religions and modes of economic production.

The lengthiest colonization, from roughly the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, was by the Dutch. Under the Dutch the whole archipelago was ruled administratively from Java, hence beginning a process of economic, cultural and political centralization. Natural resources from the provinces and regions began to be exploited under central plans from the colonial government.

In the early twentieth century Indonesia was characterized by the growth of nationalist movements. Both the nationalist struggle and the political climate following World War II shaped the destiny of Indonesia. The ensuing period of independent Indonesia since 1945 has so far witnessed only two presidents, Sukarno and Suharto. Under both presidents the unity of Indonesia was strongly projected to the outside world, the former emphasizing political aspects, the latter economic growth. The reality was and is, of course, more complex than the image. Especially under the Suharto regime, the almost 'natural' fact of diversity was suppressed, by coercion if necessary. The period following Suharto's resignation, however, has been marked not by relief but by complications deeply entrenched in Indonesia yet suppressed by the outgoing regime – that is to say, the fact of pluralism.

Indonesian societies in the Asian context

Despite the much-heralded advent of industrialization, the predominant mode of living of most Asian societies is certainly agricultural. This fact is bound to have a certain impact on the cosmology, if not of most Asians, then certainly of the majority of Indonesian people who live from traditional agriculture. Agricultural cosmology is a way of life inseparable from 'nature'. It is a world-view whose contents and methods are drawn from one's feeling of being united with nature. Signs of nature are points of reference, not only for tilling lands or harvesting, but also for understanding temporal, spatial and social events. Both the signs of nature and events in social life point to, for lack of a better term, the 'mystery' in the universe.

Natural events are glimpses of the 'mystery' which is perceived to be transcendental. If natural events point to the Transcendent, it is through meditation (*tapa*) that people are in contact with the Transcendent. *Tapa* is an inner disposition and act of uniting one's own mind and feeling with the 'mystery' in and of the universe. While meditation is a mystical-spiritual act, it is also *the* locus in which one can find a source of insight concerning the ethical contents and directions of personal as well as community life. *Tapa* is the fountain of ethics for personal and community life. The sacred character of nature, universe, meditation, ethics, person and community is usually manifested in the meanings attached to religious symbols, and these symbols reflect what is regarded as sacrosanct in a certain community.

The meaning of such symbols varies from one ethnic community to the other, yet the difference is more apparent than real. Water, for

instance, is constantly referred to as a symbol of self-purification. Events in the course of personal and communal life are moments at which these symbols are usually enacted. Shortly after the birth of a community member, for instance, an occasion is usually held for the whole community to pray for the newly born baby and the mother. Water, fruit, vegetables, an oil-burning lamp, a chicken or bird, are displayed as symbols. Water is believed to cleanse the soul and body of the baby and her or his mother from all diseases. The oil-burning lamp symbolizes the light for a new life journey, and agricultural products and the chicken or bird signify material welfare.

It is also within such a religious context that the four elements of nature (soil, water, air and fire) are believed to be the cosmic forces giving energy to life. If the cosmos is sacred, the connection between human being and cosmos is deeply religious. Human experience about the sacredness of these four elements of life is, according to Aloysius Pieris, a universal experience and is biblical in nature.²

'In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters' (Gen 1:1-2). What Genesis describes is God's act of creation from four inseparable cosmic elements. In many Asian societies, water has for long been regarded as the symbol of the feminine, whereas air and fire are the symbols of the masculine. These cosmic elements are *spiritually* cosmic.

The agricultural mode of life is conducted in accordance with this system of belief in cosmic order. It is out of these relationships that peasants decide on the timing for sowing seeds as well as choosing suitable kinds of plants to grow. It is also through cosmic experiences that people look after their health and cure illnesses by applying herbal extracts from the natural environment. The centrality of such cosmic relationships is common across regions and ethnic groups in Indonesia, and any differences are attributable to variation in local conditions. Plurality within the context of such a cosmic order is egalitarian in character, and Furnivall, a scholar on colonial Indonesia, has described it as 'horizontal plurality'. In this analysis, this egalitarian and horizontal plurality has been turned into hierarchical and vertical differences under colonial rule, in the form of sharp social demarcation between European, Chinese and native groups.³

In the experience of bad leadership, people return to a belief in the cosmic order by expecting the coming of a just and wise leader called the 'Just Queen' (*Ratu Adil*). It is worth noting that the term is not 'Just

King', for *Ratu* is feminine. It comes as no surprise that what is perceived as a good leader by most people in Asia is a leader with religious qualities rather than merely one with managerial skills. The religious qualities of a leader are of paramount importance in relation to the popular belief that such a leader is endowed with an egalitarian spirit deep-seated in the cosmic order. Predictably, this belief is related to what is expected of a leader: administration of justice and siding with the powerless. Good leadership is less about power than about establishing balanced relations between the cosmic order, the people, graceful personality and justice.

Indigenous spiritualities

In Indonesia, the cosmic-based spirituality remains strong among peasants, fisherfolk, village women and other marginal groups. It is usually preserved in the form of folklore and other local community beliefs. What is sneered at by modern rationalism is for these groups never experienced as 'myth' (in the pejorative sense) but as a source of world-view, experience and ethical guidance. It is hardly possible, then, to understand the indigenous spiritualities of the Indonesian people without taking into account the so-called cosmic-based spirituality. It is also from this type of spirituality that the richness of cultural pluralism in the Indonesian context can be found.

The Hindu influence

In the western part of Indonesia, people have been deeply influenced by Hinduism. Although historical record serves as a poor guide, this Hindu influence can be traced back to the centuries before what western scholars call the Middle Ages. People in this part of the archipelago believe that each religion embodies some element of truth. Because 'truth' is the reflection of the cosmic order, of which human beings and their life are part, *karma* and reincarnation are integral to religious belief and ethical conduct in society. *Karma* takes form in reincarnations. Since *karma* concerns the way justice is done for the suffering parties, it is no wonder that the oppressed have been the focus in such a system of spirituality. The following examples may illustrate what is meant by the spiritual foundation of life in the plural society of Indonesia.

Suku Dayak is the name for the ethnic group inhabiting some parts of Kalimantan Island (Borneo). They are known to have a special relation with their ancestral lands, a relation which is cosmic and mystical rather than functional and instrumental. One of the most central

dimensions in this relationship is the ethnic conception of 'continent' as a geopolitical conception. The term 'continent' refers to both territorial reality and cosmic entity. On it and in it, the Dayak people organize community life, which includes the collective maintenance and protection of the forests, land cultivation for rubber and daily necessities, the river and lake for fisheries, the residential area for family shelter, and the cemetery as a consecrated site.

What may seem to be simply a spatial reality is for the Dayak enclosed by mystical powers emanating from the Almighty. Their concept of the Divine cannot be inferred only from day-to-day affairs, but has to be traced in their historical processes recounted in oral traditions.⁴ Their concept of the universe is based on an equilibrium of relationships between the reality of the individual and that of the communal. This notion of equilibrium is signified by the 'stretched house' (*rumah panjang*). A stretched house, regardless of its form and length, has a cloistered cubicle as well as an open room, the cloistered part designating 'the individual', and the open room 'the communal'. As with anywhere else, tension between the individual and the communal is a matter of routine, but sharing, solidarity, mutual help, honesty and equality are part of a highly valued communal heritage. There is no stark difference between the rich and the poor, and egalitarian community life is an esteemed cultural value.

Javanese culture

Another good example of the spiritually based group is Javanese society. In the process of Dutch colonization, Java became the centre for controlling the whole Indonesian archipelago. It was then that other islands were called 'outer islands'. Being the centre of the colonial rule, Java was gradually looked up to by the population in other regions. The dominance of Javanese culture in Indonesia can hardly be separated from this historical process.

Like many other ethnic groups in Indonesia, the Javanese have an indigenous cultural heritage originating from centuries before Dutch colonization. Unlike other ethnic groups, however, Javanese society has long been organized into hierarchical divisions, and Dutch colonial rule simply reinforced them. There are at least four strata in the hierarchy: the *priyayi* (nobility), the *santri* (educated Muslims), the educated villagers, and the poor people in villages.⁵ While these four groups constitute the so-called Javanese society, the typical indigenous elements in Javanese culture can be found more in the way of life of village

people. It is among these groups that some cultural similarities between the Javanese and other ethnic groups are discernible. The Javanese villagers also believe that the cosmos has two inseparable dimensions: *jagad gedhe*, the macrocosmos, and *jagad cilik*, the microcosmos.

Jagad gedhe is the macro sphere of human life in the universe, related to the natural and social environment. *Jagad cilik* is the micro realm of human life as an individual in relation to her or his Creator. The inseparability of *jagad gedhe* and *jagad cilik*, and the convergence of the two, reflects the nature of the relationship and of the synthesis between the transcendent and the immanent. It characterizes the relationship of the individual with God and with her or his social and natural environment. The idea of *karma* and reincarnation deeply influences ethical conduct in community life, as it is manifested in the ideal of respect and compassion for 'thy neighbours', for they are the embodiment of ancestors and the presence of God, the medium of both 'curse' and 'blessing'.

The cosmic nature of personal and communal life in this belief system is so environmentally oriented that protection of the environment has never been a major problem. For example, the central role of women in looking after and protecting the seeds of plants is strongly maintained. At the heart of this popular belief is the idea that 'those who control seedlings hold the key to survival'. To maintain this tradition, many Javanese farming communities still perform the centuries-old custom of calling upon *Dewi Sri*, the Goddess of Rice. Before harvest, a group of women go to the rice field to select good rice grains for seeding. After holding a religious ritual calling upon *Dewi Sri*, the women cut the stalks of these good rice grains and carry them home. The rice stalks are stored in a *senthong* (inner cubicle of a house) which men are not permitted to enter. An oil-burning lamp and ritual dishes are put in the cubicle, reflecting the sacred character of the place. Only women are permitted to go in. The stock of rice seeds illustrates the centrality of women's position in community survival and life. Indeed, community life in Javanese villages is deeply characterized by gender egalitarianism.

The Mentawai

Such a gender-egalitarian culture can also be found among *Mentawai* communities in the municipality of Padang Pariaman, West Sumatra. In terms of flora and fauna, the area where the *Mentawai* people live has been protected from outside intrusions and retains a certain environmental naturalness. The main activity of men for the whole family is

hunting. Animals are believed to be the embodiment of spirits outside *uma* (home), whose presence is friendly to the residents of an *uma*. The diminishing number of animals for hunting encourages the *Mentawai* people to breed cattle. Hunting is regulated according to a temporal order based on religious rituals. When such rituals have been performed and the hunting season begins, some taboos are strictly enforced on the hunters. At the heart of these taboos is a deep respect for the cosmic spirits which are believed to regulate community life. Before departing, for instance, men are forbidden to have sexual intercourse with their wives, and they are not permitted to fell trees. Such taboos are enforced unconditionally for the purpose of successful hunting. There may seem to be no logical connection between the observance of a taboo and successful hunting, but logic works through a belief in the cosmic order in which hunting is bound to be an act of destruction unless natural equilibrium is strictly observed.

Similar belief in such a cosmic order is applicable to other ethnic groups in other parts of the Indonesian archipelago. Many ethnic customs that are religious in nature are expressions of close affinity between the transcendent and the immanent. Transcendental experience is entered into through meditation (*tapa*) and other religious rituals intended for community safety and welfare, as well as community thanksgiving and penance. Immanent experience is usually expressed in community sharing, solidarity and mutual support.

It is difficult to attribute the withering away of this belief system directly to the advent of ecclesiastical religions and modern market-orientated commerce and industry. The most we can say is that the intensification of the latter has coincided with the gradual disappearance of the former. Ethnic religious celebrations are emptied of their substance, especially when such celebrations are turned into a spectacle for tourists. In many respects, the politics of economic development by the Indonesian government has speeded up this market focus of ethnic cultural traditions. However, the economic crisis which beset Indonesia in 1998 has suddenly caused many people to return, for better or worse, to their ethnic traditions. We may see it as a form of escapism, but this change in attitude may also be the process for rediscovering the indigenous spirituality for survival.

Being Catholic in Indonesia

I am a woman, a Javanese Catholic, who feels at home in this plural society. My father came from a village background, my mother from a

noble family. My grandparents observed the 'religion' of Islam but strongly adhered to the Javanese 'belief'. They became Catholic by following their children who were baptized while attending Catholic schools. My grandfather on my mother's side was a Javanese *guru* and ascetic highly respected by the community. Despite his noble origins, he was known to be a man very close to the lives of ordinary people. He believed in reincarnation, and it is out of this belief that he accepted Jesus as the incarnate God. For my grandparents, there is no contradiction between being Christian and being Javanese.

In many respects, this is quite different from the way my parents lived a Christian life. They received their Catholic teaching from teachers of religion and Dutch Catholic nuns. Being taught Catholicism through the school system, my parents were inevitably influenced by Dutch theology and doctrine. In theory at least, there is no necessary contradiction between observing Catholicism and being a Javanese holding a religious belief system much older than the arrival of Catholicism in Java. In practice, however, there is often a dilemma. Sometimes I felt it was very difficult to accept some aspects of the Javanese cultural heritage taught me by my parents. I know well that my parents faithfully observed Catholic and church doctrines in their life and in educating their children, but despite all the potential for dilemmas, we have no difficulty in our relationships with relatives who are Muslim. In areas of social and community life, the starting point for any relationship is not 'religion' but 'culture'.

Gradually I learned how to be Catholic and Javanese at the same time. The habit of doing meditation and fasting over several days for a certain intention, for instance, is very much part of both Javanese religious tradition and Catholicism. To do a *tapa* is more than simply praying in the modern sense, but is an act of self-sacrifice in the process of attaining something noble. The act is also at the heart of our Catholic faith, perhaps best referred to as the passage from death to resurrection. The act of *tapa* and self-mortification touches the deepest realm of our sense as sinners before God. Between God and us lies not one-way traffic, but mutual relations that can only be experienced through reciprocal acts. If God has given us life in all its splendour, there is nothing more noble than our act of returning the very love which makes us part of God's life. Herein lies the meaning of *tapa* and self-sacrifice.

These rites of self-sacrifice are common among almost all ethnic communities in Indonesia, normally represented by animal sacrifice. The act of sacrificing is a constant aspect in all ethnic religious rites. For the Javanese, for example, animal sacrifice takes the form of a

black-feathered chicken. Of course, there remains a breach between such a rite and the Christian notion of sacrifice, but the psychological affinity is close enough in the cultural sphere, particularly with regard to how to deal with the 'reality' of sins and original sin. The consequence of original sin is death. Thomas Merton has rightly pointed out that death would remain incomprehensible, and we can never grasp the meaning of it, unless we enter into the mysterious paradox that unites death and life. Death and life constitute a paradoxical reality that makes life dynamic. Death is the face of despair, and life is the fullness of hope.⁶ Unless we experience the two in balance, the fear of death will overwhelm us and it will make us deny the very life we want to live.

Javanese village people sustain such a balance through rites of sacrifice. These rites *re-present* the whole passage of human life unfolding in a series of deaths and resurrections, despairs and hopes. The whole passage is cosmic and theological in character, and the fullness of human life lies in partaking of and being in this process. It is in this process that the Divine enters into the domain of human life at the same time that human life is elevated to the realm of the Divine. Incarnation and reincarnation are part of the process, and belief in eternal life is its end point. All creatures experience this process, and it is from this belief that respect for animate beings is at the core of Javanese spirituality. The Javanese have a habit of talking to animals and plants as their animate counterparts. Despite being regarded as superstition (*tahyul*) by the authorities of formal religions, most people in the village, especially women, continue doing it. It is also out of this habit that familiarity with the natural environment has for long been an important element in Javanese village life.

There is something in the customs and traditions of the Javanese which is not unlike what Jesus has done for salvation. John's theology suggests that Jesus is saving us through his *persona* as Christ. Paul's theology suggests that Jesus is saving us through his work. These two theologies combine Jesus' relationship to God and his immanent involvement with the reality of his society. These two moments of salvation are achieved through his sacrifice and blood.⁷ It is indeed the theology of the cross that underlies the way the Javanese Catholics experience their faith, a faith which is both Catholic and Javanese. Only by total immersion in this cultural experience are the Javanese Catholics capable of establishing genuine relations with 'their neighbours' in a society characterized by religious, ethnic and linguistic plurality.

This is also the cultural setting within which the local Church in Java lives. It is communities of the faithful who are Catholic by being Javanese, and vice versa. There is no contradiction, at least in theory, between being Catholic and being Javanese. As a local church communities of Catholics cannot escape the reality of incarnate salvation; it means being rooted in local culture. Unfortunately, this notion of 'local Church' has so far been confined to the practices of liturgy. Even in this area, there is still a wide discrepancy between the liturgical symbols for Catholic celebrations and symbols that are culturally meaningful for the local communities. For sure, the tension between the 'universality' and 'locality' of the Church can never be resolved cheaply and easily. But it is also true that local church leaders always show lukewarm attitudes and a lack of creativity in accommodating the live spiritualities of local communities.

Gender and culture have become two focal points in the ongoing critiques of the destruction of indigenous cultural traditions and policies of growth-oriented development. Asian feminist theologians in the 'Women's Commission' of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) seek to resuscitate Asian spiritualities rooted in the indigenous communities. There is currently a growing Christian feminist movement in Indonesia, of which I am part, moving back to indigenous spiritualities. It is not 'development' as such which is at issue. Rather, as is evident in the ongoing economic, political and environmental crisis in Indonesia, what we contest is a model of development which relinquishes indigenous traditions and spiritualities on the altar of economic growth. This, in sum, is the historical challenge for the Christians in Indonesia as they make their journey on the path of our Lord's incarnate salvation in a plural society.

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NOTES

1 Hildred Geertz, 'Indonesian culture and communities' in Ruth T. McVey (ed), *Indonesian Southeast Asian studies* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1967), p 24.

- 2 Aloysius Pieris SJ, *Fire and water: basic issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), pp 15–28.
- 3 J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial policy and practice: a comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), pp 309–312.
- 4 Hans Scharer, *Ngaju religion: the conception of God among South Kalimantan indigenous peoples* (The Hague, 1963).
- 5 Dwijo Sewoyo, *Laporan dari Pelatihan Guru di Yogyakarta (Report from Teachers' Training in Yogyakarta)* (Jakarta: Departemen Penerangan Indonesia, 1979).
- 6 Thomas Merton, *Love and living* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p 79.
- 7 H. F. Davis, 'The atonement' in John R. Sheets (ed), *The theology of the atonement* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1967), p 7.