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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS AN ASIAN TRADITION

Anthony Reid

Is there a necessary opposition between religious faith and tolerance? Can religious pluralism coexist comfortably with profound faith, or is it only truly secure when religion is marginalized by an authoritarian state, or gives way to nationalism as the prevailing mark of popular identity? I want to examine these questions in broad historical terms, and to focus on a different pattern in Europe than in Asia. In particular I want to insist that the real issue is freedom of opinion and tolerance within what we today consider the major world religions, and only secondarily that between them. We must remember that the most murderous wars have been those among Christians and among Muslims, not those between these two faiths. Pluralism, I want to argue, is relatively secure in Indonesia because it is relatively secure within Indonesian Islamic community (*pace* MUI).

Precedents in the West

The experience in the Middle East and Europe of the two faiths that today dominate Indonesia – Islam and Christianity – is not encouraging for my story. Both faiths have been consistently used by authoritarian

rulers to homogenize and consolidate their populations, and have often indeed invited such treatment.

Although Christianity was born as a movement apart from the state and persecuted by it, once adopted as the religion of the Roman Empire in 312 AD it quickly became a state orthodoxy, almost coterminous with the fortunes of states. The very concept of an enforceable orthodoxy was born with the Council of Nicea, since there was a mighty state that could outlaw schism as politically divisive and require the theologians to resolve any differences that became politically significant. The concept of heresy was born at a time when states could equate it with subversion, so that first Nestorians and Monophysites, and later Albigensians and Cathars, could be crushed by force except insofar as they managed to establish states of their own that could defend them. Challenges to the religious establishment were seen as challenges also to the state. Long-lasting schism, or religious diversity, could only occur when different states supported different sides of the debate. Even after the Roman Empire in the West dissolved before northern invaders, in the eastern Mediterranean it remained closely intertwined with the fortunes of the church, so that the split between Catholic and Orthodox became largely coterminous with that which had occurred within the old Roman Empire. The first world power, Hapsburg Spain, expanded into the Americas in a similar spirit that identified loyalty to Spain with adherence to Catholicism.

In Europe the idea of religious pluralism emerged only after a century of wars between states that enforced Catholicism as an essential test of loyalty, and those that supported Protestants. The success of the latter, notably in England, Holland and Sweden, in retaining both religious and political independence on the basis of their own new national churches, ensured that Europe would be plural, though not yet its separate states. A diversity of legally entitled religious opinions within the same state became possible first in Protestant Christian states,

which still refused to allow Catholics to worship publicly and legally, but which found it increasingly difficult to impose any religious orthodoxy among Protestants themselves, many of whom had abandoned the idea of a single authoritative church.

Only in the 19th century, following the radical secularization of the French revolution, did it gradually become acceptable in one European country after another for Catholics, various types of Protestants, and Jews, to have equal legal rights (Hindus and Muslims came even later, largely in the 20th century). This process was very much part of a shift towards nationalism and race (towards the outside) and class (internally) as the most important marks of identity, in the context of the new democratic politics. Religion could be taken out of the public sphere, in effect, because it was no longer the main issue of identity. The most appalling elimination of a minority by a democratic nationalist majority occurred on the basis of race (in Germany against Jews), not religion.

In contrast with early Christianity, Islam wielded state authority within the lifetime of its founder. The issues of who was entitled to exercise such power and how, were therefore always salient in Islamic history, and the deepest division, Sunni-Shia, arose over them. Having to come to terms with well-established Christian churches in many of the areas it conquered did provide Islam with an experience of pluralism, but only on very unequal terms. The democratic premise that individuals may take multiple positions but should accept the vote of the majority made rather limited progress in the Islamic countries of the Middle East. Many modernizers accepted that religion had to be taken out of the public sphere, but their attempts to replace it with nationalism as the glue that holds a modern democratic polity together succeeded only in Turkey, and with the same appalling side-effects against racial/national minorities as occurred in Germany (and later Serbia).

Democracy elsewhere made very poor progress even when religion was marginalized. With the hindsight of contemporary Iraq, it becomes

clearer that religious minorities readily joined the secular nationalist movements that brought them to power at least partly because, as minorities who could not hope to impose their own religious agenda, the advantages of secularism were obvious. The advantages of democracy, on the other hand, were much less obvious, particularly when popular opposition took on a religious flavour. Hence a Sunni minority in Iraq, and an Alawite (sect of Shi'a) one in Syria, both with Christian and other minority allies, formed secular nationalist authoritarian governments, for which anti-Israeli propaganda became a necessary nationalist trope even past the day when Arab nationalism retained much credibility. Democracy threatens these minorities with the spectre of being classed by the religious majority as heretics without rights.

The Asian Difference

Fortunately there have been other traditions of interaction between religion and power, more encouraging for pluralism and piety than that of the west, and notably in Asia. We should see Asia (east of Afghanistan) as the great laboratory of religion, where the pattern of pluralism essential for our globalized modern world has the longest roots. Different ritual practices coexisted, and appear often to have learned from each other. Ancient religious communities survived over millennia as minorities distinct from their neighbours. There were attempts to impose religious uniformity through military and political power, but these were surprisingly unsuccessful and short-lived.

The Semitic "religions of Abraham" that made their way to Asia certainly brought with them exclusivist ideas of crusade and jihad. The first generation that brought both Muslim and Christian arms to Asia appeared to believe that their faith required either domination or constant battle. But they adjusted to Asian realities, and the wiser counsel of coreligionists who had learned an Asian pattern of interaction without compromising religious principles.

Perhaps the oldest tradition is not so much Asian as Eurasian, having to do with the largeness of empires, and the tightness of many religious communities over which they ruled. Ancient conquerors who have left us records attest the antiquity of a pattern by which the most successful rulers accepted the religious diversity of their subjects. This was particularly the habit of the more successful Persian rulers, to the extent that the famous cylinder of Cyrus the Great (576-529 BCE), first discovered and translated in 1879, was in 1971 translated by the United Nations as a kind of founding charter of religious rights.[1]

To simplify, there are at least two deep origins of the "Asian" religious pattern that is still with us. The first was essentially Indian, where religion centred on an abundance of sacred sites and ritual practices, rather than the definition of boundaries and orthodoxies that political power imposed on the Semitic faiths in their strongholds. Varied Hindu schools could coexist with each other and with Jainism, Sikhism, Islam and Zoroastrianism in India, and with Buddhism in early Southeast Asia. The other origin was quite different, in the insistence of the Chinese court (somewhat like that of Rome) that the Emperor himself was principal mediator between the world and the cosmos. The emperor was therefore not interested in imposing any orthodoxy other than a Confucian secular one as the definition of "Chineseness". This was not exactly religious tolerance, since any religion held to challenge the emperor's centrality was regarded with deep suspicion and hostility. But it did allow, in Korea, Japan and Vietnam as well as in China, various schools of Buddhism to overlap and interacted with Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto and shamanism.

[1] The text has been variously translated, and essentially states that the conqueror has restored the gods to their respective temples, after his vanquished predecessor had sought to impose religious uniformity. A translation by Leo Oppenheim is included in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press, 1950).

Java offers an intriguing example of this pluralism at work. Its two most spectacular temple complexes are the Buddhist Borobudur, and the Hindu Loro Jonggrang temple near Prambanan, both dated to the 8th-9th centuries and only about 50 km apart. Until recently it was assumed by western scholars and their Javanese successors that these must have been built by rival dynasties succeeding one another in the central Javanese heartland – the Buddhist Sailendras from their South Sumatran base, and the Javanese Hindu Sanjaya dynasty. The newer scholarship has been forced to concede, by virtue of the existence of undisturbed Hindu monuments in close proximity to Buddhist ones and vice versa, that the monuments "may be the products of a carefully maintained balance, a peaceful coexistence [of the two religions] in which an element of competition was never absent".[2] Bokyung Kim has now shown that the there was more likely only one dynasty in Central Java at this time though with competing branches, that the building of the two temples overlapped in time, and that one of the key patrons of the completion of Borobodur was a Saivite king with a Buddhist wife.[3]

It became a theme of Javanese mysticism that different ritual paths to enlightenment such as Buddhism and Hinduism were only external expressions of an inner oneness. The state motto of contemporary Indonesia (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*) derives from a 14th-century mystical poem, the *Sutasoma*, in which Mpu Tantular pondered the essential oneness of surface differences, such as those between Buddhism, Saivism, and the new, still marginal presence of Islam:

"The truth of Jina (Buddha) and the truth of Shiva is one.

They are indeed different, but they remain one, as there is no duality in Truth".[4]

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[2] Jan Fontein, *The Sculpture of Indonesia* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 38, cited by Bokyung Kim, unpublished dissertation, UCLA, 2006, 14.

[3] Bokyung Kim, chapter 1 *passim*.

[4] *Rwâneka dhâtu winuwus Buddha Wiswa,*
Bhinnêki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen,

Islam Encounters Pluralist Asia

Muslims began to experience this pattern first by sea as traders. Within decades of the death of the Prophet, Muslim traders began to journey as far as southern India for pepper, the Indonesian Archipelago for spices, and Quanzhou in China for silks and ceramics. Muslim enclave communities took their place alongside devotees of myriad deities and spirits all around the Indian Ocean. In places they established little port-states under Muslim rule, but the larger settlements were in cities ruled by Hindus, Buddhists and animists. In Calicut in today's Kerala, Muslim writers like Ibn Battuta in the 14th century and Abdul Razzaq in the 15th appreciated the justice of its Hindu regime, which treated all vessels correctly and equally regardless of the religion of its owner.[5] Siam's port-capital in the 17th century continued to flourish by attracting "a great multitude of strangers of different nations, who settled there with the liberty of living according to their own customs, and of publicly exercising their several ways of worship".[6]

The need to reconcile the religious diversity of a complex society with the demands of Islamic piety was handled a little differently in South Asia and in Southeast Asia. In the South Asian heartland of north India, Islam came with conquering armies that drew a clear line between their own faith and that of their new subjects. Hinduism, Islam, Jainism and Zoroastrianism all continued to exist alongside the new faith, and to interact with it in diverse ways. Indian art, architecture, literature and

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Mangka ng Jinatwa kalawan Siwatatwa tunggal,
Bhinnêka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa.
This quotation (the last 2 lines of which translated above) comes from canto 139, stanza 5, as presented in Soewito Santoso, Sutasoma, *A Study in Old Javanese Wajrayana* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1975), 578.

[5] "Journey of Abd-er-Razzak", in *India in the Fifteenth Century: Being a Collection of Narratives of Voyages to India*, ed. R.H. Major (London: Hakluyt, 1857), 14.

[6] Simon de La Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam* [1693] (reprinted Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969), 112.

music all emerged from this interaction, without however subordinating any of the faiths. Many of the Sufi masters showed an interest in the yogic mystical techniques long practised in the sub-continent, while their sacred graves attracted worshippers across the religious spectrum. A few rulers, and notably the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (ruled 1658-1707), saw this pattern of religious pluralism as weakness, and sought to impose the syaria'ah by force of arms across as much of South India as his armies could extend. Whereas his successful predecessor Akbar had provided economic equality among his subjects by abolishing the canonical poll tax on non-Muslims (*jizyah*), in 1562, Aurangzeb fuelled Hindu hostility by restoring it in 1679. But this went too far for safety, alienating vital non-Muslim allies such as the Rajputs, and exhausting the goodwill as well as the treasure of the empire. A reaction was underway in the last decades of his reign that saw Hindus and Sikhs giving their support to rebel warriors of their own faith. Mughal control continued to decline after his death, and there was a greater polarization between Muslim and Hindu.

In Indonesia the initial stage of Islamic expansion was marked by intense interaction and syncretism, with conquest playing only a minor (if vital) role in eliminating the dynasties that held out against Islam. The most sacred sites of Hindu-Buddhist scholarship and meditation accepted Sufi mystical masters as fellow-seekers, and were in many cases gradually taken over by them. The smaller Muslim port-kingdoms of Indonesia moreover were not successors to the imperial idea of ruling over many kings and peoples of different faiths. Kings made the adjustment to Islam gradually and syncretically. As van Bruinessen notes, adoption rather than conversion was the process, "for the Javanese were deliberately syncretistic. For many of the new Muslims, Islam, especially in its Sufi variety, was a welcome additional source of

spiritual power, not a substitute for what they already had".[7] They declared upon their own conversion that Islam was thereby automatically the official doctrine, but were able to establish what Merle Ricklefs calls a "mystic synthesis" that incorporated much of the rich literature and wisdom of the Javanese Hindu-Buddhist tradition in particular. Only in the minority of cases where a more legalistic understanding of Islam was spread at the point of a sword did peoples emerge who defined their identity by rejecting it – as the Balinese, Batak, and Toraja did. Elsewhere, among Javanese, Malays, and Bugis in general, pluralism almost as great as India's in terms of ritual practice, was maintained under the overall label of Islam.

As in India, legalistic Islam peaked in Indonesia in the mid-17th century, and provoked a reaction to return to pluralism. The greatest patron of the *shari'ah* was Sultan Iskandar Thani of Aceh (r.1637-41), who endowed with state power the hard line of Nurud-din ar-Raniri. He was the only ruler known to have excluded Chinese traders from Aceh on religious grounds, and he executed scores of Portuguese who refused to accept Islam (including their French priest, Pierre Berthelot, subsequently beatified by the Catholic Church). In terms of my point about internal pluralism, however, his more important exceptionalism was to use the *murtad* laws to silence the Muslim scholars that Raniri disagreed with. He had the books of Hamzah Fansuri and Shams ud-Din as-Samatrani (d.1630) burned in front of the great mosque. Their disciples who refused to renounce their monistic views were executed for apostasy, including the popular Sheikh Jamaluddin.

Raniri lost his state power when Sultan Iskandar Thani died in 1641, and a reaction against his excesses set in immediately. Sayf al-Rijal, a disciple of the executed sheikh, returned to Aceh from his studies in

[7] Martin van Bruinessen, "Muslims, Minorities and Modernity: The Restructuring of Heterodoxy in the Middle East and Southeast Asia", (paper presented at Inaugural Lecture, Utrecht University, November 19, 2000).

Arabia, and bitterly attacked ar-Raniri's views and actions.[8] In effect the crowd decided in favour of Sayf al-Rijal, the Aceh establishment accepted the popular view, and in 1643 the learned Gujarati fled back to his birthplace in India. A consensus may be said to have developed in Aceh that pluralism was essential, Christians, Chinese and diverse types of Muslim were admitted to the port (as had always been the case in the other great Muslim trading centres, Banten and Makasar), and the state desire for uniformity should not be taken to such extremes. Aceh's most beloved Sufi master, Sheikh Abdurrauf as-Singkili (1617-93), epitomized this consensus, refusing to condemn either the views of Hamzah Fansuri or of Raniri.

The Aceh elite had earlier spurned Raniri's advice by putting a woman on the throne and were so pleased with the results that they enthroned three subsequent women, covering the period 1641-99. In this they emulated the strategy of two other commercially-inclined sultanates of the period, Patani (from 1564) and the Maldives, who also showed a repeated preference for female rule not previously known in the region. This raises the question whether the conventional disbarring of women from exercising religious authority was seen as an advantage for the queens by contrast with the pressures of office Raniri had been able to impose on Iskandar Thani. It may have been seen as a means to avoid pushing disagreements to the ultimate limit, and effectively legitimating, by default of a sole religious authority, the pluralism that was essential to stable commerce. Azyumardi Azra points out that the Queen, Safiyyat ud-din, "wisely refused" to resolve the debate because she had no authority on religious matters.[9]

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[8] Ar-Raniri, Fath al-Mubin, as translated in Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulamā' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 60-1.

[9] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins*, 61.

Continuities under Colonialism

Nationalist historians were fond of insisting that whatever divisions there were within the borders of the former colony were brought about by colonial divide and rule policies. The truth is more interesting, and I believe more positive. Europeans came to Asia initially with their exclusive ideas of religious uniformity, but soon were forced to make an Asian adjustment. Only the very first colonial venture, of the Spanish in the 16th-century Philippines, sought to impose a European style of religious uniformity. The later comers, Dutch, English and French, had to allow religious freedoms in Asia that they denied in Europe. Chinese, Indian and Southeast Asian traders would use ports by preference that allowed them traditional freedoms of religion, as Ayuthaya, Melaka and Calicut had done. The Europeans had to learn this formula. One of those who explicitly did so was Jan Pieterszoon Coen, who wrote to the East India Company about his dream:

> *to establish a place where so great a concourse of people would come to us, Chinese, Malay, Javanese, Klings and all other nations, to reside and trade in peace and freedom under Your Excellency's [VOC] jurisdiction, that soon a city would be peopled and the staple of the trade attracted, so that [Portuguese] Melaka would fall to nothing.10*

This was written more than two years before he captured Jakarta and renamed it Batavia, as his attempt to realize this dream. By "freedom" he meant in particular religious pluralism, whereby the different trading communities could each publicly practice their own faith. Batavia/ Jakarta, Rangoon, Penang, Singapore and Saigon, no less than Ayutthaya/Bangkok, became endowed with places of worship of all kinds – Sunni and Shi'a, Catholic and Protestant, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Chinese Buddhist and Taoist, Hindu of various persuasions,

[10] Coen to VOC, 10.10. 1616, in Jan Pieterszoon Coen, *Bescheiden Betreffende zijn Verblijf in Indie*. The Hague, I: 215.

Sikh and Jain. One American Protestant missionary noted of Singapore soon after its foundation:

> *As in every other part of India, each class of the community preserves the costume, manners and religion of its ancestry. This has long ceased to look odd to me.*[11]

There was a difference between colonized and uncolonized Southeast Asia, in that Siam developed a nationalism that was not plural, but rather stressed Buddhism as part of the trilogy of nation, religion and king that defined its nationalism. By continuing the imperial tradition into the age of nationalism, by contrast, the colonial governments defined their states in terms of physical boundaries, not uniformities of culture or religion. The nationalists had little choice than to build their coherences around those boundaries, rather than around religion. Religious pluralism therefore had to be officially part of the nation conceived by Burmese, Malaysians, Filipinos, and notably Indonesians. In an age of intense nationalism that often seemed at a disadvantage, but in the globalized era we are entering, it should put these countries, like India, ahead in coming to terms with a necessary religious pluralism.

Independent Indonesia was born in 1945 as essentially plural, with the Constitution and the Pancasila representing a compromise between the demands of strict Muslims, *abangan* Muslims and minorities. In Sukarno's *Lahirnya Pancasila* speech of June 1945 made the case eloquently for a representative basis for the state, not a religious one. If Muslims or Christians wanted a state more in conformity with their respective religions, "let us work as hard as possible so that most of the seats in the people's representative body… are occupied by Muslim [or Christian, respectively] delegates".[12]

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[11] Howard Malcolm, *Travels in Southeastern Asia* (London: Charles Tilt, 1839), II: 101.

[12] The Sukarno speech was delivered on June 1, 1945 as part of the Japanese-sponsored preparations for independence and later published as *Lahirnja Pantja Sila* (Jakarta: Ministry of Information, 1960). I have quoted from the excerpt

This kind of ideological commitment to pluralism, however, proved fragile in the event. Sukarno himself changed his views several times, and eventually laid the basis for an authoritarian rejection of democracy and pluralism, enforced more effectively by Suharto. The more substantial basis for democratic pluralism was the simple diversity of Indonesia, impossible to force into a single mould. The decree authorizing a plurality of contending political parties in November 1945, much denounced subsequently by those who favoured authoritarian rule, emerged much more from an attempt to provide legitimacy for government and a link between it and the people, than from a commitment to liberal principles per se.[13] The eventual return to a more plural and democratic form of government in 1998 was also a recognition that broader sections of society could only be given a stake in government by this means.

The Islamic community, as a notional "majority", is particularly crucial. If the Islamic majority were to be successfully manipulated by authoritarian rulers into surrendering its democratic rights in the name of Islamic uniformity, there would be no hope of pluralism in Indonesia. But the reverse has always been the case. Firstly the nominally Islamic community has been divided about equally between those who vote for Islamic parties in the belief that Islam is the dominant issue, and those who do not. Among the former, there is again a roughly equal division between those who have supported the more-or-less modernist position of Muhammadiah and its various political offshoots, and those who have supported the NU, or since 1999 an explicitly pluralist political stance.

Thus in 1955 the 44% of the electorate who voted for Islamic parties were almost equally divided between Masjumi (20.9) and NU (18.4). In

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translated in *Indonesian Political Thinking 1945-1965*, ed. Herbert Feith and Lance Castles (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 45.

[13] Anthony Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution, 1945-50* (Hawthorn, Vic.: Longman Australia, 1974), 68-73.

1971 only 27% voted for Islamic political parties, of which the NU share was 18.7%.

Elections	**Modernist**	**NU**	Total %
1955	Masjumi 20.9	NU 18.4	43.9
1971	Parmusi 5.4	NU 18.7	27.1
3-party			16-29 (PPP)
	Explicit Islam	**Pluralist Islam**	
1999	15.9	22.1	38 (21 parties)
2004 Parliament	21.3 (PKS 7.3)	17 (PKB 10.6; PAN 6.4)	38.3 (7 parties)
2004 President	3.0 (PPP)	14.7 (PAN)	17.7

When open competition was again permitted at the national level after 1998, roughly 38% of the national vote in the 1999 and 2004 Parliamentary elections went to Islamic parties, of which there were 21 in 1999 and 7 in 2004. But of this proportion, only 16% in 1999 and 21% in 2004 went to parties that were exclusively Islamic, with 22% and 17% respectively voting for parties such as PKB and PAN, which had embraced pluralism and included non-Muslims in their party leadership.

[In the Presidential election of 2004, with candidates limited to 5, the only ticket that could be considered in any sense exclusivist Islam (PPP) obtained only 3% of the vote].

Normative comments such as the fatwa of Majelis Ulama Indonesia in July 2005, condemning "pluralism, secularism and liberalism" certainly give a disturbing impression to outsiders. But the reaction to that fatwa showed very clearly what a minority opinion it was, and how little support for such views there is in the electorate. In fact Pluralism in Indonesia rests upon a very secure base of history as well as ideology.

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