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## Conversion and Public Conversation in Asia

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The Lutheran churches in Asia are considered by some an insular community, where converts seemingly enjoy their communal isolation. Of course this communal and insular character has to do with the problem of the folk-church (Volkskirche) which has lingered for sometime in our Lutheran community. What is pressing now is not so much this ecclesiological issue as the societal one. Being the church of converts poses as a problem today in Asian society at large.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to be lamented. Conversion has in some cases led to a fruitful theological process. It was not merely a process of uprooting the local people from their primal cultural roots, which many Asian theologians have blamed as the legacy of some missionaries. Those theological processes will in some instances help the church to converse with its neighbours. This may also mean that the community will share the Christian faith without alienating them from their daily culture. Much can be expected. The church will also convince society today of the need to have an open public conversation.

### Conversion to Christianity

The very identity of the Indonesian (or Asian) Christian lies within the process of conversion from 'heathenism to Christianity'. This journey was described as such by a Dutch missionary, A. B. Kruyt in his 1925 work entitled *Von Heiden tot Christen*. Another contemporary historian, Gerry van Klinken, agrees that the Indonesian Christian identity is the story of conversion:

The history of Christianity in Indonesia is often studied as a history of conversion—and rightly so...It enables them to move from marginality to responsibility. Simultaneously, it confirmed their homeless, migrant status<sup>2</sup>.

The life of a Batak Lutheran witnesses to this claim: conversion brought him into the public sphere.

*Todung Sutan Gunung Mulia Harabap* (1896-1966) enjoyed a colonial education due to the missionaries' endorsement and support. He went to the Netherlands and joined SCM, and was there exposed to a new modern ethos: the idea of being a progressive person.<sup>3</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> One notes from India concerning to this matter is the insistence of PM Atal Behari Vajpayee in 1998 to have a national debate on conversion, see Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Quest for freedom and Dignity: Caste, Conversion and Cultural Revolution* (Colorado: South Asia Resources, 2002), p. 95. There is also another recent note: The Malaysian government, backed by the Supreme Court, recently ruled that non-Muslims cannot use the word *Allah*. The move to ban the use of *Allah* in Malaysia is apparently founded upon fears among Muslim leaders that it is being used to proselytize, to convert Muslims. See, Endy M. Bayuni, "Allah is my God. Who is yours?", *The Jakarta Post*, Jakarta, 03/13/2009.

<sup>2</sup> Gerry van Klinken, *Minorities, Modernity and the Eemerging Nation; Christians in Indonesia, a Biographical Approach* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003), p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> Gerry van Klinken, *Minorities, Modernity...*p.71.

encountered Hendrik Kraemer (the Dutch ecumenical missionary) who supported him to become the future leader of Indonesia.

In 1919 he returned from the Netherlands as a teacher, and in 1922 he was appointed representative member of the Batak ethnic group to the National Council (*Volksraad*) of the colonial state. He published a weekly magazine, *Zaman Baroe* (*New Era*), which upheld his progressive ideas.

He believed that through a colonial institution (i.e. *Volksraad*), a modern, independent and democratic state could be founded. He believed in the colonial *debt of honour* which is why he chose to co-operate while founding a Christian Political Party (1929). He was considered as one of the young leaders of the new independent nation. He became part of the growing Indonesian bourgeois class,<sup>4</sup> and through this elite he, as a Christian, was publicly recognized and accepted.

This is an important part of the story of Christian conversion, which is why some anthropologist have claimed that conversion can also be said to be a conversion to modernity, through which a Christian could reach a significant public position in Asia. However, we should continue to deal with a more local and theological story of the conversion. Studying a Lutheran local leader may contribute to a more theological perspective, which will provide some rich examples to address the public conversation.

Jaulung Wismar Saragih accepted his baptism at the age of 22. In his autobiography, he mused,

After joining the Christian school, I felt more certain on the love of Christ to all human beings, although my heart was sometimes in doubt. However, in order to pass the exam, I need initially to be baptized (it was dated in 1888, the year my King Rondahaim deceased). My parents were a bit uneasy about decision, nevertheless, they still fed me, and therefore I can move from living in the house of a German missionary<sup>5</sup>.

This was not a common pietistic reception of a conversion. We can see many aspects intersecting here, from the new challenge of Christian faith, the strategic path to be taken, to the local context. All these were taken into consideration by Saragih.

During his lifetime (1888-1968), one of the significant steps he took (especially in his leadership) was to create a literate society in Simalungun (Sumatra, Indonesia). In 1916, he started to work on *Simalungun-Indonesian Dictionary*. He needed to develop an institution to promote the study of language and cultural development (in 1928 he was one the founders of the "Committee for Spreading," *Comite Na Ra Marpodah*). For the catechism he translated a book by C. Grabel (a Barmen/German missionary), and added another book on sexuality. By 1939 he had finished translating the Gospel of Luke, and in 1953 (with some help from a missionary called Vollmer) he managed to publish the New Testament in his own language.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerry van Klinken, *Minorities, Modernity...*p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> See, Memorial Peringatan Pendeta J. Wismar Saragih, Marsinalsal (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1977), pp. 55-56.

He also wrote a “daily bread”, *Tadah ni Tonduy* (Milk for the Soul). For 10 years he was an editor of a progressive local church journal, *Sinalsal* (Light). A researcher from the Dutch Bible Society called him *A Simalungun Luber*, “Een Simaloengoense Luther”<sup>6</sup>.

There are things theological here. When he translated the Bible, he claimed that “...although I don’t know Greek nor Hebrew, but I know Batak-Simalungun language, and I think my translation is more precise than those of missionaries who know Greek and Hebrew but don’t understand the feeling of my language”<sup>7</sup>. The creative theology he developed starts with the translation of the *Holy Spirit* to his own native language.

He invited many friends to discuss this important task, especially to translate the notion of “holy” of the Spirit. For “Spirit” it was quite easy, because his primal religion is very much about things spiritual. But “holy”?

They agreed upon a word from the shamanistic practice for holy: “pansing”. *Pansing* is a notion or name given to a special betel leaf (Asian climbing plant) which effectively cure diseases. So *pansing* is *holy* since it has the quality needed to heal the sick body.

The translation of the Holy Spirit to this local notion illustrated the process of appropriating (or negotiating) the Christian faith to his local culture. Conversion had indeed taken place. At the same time, the need to translate faith brings conversion as a conversation between the Christian faith and the living cultural values.

This conversation can be further seen, especially in the community’s book he published, i.e. a “daily bread” (*Milk for the Soul*, 1965). Here he actually tried to communicate theologically and directly to the church member. I charted this interesting theological conversation below:

Christian Theological notion	Local Translation and Reception
Justification of the sinner (Reflection on 3 <sup>rd</sup> January)	The bitter coffee is becoming sweet after <i>mixing</i> it with sugar
God <i>reveals</i> Himself in Christ (Reflection on 4 and 5 <sup>th</sup> January)	God comes to our home asking for hospitality
God gives strength (Reflection on 7 <sup>th</sup> January)	God is like a mother who gives provision for us to work
God’s <i>gracious</i> gift to the sinner (Reflection on 8 <sup>th</sup> January)	“Your basket for the betel leaves will never empty as long as you take them sufficiently”.
Temptation in life (Reflection on 10 <sup>th</sup> March)	You must discern if it tastes sweet or bitter; but do not in hurry to swallow the sweet and throw up the bitter.

<sup>6</sup> See, J.L. Swellengrebel, In *Leijdeckers Voetspoor. Anderhalve eeuw Bijbelvertaling en Taalkunde in de Indonesische Talen, II* [1900-1970] (‘S Gravenhage: Martinus/Nijhoff, 1978), p.165.

<sup>7</sup> See, J.L. Swellengrebel, In *Leijdeckers Voetspoor*...p. 165.

To seek the Kingdom of God (Reflection on 4 <sup>th</sup> Augustus)	Like a boy who hold fast the reins
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This theological conversation is a theology rooted in the practice of the people, i.e. theology as a process that happens in community. The Christian faith is a living faith because it is incarnated in the practice of daily hospitality, cultivating and enduring work. Theology is upheld in the realm of cultural and societal practice. The Christian faith then is implicated in the larger cultural and societal context. The church is concretely taking part in societal conversation.

### The Problem of Public Conversion

The conversion and conversation were extensive. They go beyond the Lutheran churches of Indonesia, and because they implicated a larger context, the Islamic community reacted. The “race between the Islam and Christianity” produces a lot of social tension<sup>8</sup>. The Islamic reaction to the missionary movement was to promote an “anti-Christianization” (a name given to an anti-conversion movement) organisation called the *Muhammadiyah*<sup>9</sup> that eventually also emerged as a political movement. The organisation endorsed the *dakwah* movement (in some places, they even named this *dakwah* organization as *Zending Muhammadiyah!*) to tackle church growth as well as to infiltrate the political party to promote *Syariah* law.

Conversion became a bad word, religious boundaries became more rigid. This is also linked to the expansion of the Christianity in Indonesia as well as in Asia at large. The church’s growth is a real challenge to the social fabric (where Muslims are always the majority)<sup>10</sup>.

In the course of history, however, public conversion was visible, and it was also in part a consequence of the global “war against communism” (1960s). Millions of people scattered desperately, looking for shelters from violence. It was estimated that around 500.000 Indonesians died in such a chaotic event. However, in many part of Indonesia, millions of peoples asked the church to baptize them into Christianity<sup>11</sup>.

During that time, the political tension approached city and mountainous village, putting all communities in a frontline one to another. Most of the people who lived in Indonesia were non-partisan, however they were easily suspected as being a member of the communist party. The pressure from Islamic community was also strong, asking them to convert to Islam in order to find a haven.

<sup>8</sup> See, Azyumardi Azra, “The Race between Islam and Christianity: Theory Revisited. Islamization and Christianization in Malay-Indonesian Archipelago 1530-1670”, in *Journal for the History of Dutch Missions and Overseas Church*, no.2/7/2000.

<sup>9</sup> Alwi Shihab, *The Muhammadiyah Movement and its Controversy with Christian Mission in Indonesia* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple Univ. USA, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> See Charles Keyes, “Being Protestant Christians in Southeast Asian Worlds”, in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 27/ 2/ 1996.

<sup>11</sup> A full account on this event, see Robert Hefner, “Of Faith and Commitment: Christian Conversion in Muslim Java”, in Robert Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), or from an evangelical one, see Avery Willis, *Indonesian Revival: Why 2 Million Came to Christ* (Pasadena:William Carey Library, 1977).

Slowly, houses of biblical study started to make its sign. Hundreds and thousands of people started to join and reflect regularly on biblical texts. They did it in a deep sense. They experienced a personal dignity through the newly community which help them to discern and come to term to the harsh reality. The church is for them "...a free space in which converts joined to declare their autonomy from the local social order without presenting it with an openly political challenge"<sup>12</sup>.

### Public Conversation

Publicly, religious communities appear to be in a frontier today, and the race to win souls are rampant in Asian society. As a result, this brings religions into a feeling under threat and suspicion, and they tend to protect their flock politically.

The church of converts is *again asked to continue their conversation* within this plural society. After the public conversion, we now desperately need a public conversation!

Below the story of a local church that continues its public conversation; and we could see some more theological insights from this story<sup>13</sup>.

In 1962, half of the people in one small village (hamlet) or *dusun* in Ngampel, Central Java-Indonesia were converted to Christianity. The community had grown out of the work of a group of seven people who had gathered every Sunday at the *carik's* (village secretary) home. The community received funds from European churches to build a church and the *carik* was to coordinate the work. However, the *dusun* built a school because the church leaders agreed that the village needed a school more than they needed a church building, and it is believed that the Christians must learn 'to suffer' by doing without their own building for the sake of the greater good of the wider community. The church was accused of corruption because they had diverted church money from its intended use. When the accusation levied on the Christians, the *carik* mobilized the entire village, and Christians, Muslims and Buddhists contributed to erecting a church building.

Eventually, the demarcation of the Christian identity shifted within this religiously plural hamlet (*dusun*). Relations between Christians and Muslims in the village took on new and surprising dynamics. A number of youths from four Christian homes chose to circumcise themselves. In reaction to these acts, the church's minister visited these families and started in a friendly conversation about farming (The conversation circled around questions such as, "Were you troubled by a rat plague in the rice field this season?"). Without discussing circumcision or church doctrine, the families and the community learnt and accepted that some boundaries must be maintained to sustain the identities of both Muslims and Christians.

When Muslims celebrate Ramadan festival of *Idul Fitri*, the community was invited to share the religious blessings. During Easter, the church conducted a village ritual called *Pajatan*. This ritual began with the cleaning of the cemeteries of the village ancestors. This ritual was considered an open practice as villagers of different religions would participate and join in the Easter meal that followed. During the ritual process, the villagers would discuss their various

political preferences. Even when the village was visited by members of various political parties, campaigning on the occasion of the recent elections, the Easter *Pajatan* preserved the village harmony despite varying political and religious preferences.

The church could feed public imagination of tolerance and inclusion. The liturgy of the church is now a part of the social agenda, where brother/sisterhood and hospitality are at the centre. This is how the public conversation is carried on. It is of course started by the event of conversion which guides the church to sacrifice its interest for the benefit of society at large. Christian faith supports the fabric of an open society. This is indeed one moment when Christian faith is translated into the plural and public life of Asia today.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Hefner, *Conversion to Christianity...*, p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> See, Singgih Nugroho and Nico L. Kana, "The Easter Pajatan Celebration, Identity Differences and Efforts to Restore Harmony", in Ananta Kumar Giri, et.al., *The Development of Religion, The Religion of Development –Liber Amicorum for Philip Quarles van Ufford* (Delf, 2004), pp 163-169.