Contextualisation and re-contextualisation: Regional patterns in the history of Southeast Asian Christianity

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John Roxborogh

1. Introduction and overview

Southeast Asia comprises the present day countries of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and Indonesia. Chinese influence is stronger in the North and East and Indian in the West and South, but both are widely felt. Islam became widespread in "island"[1] Southeast Asia from the 13th century. The region has long been a melting pot in which continuities of value and belief are not to be underestimated.

Christian origins in the area arose through trade, migration, colonialism and mission - migrants, merchants and missionaries, soldiers and seekers of fortune all contributed in different ways. These were often Westerners, but in terms of what the church is today, it is important to note how many were Asians who were converted in one place and migrants to another. The story of these churches can be traced in terms of institutional development, in relationship to political changes, and as part of a shifting complex of world-views. It is the movement of a faith which is aware of regional and international roots at the same time as it seeks a more authentic contemporary cultural and theological identity.

An account of this process of contextualisation and recontextualisation needs to take account of the plurality of dynamics at work. Those who changed religion did so for many reasons, a quest for social or personal security and identity in the face of social change, a search for personal salvation and for a religion which appeared to better cope with the modern world to which they aspired, a faith which seemed to allow scope for traditional religious - and material - concerns and aspirations, which also addressed other needs. Those who kept the faith and witnessed to Christ in successive generations sometimes did so because they had come in to what was now a tradition; yet the ability of Christianity to regenerate itself across time and culture in Southeast Asia as elsewhere has a great deal to do with what it has always claimed to be about. Mixed motives are a commentary on the human condition, to be acknowledged as part of the story; yet they do not explain or explain away ultimate questions of truth and value which must also be considered.

In terms of numbers, in the 1980s estimates of the percentage of Christians range from 87% in the Philippines and 18% in Singapore, through about 9% in Indonesia and Vietnam, 7-8% in Malaysia and Brunei, to 4.5% in Burma, and 0.5-1% in Laos, Thailand and Kampuchea.[2]

Apart from those locked into being `pro' or `anti' in their evaluation of colonialism[3] it is widely accepted that in terms of the structural changes brought to Southeast Asian society, generally speaking Western influence was relatively peripheral until the latter part of the 19th century.[4] Nevertheless the arrivals - and

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[1]. The Malay Peninsular belongs in this as in many other ways to "island" rather than mainland Southeast Asia.

[2]. *Asiaweek*, 6 October 1989, p.44. D B Barrett, ed. *World Christian Encyclopedia*, OUP, Nairobi, 1982.

[3]. Panikkar, K M. *Asia and Western dominance*, Allen and Unwin, 1969, is the classic anti-colonial corrective. A measured response is S Neill, *Colonialism and Christian mission*, Lutterworth, 1966.

[4]. Benda, H J. "The structure of Southeast Asian history: some preliminary observations," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 3(1), March 1962, pp.106-138. Smail, J R W. "On the possibility of an autonomous history of modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 2(2), July 1961, pp.72-102.

departures - of Western powers frequently provided turning points as far as Christianity was concerned.

The Spanish and the Portuguese came in the 16th century, followed by the Dutch in the 17th, then the French British and Americans. The Portuguese mission under royal patronage led to the founding of churches throughout the region except in the Philippines, but with the collapse of Portuguese rule Catholicism learnt to cope without government support. The creation of the Propaganda Fidé (1622) and the Société des missions étrangères de Paris (MEP, 1664) were significant in maintaining and extending Catholic faith, but not without serious rivalry between French and Portuguese. The Spanish mission produced in the Philippines the only "Christian" country in Asia. French missionaries were the basis of Catholicism from Thailand to Vietnam, and French priests served in other areas as well, notably Malaya.

The Dutch East India Company in the 17th and 18th centuries at first did little more in religious terms than suppress Catholicism and provide for their own, but in the 19th century Dutch Protestant missions became widespread in what is now Indonesia.[5] The British in Burma and Malaysia facilitated rather than encouraged a range of denominations and missions of different nationalities. Protestants came to the Philipines with the Americans from 1898 onwards. While Thailand did not escape foreign influence, it successfully avoided foreign rule. Its Buddhist heartlands were tolerant but unyielding as far as missionary activity was concerned; perhaps a factor in permitting Christian work among more responsive non-Buddhist tribal groups.

A watershed was the Japanese period of 1942 to 1945 which provided an enforced period of independence for local churches and an indication of issues to be faced for church as well as state. After political independence churches had to learn to relate to their governments on their own at the same time as new partnership relationships developed regionally and internationally. There are a number of situations, such as in Burma, Thailand, and Malaysia, where Christianity remains not only a minority religion, but also one strongest among groups in some way or another in tension with the central government or dominant social or ethnic group.[6] As in other parts of the world the challenge of faithfulness to local and global identities and of finding an authentic impetus to mission is a real one.

Different colonial powers had different policies regarding religion, and these were seldom uniformly applied except that economic and political issues usually outweighed religious considerations. Few could resist using missionary activity for their own ends when pressed, but the British and the Americans were on the whole more restrained.

In terms of its own development the story of the church often began with migrants, European and Asian, bringing Christian faith with them as part of a community identity. Missionaries nourished these communities and then sought to reach beyond them. Churches took root in relation to the culture of the community, and either in connection with or over against the wider communities of which they were also part. Such churches can be seen among Chinese and Indian communities throughout Southeast Asia, and the same observations apply to Eurasian Catholic and modern-day expatriate congregations.

Where Christianity was brought to a culture which was essentially stable in place, if not in time; the process of enculturation was more straightforward. The tribal churches of the Hmong across Burma, Thailand and Laos; the Karens and Chins in Burma, Bataks in Sumatra, and Iban in East Malaysia are illustrative of these. The Protestant churches of Bali have successfully related Christian faith to a very creative culture,[7] but as Balinese have migrated to other parts of Indonesia taking their

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[5]. van den End, T. "Dutch Protestant missionary activity: a survey," *Itinerario*, 7(1), 1983, pp.86-108.

[6]. Tapp, N. "The impact of missionary Christianity upon marginalized ethnic minorities: The case of the Hmong," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 20(1) March 1989, pp.70-95.

[7]. McKenzie, D G. *The mango tree church. The story of the Protestant Christian Church in Bali*, Boolarong Publications, Brisbane and the Joint Board of Christian Education, [Melbourne], 1988.

enculturated faith with them, the dynamics changed to that of migrant Christian groups in general.

The region continues to exhibit the successive influence and ongoing interaction of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. Behind and often alongside apparently modern economic and religious patterns, is a pervasive animism and the experience of traditional economies of padi farming, shifting cultivation, fishing and trade. This dualism of economic systems mirrors a duality of religious aspirations. Present-day Singapore[8] may appear to have left its rural roots far behind, but spirit and ancestral shrines in high-technology business premises and the growth of an Asian Pentecostalism[9] are suggestive of the fascinating economic, cultural and religious mix that is the matrix of Southeast Asian Christianity today.

2. **Traders and travellers: Nestorians and Catholics in the middle ages.**

The earliest Christian presence appears to have been Nestorian.[10] There are 7th century references to claims of Nestorian episcopal jurisdiction extending to the north-West coast of the Malay Peninsular[11] and in the 14th century to Java and South Sumatra. These are consistent with reports of Nestorian traders in these areas and in the 15th century in Pegu (Burma) and Ayutia (Thailand) as well as Melaka. There were also limited contacts with Catholic travellers and diplomats returning from China such as Marco Polo in 1292, Orderic of Pordenone in the early 14th century[12] and John de Marignolli in 1346.

Neither trader nor visitor were concerned with establishing permanent Christian communities and there is only limited residual evidence of their presence, cultural, religious, or archaeological. From the local viewpoint these were but isolated contacts with people of different religion, language and race who may have been objects of curiosity but who did not represent much in the way of military threat or political or religious promise.

However the significance, particularly of the "Nestorian" or Eastern Church, is greater than the paucity of direct continuity with later events might suggest. Christianity is not "young" in the region, or indeed elsewhere in Asia - whatever the pedigree of some of its current forms; and neither is it just "Western" - "the history of Asian cultures and religion is one ... of a continuous and constantly changing pluralism in tradition, within which eastern Christianity has both contributed and recieved major influences."[13] The issue of being both an international and a contextual faith remains acute, but there are some ancient traditions to draw on in seeking to be both Asian and Christian.

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[8]. Clammer, John. *Singapore. Ideology, Society, Culture*, Chopmen, Singapore, 1985. Scott, Margaret, `Halting the crusade. The government confronts Singapore's church activists,' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1987, pp.44, 61-65.

[9]. Northcott, M. "A survey of the rise of Charismatic Christianity in Malaysia," *Asia Journal of Theology*, 4(1), April 1990, pp.266-278. Ackerman, S E and R L M Lee, *Heaven in transition, non-Muslim religious innovation and ethnic identity in Malaysia*, University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

[10]. England, J C. "Christian communities in South East and North East Asia - an outline of the evidence in seven countries before 1500AD," *East Asia Pastoral Review*, 1988(2), pp.144-152. Also in *Asia Journal of Theology*, 4(1), April 1990, pp.174-185 and *Missiology*, April 1991.

[11]. Colless, B. "Persian merchants and missionaries in medieval Malaya," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 42(2), 1969, pp.10-47. S Q Fatimi, "In quest of Kalah," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 1(2), 1960. G R Tibbetts, *A study of the Arabic texts containing material on South-east Asia*, Royal Asiatic Society, London and Brill, Leiden, 1979. F Ukur, "A brief history of the churches in Indonesia," *CTC Bulletin*, 3(2) August 1982, pp.3-11.

[12]. Rooney, J. *Khabar Gembira*, Burns and Oates, 1981, pp.3-5.

[13]. England, J C, *Missiology*, ibid.

3. Invaders and missionaries: the origins of Christian communities under Portuguese and Spanish influence.

In the 16th century Western Catholicism from Portugual and Spain became the dominant form of Christianity in the region. Over time, its leadership changed from the casual if not openly covetous attitudes of chaplains accompanying the first soldiers, traders and administrators; to the dedication and leadership of the first Jesuits, to the serious determination and authoritarianism of the missionary orders of Tridentine Catholicism.

Those who came as invaders and traders from Europe seldom commended their faith by word or deed. Nevertheless in times of war their piety returned and their wives, children and slaves became the core of the Eurasian church. Missionary orders provided leadership little open to other races for centuries. Individuals and communities converted, but usually from Animism or Hinduism rather than Islam or Buddhism. These "mission" congregations were usually distinct from "colonial."

The Portuguese[14] worked their way eastwards following their conquest of Goa in 1510. In 1511 they took Melaka which in 1558 became a diocesan centre; from 1522 they established a fortress on the Moluccan island of Ternate. There was some contact with Burma and Thailand where there were a number of converts, but little with Java and Sumatra. The Philippines were under Spanish rule from 1565 and political and religious rivalry between the two Catholic powers was not unknown.

On Ternate the first public mass had been held in 1522 and Franciscans came as chaplains and evangelists, particularly after 1534. This strengthened Islam as a focus of opposition and Portuguese interference resulted in a series of unstable rulers. In 1558 the Portuguese arrested Sultan Hairun (1535-1570) provoking an attack on local Christians on Ambon. In 1570 there was further tension. Peace was restored with oaths sworn on the Quran and the Bible, but the following day Hairun was murdered by the Governor's brother. The Tertanese revolted and by 1575 had forced the Portuguese to leave.

Political motives were often involved both in evangelism and response. On Halmahera the Portuguese administration saw conversion as a means to weaken the Sultans, the Halmaherans as a means of asserting their independence.[15] Requirements for baptism were minimal: basically the ability to recite the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, yet conversions close to the royal court were rare[16] and there was a fair degree of mobility in and out of Christian faith. Of the about 4,000 Christians on Halmahera in 1613, most reverted to animism and some became Muslims. The church died out completely until a Protestant mission began in 1866. A number of reasons have been suggested:

> First evangelism was widespread but superficial. Second evangelism was entirely related to political motivations. Therefore in the periods of relatively good relations between the Sultans and the Portuguese (1520s and 1540s - 1550s) evangelism advanced; when however there was strong opposition from the North Moluccan local power-centre (1535+ and after 1570) then there was rapid falling away from the

[14]. Boxer, C R. *The Portuguese seaborne empire 1415-1825*, Hutchinson, 1977, pp.64-83. T R de Souza, "The Portuguese in Asia and their church patronage," in M D David, ed., *Western colonialism in Asia and Christianity*, Himalaya Publishing House, Bombay, 1988, pp.11-29. These concentrate on Goa, and the situations further east in the Portuguese empire were frequently diluted. A series of writings by Fr Manuel Teixeira may also be consulted. *Portugal na Birmânia*; *Portugal no Camboja*; *Portugal no Tailândia*, all published by Ediçao da Direcçao dos Serviços de Turismo, Macau, 1983.

[15]. Haire, J. *The character and theological struggle of the Church in Halmahera, Indonesia, 1941-1979*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 1981, p.107. See also N Tapp, op cit, p.89. There are a number of examples of conversion to Christianity being seen as providing protection against a dominant culture.

[16]. Haire, Ibid., p.103f.

> faith. Third the murder of [Sultan] Hairun and the consequent backlash against Portuguese perfidity destroyed any trust in the missionaries closely related as they were to the Portuguese forces. Fourth Islam ... was increasingly the standard of national self-expression. In these circumstances it was not surprising that Christianity should die out once Portuguese influence began to disappear.[17]

In other areas work was more lasting although in Ambon the Dutch sought to effect a change from Catholic to Protestant to ensure political allegiance. A small number of villages were already Christian when Xavier visited in 1546. From 1576 until its capture by the Dutch in 1605 there was a substantial Portuguese presence and by 1587 there were reputed to be 34 Christian villages in the area.[18]

In Melaka by 1600 the population of local Christians reached 7,400 largely by intermarriage or conversions of Indians and Chinese.[19] From 1641 the Dutch proscribed Catholicism but otherwise made little effort to seek conversion.

Spain's position was stable until the end of the 19th century, but from the 1560s Portugal's interests were turning more towards Japan, to China (Macao was ceded in 1557) and further afield, to Brazil. The loss of Ternate was a serious blow as was Ambon in 1605 and Melaka in 1641.

The religious legacy of the Portuguese "was less the work of the Portuguese empire than of one Jesuit and his devoted followers."[20] In Goa, Melaka, the Moluccas and Japan - from 1545 until his death off the coast of China in 1552 - Francis Xavier[21] worked with characteristic energy. In the early 17th century estimates of the number of Christians in Southeast Asia, apart from the Philippines, vary between 25,000 and 60,000. Numbers were strongest on Ambon but also on Solor, Timor and Flores with less success on Sulawesi and among Hindu communities on the Eastern coast of Java. On mainland Southeast Asia there were churches associated with traders in Burma and Thailand and sporadic and inconsequential missionary efforts had been made into Kampuchea.

In the Philippines,[22] early Spanish contact in 1521 had produced converts, but these did not last. In 1565 they established themselves in Cebu and then Manila. Augustinian missionaries were soon followed by other orders and before the end of the century Filipinos were coming for baptism in their thousands. During 1622 alone there were half a million. A rapid mass movement did not escape problems of shallow faith and too much dependence on too few clergy. The converts came from the animist north and not from the Muslims on the southern islands.

4. Survival and expansion in the 17th and 18th centuries.

In Vietnam, Catholics fleeing persecution in Japan formed the first stable Christian church in 1615, in Da Nang. In 1624 the French Jesuit Alexander de Rhodes (1591-1660) began a remarkable ministry[23] which provided a Southeast Asian version of the strategies and adaption techniques of Mateo Ricci (1552-1610) in China and Roberto

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[17]. Haire, ibid., p.107.

[18]. Jacobs, H. "Ambon as a Portuguese and Catholic town," *Neue Zeitscrift für Missionswissenscaft, 41(1), 1985.*

[19]. Thomaz, L F. "The Indian merchant communities in Malacca under the Portuguese rule," in Teotonio R de Souza *Indo-Portuguese History. Old issues new questions*, Concept Publishing, New Delhi, 1984, p.65.

[20]. Ricklefs, M C. *A history of modern Indonesia*, Mamillan, 1981, p.23.

[21]. Schurhammer, Goerg. *Francis Xavier, his life, his times*. vols 3 and 4, Jesuit Historical Institute, Rome, 1980, 1982.

[22]. Gowing, Peter G. *Islands under the Cross. The story of the Church in the Philippines*, National Council of Churches, Manila, 1967.

[23]. Yarr, Linda. "The indigenization of Christianity in pre-colonial Vietnam," paper presented to a conference on the indigenization of Christianity in Southeast Asia, Cebu, 1986.

de Nobili (1577-1656) in India. By his death there were some 300,000 converts, a seminary was started in 1666 and the first native priests ordained two years later. A local women's order which still exists, the *Amantes de la Croix*, was founded in 1670. The very success of the mission invited a hostile response and from 1698 the periodic bouts of persecution became more severe and by 1883 provided a pretext for French annexation.

During the 17th century Portuguese power continued to decline, and the Catholic communities it founded in the region were diminished or dispersed, yet often survived. In 1665, 400 Portuguese exiles were found in Kampuchea, together with 50 Christians from Cochin China. In Kedah, on the Northwest of the Malay Peninsular, priests who had had to leave Thailand because of internal troubles discovered in 1781 a group of Catholics willing to accept their ministry and a local Sultan willing to help them provide it. In the Philippines the Spanish continued to consolidate their religious and political position, but in general Catholic missionaries were at the mercy of local rulers, Protestant, Buddhist, Muslim and Pagan. Like Catholic rulers themselves, these were not always predictable.

As the external agents of the Portuguese demise the Dutch introduced Protestantism, but with little fervour. Faced with the inability of Portugual and Spain to carry out their missionary obligations, the Catholic Church formed the Propaganda Fide in 1622 and later the Société des missions étrangères de Paris [MEP]. In Thailand in the 1660s there were 2000 Catholics and a general seminary was established which proved the heart of missionary catholicism in the region. Efforts to evangelise Burma mostly lead to martyrdom but by 1790 there were several thousand Catholics in Rangoon.

Melaka continued to exist as a diocese, although the bishops resided in Timor or Flores, the last to take up the position being appointed in 1747.[24] Lay leadership was crucial for the survival of Catholicism which quite often proved itself more resilient than Protestantism.[25] By 1712 there were six times as many Catholics as Protestants in Melaka and many had Dutch names.

The Dutch established themselves through the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC) founded in 1602. The Company charter provided for the "maintenance of the common faith" but limited extension of Protestantism outside the Dutch community was only encouraged when it suited political ends.

By 1799 Dutch presence was strongest in the Moluccas and on Java. Initially about 30,000 Roman Catholics were forced to convert to Protestantism. The Gospel of Matthew was translated into Malay in 1629 and the Bible by 1733 although the Company delayed printing for a decade. By 1727 there were an estimated 55,000 baptised outside the Dutch community of whom only about 1000 were communicants. These figures had little changed by the end of the century. On the island of Roti (West of Timor) people took their own decision to become Christian and to encourage education, thus forming an elite which was of significance later in Indonesian history.

By the time the British were establishing a foothold in the region at the end of the 18th century, Christianity was present in Protestant and Catholic forms, and Catholicism was divided into Spanish, French, and Portuguese spheres of interest. Although Rome refused the request of the MEP to appoint six native Vietnamese Bishops in 1678, a small local priesthood and the formation of seminaries meant that the policy of the Propaganda Fidé of encouraging native priests had a beginning at least.

5. Churches, Migrants and missionaries to World War II.

[24]. After an extended vacancy the see was transferred to the Vicariate Apostolic of Ava and Pergu (ie Burma) in 1838, and to Thailand in 1840. It was restored in 1888. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, `Malacca'.

[25]. For Melaka see, Bernard Sta Maria, *My people, my country. The story of the Malacca Portuguese community*, Portuguese Development Centre, Melaka, 1982, pp.74-77. For Flores see J M Prior, *Church and marriage in an Indonesian village*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 1988, p.8.

At the beginning of the 19th century Southeast Asia was quick to feel the effects of the new rush of missionary interest, both Catholic and Protestant. As the century progressed this became increasingly associated with a new phase of Western colonialism, British in Burma and Malaya and for a time Indonesia; Dutch in Indonesia, French in Indo-China and American in the Philippines where it supplanted Spanish rule after 1898. Yet many missions did not align with the colonial power involved. In Malaya, French and Portuguese Catholics squabbled over who would evangelise Chinese and Malays in British dominated territory. In British Burma, after the Anglo-Burman wars which progressively extended British control, the main Protestant mission was American Baptist. In Malaya again, the most successful Protestant mission was that of the American Methodists which built a large proportion of the schools and expanded as a mission to the Philippines, Burma and Sumatra. In Indonesia the Dutch were slow to admit Catholics and in Indo-China the French administration only reluctantly allowed the American based Christian and Missionary Alliance to begin work - in 1911 in Vietnam and 1923 in Kampuchea. As Protestants under a Catholic colonial regime they found response among groups less identified with the French - but in time association with Americans was also to prove a liability.

The relationship of Christianity to colonialism was thus complex - it was not always the precise religion of the ruling power, yet its associations were clear. At the same time other bases for the church were important. Eurasian catholic communities in Thailand, Malaya and parts of Indonesia developed into a new era with an identity as much Asian as Portuguese in origin. As Indians migrated to Malaya to find work, it was discovered that numbers were Anglicans, Methodists and Lutherans who were demanding that they receive pastoral care. They also included Mar Thoma and Syrian Christians from Kerela whose roots claimed to predate those of Christianity in Britain. From South China came whole Christian communities to settle in British North Borneo, Sarawak and Malaya whose descendants are today the core of Chinese churches in Malaysia and Singapore.

British policy was not entirely uniform. In the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Melaka and Penang there was virtually total religious freedom. In the Malay States, where from 1874 British influence increased rapidly, church work was at first restricted to chaplaincy provision for expatriate Europeans, although pastoral and missionary activity was possible among migrant Indian and Chinese. Support for the Church of England was personal rather than official, although it could be real enough. One knew what was the religion of the colonial masters, where the Governor worshipped and where the bishop, if not the native clergy (such as they were) were invited to stay. In the Philippines this produced strange results when the American governor was Unitarian and strongly influenced the leadership of an emerging independent church.

In Indonesia Dutch control of mission work ensured that religion did not interfere with broader economic and political interests. Although some independent missionary groups were permitted, church and mission were simply part of the government. This placed the church in the position of being firmly identified with foreign domination. Nevertheless there were those who saw that rising nationalism must result in independence and sufficient local church leaders were active in that cause to save the credibility of the Indonesian churches. In examining and criticising the policy of their own church and government a number of Dutch missionaries attained world stature as missiologists, notably Kraemer, Bavinck and Verkuyl.

Taken as a whole the period of high colonialism prior to World War II was probably more significant for associating Christianity with education, medicine, economic progress and democratic ideals than it was for its undoubted links with the Western powers who would one day depart, as a few were beginning to forsee. It also demonstrated that whatever the progress of the faith among those of animistic and tribal backgrounds, adherents of Islam and Buddhism, particularly where these championed national identity as in Burma, Thailand, and Malaya and parts of Indonesia such as Acheh, were much less likely to convert. Chinese Christians were

becoming a discernible group, whatever their denomination. Outside of China Chinese identity was less compromised by religious change, and the move from folk religion to Christianity was more feasible than conversion from purer forms of Buddhism - very much less widely practiced among Chinese than often supposed.

World War I had reduced mission staffing and placed German missions in other hands, yet in the 1920s and 30s countries of the region experienced considerable missionary input which was also theologically more diverse. Questions of co-operation between Protestant groups, and the need for positive action to become less Euro-centric in polity, theology and leadership were increasingly felt. Moves toward union began soon after Protestant missionaries arrived in the Philippines, but the forces of fragmentation, as of nationalism were also strong. There were significant unions in Thailand and the Philippines in the 1930s and the beginnings of greater co-operation in Malaya. In 1938 the Madras meeting of the International Missionary Council provided a forum for ideas of unity and indigenisation, but before much could be done, war in Europe and invasion by Japan brought disruption, yet ensured these concerns would one day be acted on with unexpected urgency and commitment.

6. Japanese occupation.

The Japanese invasion from 1941 to 1945 meant that the region lost any belief it ever had that Europeans were invincible and would stay forever.[26] The churches suffered loss of life and property, not to mention records, and Christians faced the general chaos, uncertainty and deprivation of the times along with everyone else. Of necessity in most places leadership was suddenly placed in local hands as missionaries left or were interned. This was more gradual in Vietnam and Thailand and generally Catholics were less affected because of the number of their missioners who were French, German, Austrian or Italian.

The Japanese sought to be "pro-Asiatic" in their policies and individual Christians in the Japanese administration were frequently encouraging in a mutually difficult situation. Some church synods and councils were allowed to meet and the Chinese Conference of the Methodist Church in Malaya took the opportunity to declare its independence from the American mission. British North Borneo, Sarawak and Malaya suffered more than Indonesia where Dutch rule collapsed within three weeks of the fall of Singapore in February 1942. The future rulers of independent Indonesia were given scope for political activity under the Japanese which they had not been permitted under the Dutch.

Across the region the capability of the churches to survive without European leadership was well demonstrated. The common experience of suffering was a chastening and a unifying one. While help was needed to restore churches and schools and the training of a national ministry was more urgent than ever, after the war the end of expatriate leadership in the churches was if not exactly in sight then certainly a possibility.

7. Independence in church and state

The modern period saw the gaining of political independence throughout the region. In Indonesia independence was declared in August 1945, two days after the Japanese surrender, but the Republic of Indonesia was not firmly established until 1950 as the Dutch fought to regain control of their erstwhile colony. In Malaya independence was delayed till 1957 by the Communist `Emergency' of 1948 to 1960. Sabah and Sarawak were British Crown colonies prior to their coming into Malaysia in 1963 along with Singapore. Singapore left Malaysia in 1965 to become an independent republic. Brunei's full independence was not realised until 1983. Burma was carried by events

[26]. Thomas, W T, "The Christian mission since 1938 in Southeast Asia," in W C Harr, ed., *Frontiers of the Christian world mission since 1938. Essays in honour of Kenneth Scott Latourette*, Harper, 1962, pp.25-30.

in India and became independent in 1948. In Vietnam, nationalist forces declared independence early, but the ensuing struggle with the French lasted until 1953-54 when independence was also granted to Laos and Kampuchea.

Where independence involved conflict more than negotiation, it was mostly in Indonesia that some Christians were able to play a significant part, helping ensure the Church left behind the stigma of being the Dutch religion. In Vietnam the situation was more ambiguous, and generally Christians were not well represented among groups where nationalism was most clearly developed.[27]

In Malaya the racial complexity highlights factors which may have been at work elsewhere. Finely balanced racial groupings each found some benefit in the British as outside rulers; Christians with any voice were expatriate, European, Chinese or Indian, and independence was seen as a Malay and therefore Muslim rather than Christian issue. For Chinese, their identity was rooted in China and many were uncertain whether their residence out of China was permanent or transient. With the Communist revolution in China, in the 1950s many were only just coming to terms with the fact that it would have to be permanent and that this had implications for their citizenship which they needed to face.

Christians thus tended to reflect the concerns of their ethnic communities and were not far sighted enough to see the need to speak out in support of wider interests not just their own. Among the expatriate and ecumenical leadership in Malaya, the main issue as independence approached in 1957 was that of religious freedom.[28] This was something the Malay community did not particularly want for itself though it was prepared to grant it to others to a fair extent.

8. Communism and church growth

Across the region the victory of Communism in China, the experiences of the Korean war, the Emergency in Malaya from 1948 to 1960, and the developing conflict in Vietnam made communism a powerful concern. Although the communists were defeated in Malaya, and were discredited by a failed coup in Indonesia in September 1965, their victory in Indo-China and on-going ability to exploit entrenched social injustice in the Philippines reinforced long-standing regional sensitivities which a post cold war age has not yet resolved. Communism's religious antipathies reinforced the communist threat as a potent factor in the Christian history of the region since World War II.

During the War in Malaya Communists had provided the backbone of guerilla opposition to the Japanese. In 1948 they began a campaign of terror to win independence from the British. Given that this was attainable in any case, a mass following was unlikely and there was no broadly based nationalism as in Indonesia or Vietnam which felt it needed communism to help achieve its goals.

The resultant Emergency led to the creation of "New Villages" of resettled rural Chinese and an invitation to large numbers of ex-China missionaries to work in them. A desire to stop communism in general as well as to deal with the matter in hand no doubt motivated some, especially among American supporting agencies, but British missionaries were cautious about being associated with wider campaigns. The greatest influx of missionaries in Malaysian history not surprisingly contributed significantly to church growth, particularly among Chinese; it also provided a major focus of activity for the Council of Churches. At the same time the diversity of agencies involved led to denominational fragmentation. Communism was permanently discredited as an agent for social change and to the present day anything

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[27]. von der Mehden, F R. *Relgion and nationalism in Southeast Asia, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1968, pp.170-193.

[28]. Roxborogh, W J. "Ministry to all the people? The Anglican Church in Malaysia," in W J Sheils and D Wood, eds., *The Ministry: Clerical and Lay*, Studies in Church History, 26, Blackwell, 1989, pp.423-431.

even remotely inspired by a Marxist critique of injustice attracts suspicion in both Church and State.[29]

In Indonesian politics the Parti Kommunist Indonesia had been a factor since the 1920s, though their attempt to take over the nationalist movement in 1948 was supressed. After the failed coup in September 1965 some half a million Communists were imprisoned and killed.[30] A secondary outcome of the turmoil was phenomenal growth in church membership. The government encouraged religious commitment in terms of the Pancisila ideology (belief in God, nationalism, humanitarianism, social justice and democracy) and conversion was one way of distancing oneself from the taint of communism. Nominal Muslim (*abangan*) communities which had provided much of the support base for the communists were vulnerable to extremists among stricter (*santri*) Muslims and it was easier to become Christian than remain nominal or join the *santri*. For Chinese, subjected to renewed pressure and the forced assimilation of their culture, Christianity also offered new identity and hope. But there were many factors at work. In Java lay evangelistic bands spread revival. The churches grew by over 2.5 million converts in 5 years.[31] Between 1933 and 1971 the proportion of Christians in Indonesia increased from 2.8% to 7.4% and much of this was in the more recent period.[32]

The question of communism and Christianity was most acute in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh had founded his Indo-China Communist Party in 1933 and the Japanese defeat gave the opportunity to declare independence. This was at first supported by the local Catholic hierarchy, but soon mistrust and misdeeds on both sides, and the French sympathies of many Catholics undermined the situation - a process completed by the support of the Pope for the French army. As part of an agreement for partition in 1954, those on each side were given the opportunity to migrate North or South. Of about 1,400,000 catholics in the North, 60% of the bishops, 70% of the clergy and 40% of the laity left for the South. Those remaining only regained credibility as they shared in the sufferings of the people as conflict developed and America was drawn further into the civil war from 1964 onwards.

In the South migrant catholics attracted international aid and not surprisingly, local jealousy. But they were associated with a doomed regime and a lost cause. When Saigon fell in April 1975 it was again a test of loyalties, but this time no bishop left his diocese. Catholics have their difficulties relating to the new regime, but not as much as Protestants. Communism is itself changing, but the level of trust still has some way to go.

9. The churches in an era of nation building.

The existence of Christianity as a unifying force in racially diverse states is not insignificant. Nevertheless finding ways of expressing that unity remains a challenge. Different denominations have found various ways of accepting diversity and affirming unity within themselves. For those who speak the language of an original migrant community however, ethnic identity is likely to be stronger than denominational. Geographical origins also remain important. Churches which began among tribal people's often remain so - urbanisation tending to reinforce such identity at the same time as it threatens it. Church union no longer has much attraction, but efforts to improve relationships between denominations have been rather more fruitful.

It is difficult to escape using "colonial" languages for international communication. Indonesia's vast territory and regional identities make for differences not easily catered for, even within the same church. In Malaysia it is the English

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[29]. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 July 1987, pp.44,61-65.

[30]. Ricklefs, op cit., p.274.

[31]. Cooley, F L. "The revival in Timor," in R P Beaver ed. *The gospel and frontier peoples*, William Carey Library, 1973, pp.205-230. Also in *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 23(10), October 1972. A T Willis, *Indonesian revival*, William Carey Library, 1977.

[32]. Ricklefs, op cit., p.273.

speaking churches which are more firmly involved in wider activity, including concern for national and social issues. Chinese speaking congregations have a strong sense of autonomy, weak denominational links and fragile involvement in ecumenical activity - whatever its theological stripe.

The presence of Christianity in multi-religious and multi-racial countries does not necessarily lead to theologising about the issues involved and when different religions align with ethnic groups the situations become complex. Although religious dialogue is fruitful in theory, communal sensitivities often make it difficult to realise in practice. What is said about Muslims and Christians in Indonesia applies more widely.

> The basic problem is that there is far too much mistrust and fear among Christians as well as Muslims. Christians are afraid of losing freedom of movement and rights. Muslims are afraid of losing ground. But we cannot build a wall around ourselves and live in isolation.[33]

Christians willing to break down some of the barriers to communication discover that it takes the efforts of more than one party to do so. Independence from missions and colonial associations can still leave the question of identity unresolved. Again this is not just a matter of the Christians themselves. The Malaysian government for example is deeply ambivalent about Christian use of the national language. This is in part out of a desire to protect Malays from Christian influence, but it can also be seen as isolating Christians from national life and culture.

Important expressions of national identity are art and architecture. Thai, Filipino and Indonesian Christians seem to feel more comfortable about encouraging the use of local, including regional, art in the service of Christ. In Malaysia there is little of this and what is Malaysian is often perceived as Islamic. If that may or may not create problems for Christians, Muslims prefer the lines of demarkation to be clear. This makes contextualisation difficult. While every culture stands under the judgement as well as the affirmation of the Gospel, it seems that national identity and Christian identity too easily come into conflict and church architecture resorts to vaguely European forms while Christian art remains undeveloped. There may be more scope in the area of drama.[34]

In a relatively stable political situation one would expect a greater degree of regional consciousness than appears to be the case. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) covering from North East to South Asia includes the region, but there does not seem to be within it much sense of sub-regional identity. In recent years the ethos of the CCA has been shaped by the political experiences of South Korea, Taiwan and the Philipines where churches have been in confrontation with their governments over civil rights issues. The value of such a stance may be said to be vindicated by the scope and success of the Filipino Church support for the overthrow of the Marcos regime in 1986, yet it is not universally applicable. In Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, not to mention mainland Southeast Asia, church-state relations of necessity have to be more circumspect.

In general internal and international ecumenism has provided an avenue for developing local leadership and for shifting the balance of overseas church relations towards the more multilateral. National Councils of Churches have developed as significant organisations in most places, not unrelated to the need to provide a common voice in dealing with governments whose religious sympathies lie elsewhere.

The Association of Theological Education for South East Asia and its Evangelical counterparts have by their publications and the process of accreditation of theological schools provided a means for improvement of standards and also a sense of local `ownership' of the process of ministerial formation. The development of

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[33]. Frans Seda quoted by T Sumartana in "A personal reflection," *CTC Bulletin*, 3(2), 1982, p.15.

[34]. Finney, A, et al. *Pucuk Harapan. A resourcebook for drama in the Malaysian Church*, Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1987.

contextual theology is much talked about across the theological spectrum, but has some way to go. Reflecting long-standing patterns, what is Indian and Chinese from elsewhere in Asia, is still not fully indigenous, and contextualisation has to reach beyond giving form to somebody else's content, Western or Asian, Liberal or Evangelical. The changing fashions of world-wide Christianity find their expression in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, though one could wish that the transfers were less superficial. Partnership in the area of theology as in others has to reach the point where genuine critical interchange within and beyond the region is less threatening to local self-confidence.

10. Conclusion

In terms of seeing the coming of Christianity to Southeast Asia from the point of view of the oppressed; who is oppressed and who is oppressor changes over time and Christianity is not necessarily to be found on one side rather than the other. Western colonial powers were agents both of oppression (political and economic) and liberty (arguably also political and economic in the long run, but particularly in terms of education, medicine and sometimes religion). Minority groups often found in Christianity liberation from the political yoke of Islam or Buddhism. More found it a freedom from the economic and ritual requirements of folk religion. In a world where the supernatural is everywhere, the language of freedom from bondage is not always inappropriate. Where Islam or Buddhism were associated with national identity, they often became a focus for resistance to foreign faith and foreign domination.

It is seldom, perhaps never, possible for the gospel to be spread in ideal circumstances. Christianity in Southeast Asia is now both a locally rooted Asian religion and a world faith. As it continues to respond to the needs and sometimes the demands of its own communities, it also has the energy and integrity to assert itself on a larger stage.

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