

UWTSD

Christian-Muslim Relations: Texts, Past & Present (HPRS7023)

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Assessment 1: Choose one area of historical overlap between the Christian and Islamic traditions not covered in the course material.

Topic: Christian-Muslim Relations in Southeast Asia in the Early Colonial Period (1500-1700)

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Southeast Asia was an important hub for the coming and spread of Islam and Christianity in Asia (Andaya 2016, 3-4; Riddell 2018, 22). It is also a corridor where Christians and Muslims interacted with the region and with one another through trade, missions, and western colonization (Andaya 2016, 3-4; Riddell 2018, 22). At the heart of early interactions between the local communities in Southeast Asia and the West, religion already played a critical role. In the pre-colonial period, Christian-Muslims interactions in Southeast Asia faced common cross-cultural issues such as different religious affiliations, cultural differences, and differing perceptions of each other (Barnard 2015, 260, 264). It sufficed to say that Christian-Muslim relations were generally peaceful prior to the colonial period, with no major large-scale conflicts between them (Barnard 2015, 259, 264, 268; Riddell 2018, 22). With the onset of Western imperialism and military campaigns in Southeast Asia by the Portuguese and Dutch in the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the peaceful nature of the early Christian-Muslim interactions in this region was set for changes.

This paper posits that the coming of the Portuguese in 1511 to Malacca in the Malay Archipelago and the Dutch to Batavia in the Indonesia Archipelago in 1602 proved to be two defining events that changed the course for Christian-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia. These two events led to a heightened increase in the overall level of tension, conflict, and hostility and mistrust between the local Muslim powers / communities and the West. They also had serious ramifications on Christian-Muslim relations and interactions in Southeast Asia in the subsequent centuries to come. From the perspective of the Muslims then in early Southeast Asia, Christianity was seen as

an imperialistic tool and Christians as imperialistic agents of the West, a deep-seated sentiment that was hard to shed off even in the post-colonial period (Ballhatchet and Ballhatchet 1990, 490; Phan 2021, 13).

THE BEGINNING OF CONFLICT: THE FALL OF THE MALACCA SULTANATE TO PORTUGAL IN 1511

By the fifteenth century, we see the rise of Islamic kingdoms in power in Southeast Asia (Heidhues 2000, 77-79). In particular, the Sultanates of Malacca, Aceh and Java in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago were already well-established and influential in the spread of Islam among the masses in Southeast Asia (Heidhues 2000, 77-79; Pratt and Riddell 2018, 414). Along with the conversion of the local rulers, many of their subjects also converted to Islam (McAmis 2002, 13). Through trade, mission, inter-marriages and the influence of converted local rulers, Islam had gained a greater foothold in the Malay and Indonesia Archipelago by the sixteenth century (McAmis 2002, 13). The Malacca Sultanate was not only a significant Muslim power, but Malacca was also an important trading port in Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century. The *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals) had recorded Malacca as a cosmopolitan city cum trading port with many international travellers including Christians passing through while on route to China (Riddell 2018, 23).

The conquest of the Malacca Sultanate in 1511 by the Portuguese Catholics holds huge significance in the history of Christian-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia. While the coming of the Portuguese to Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century marked the beginning of nearly five centuries of Western colonial rule in this region, Portugal's foray into this region had been motivated by "a blend of religious fervor, national pride, and commercial profit" (Andaya 1992, 354). Under the *Padroado Real* of the Portuguese, the Portuguese military forces under the patronage of the Crown and attachment to the Papacy bears the responsibility of expanding the work of the Catholic Church overseas through conquests and conversions (De Souza and Chumsriphan 2001, 625-626; Phan 2021, 13). Thus, the military onslaught of the Portuguese against the Malacca Sultanate in the early sixteenth century cannot merely be seen as an ordinary military campaign for the purpose of Western political and economic expansion. The military campaign by Portugal in Malacca was reminiscent of earlier Crusades and wars between Christians and Muslims that took place in other

parts of the world, especially in Spain (Andaya 2016, 3; Michel 1997, 62-64). It was certainly difficult for both the Christians and Muslims to shed off the emotional historical baggage or what Riddell would call it: the negative “inherited attitudes” from the past “eight centuries of interaction in other parts of the world, especially in the eastern Mediterranean and the Arab world” (Riddell 2018, 23). This also led to heightened tensions between the Muslims and Christians as they compete for souls in the local communities (Andaya 2016, 4, 8).

THE INTENSIFICATION OF CONFLICT AND ISLAMISATION IN THE MALAY-INDONESIA ARCHIPELAGO: THE COMING OF THE DUTCH TO BATAVIA IN 1602

The coming of the Dutch to the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago in the early seventeenth century via the medium of a joint stock company, VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) worsened the existing hostility between the Christians and the Muslims in the region. The presence of the Dutch in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago and her determination to gain absolute monopoly of the spice trade sparked off many wars with local Muslim Sultanates in the region. This led to much bloodshed in the region and continued resistance and struggle among the local Muslim communities towards Dutch rule (Andaya 2016, 8-9; Riddell 2018, 30). Although the Dutch were not primarily interested in Christianization, they did force the locals to convert to Protestant Christianity so as to sought better control through religion and also coerced the Muslim Sultans to sign trade and labor contracts on inequitable terms (Andaya 2016, 8; Van Kaam 1997, 9-12). Often, the Christian missions “evoked image of the missionary arriving with the Bible in one hand and a gun in the other” (Dubois 2005, 127). It was difficult for the local communities especially the Muslims not to associate Christianity with the West and Christianity being an “imperialistic tool” (Andaya 2016, 15; Ballhatchet and Ballhatchet 1990, 490).

However, it is significant to note that despite the intensification in conflict between the Dutch and the local Muslim powers in the Malay-Indonesia archipelago during the seventeenth century, history has also shown that it is the century of rapid Islamization in the region (Andaya 2016, 15; Franklin 2020, 581-583). By the seventeenth century, Islam has spread throughout the Malay-Indonesia archipelago and entrenched itself particularly in this area (Andaya 2016, 2). The speedy and successful Islamization of the region can be partially attributed to the pragmatic attitude that the Dutch had

towards Christian evangelisation and the Muslims. An example of the pragmatic attitude of the Dutch towards the local Muslim powers would be the signing of trade treaties that forbids evangelisation activities to take place in either direction to safeguard the peace for commercial activities to take place (Franklin 2020, 575; Riddell 2018, 32). Franklin opined that out of the other early Western powers who came to Southeast Asia, namely the Portuguese and the Spanish, the Dutch were probably the “least destructive of Islam and Islamisation” and accommodative towards the local religion – Islam (2020, 583). Unlike the Portuguese and the Spanish who were driven by their religious zeal to Christianise the new lands they conquer with the *Padroado Real* of Portugal and Spain, the Dutch were primarily motivated by commercial and economic benefits. The evangelisation of the local people was often an after-thought or a response to a perceived threat to the political and economic stability caused by the Muslims (Andaya 2016, 8; Riddell 2018, 30).

CONCLUSION

The fall of the Malacca Sultanate to the Portuguese in 1511 was a watershed event in the history of Christian-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia. The once peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims prior to colonial rule was shattered. The military campaign of Catholic Portugal against the Muslim Sultanate of Malacca led to an intense period of direct conflict and hostility between the local Muslims and Christians in Southeast Asia. The presence of the Portuguese in Southeast Asia ushered in the era of Western imperialism in this region. With the Dutch Protestants arriving subsequently in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago, the scene was set for greater direct conflicts with other Muslim Sultanates (Pratt and Riddell 2018, 415; Riddell 2018, 29). This was the beginning of an era where Christian-Muslim interactions in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago were often characterised by military conflicts, and competition for souls with the sudden influx of Christian missions (Andaya 2016, 4, 8). The coming of the Catholic Portuguese and Protestant Dutch to Southeast Asia was seen as a threat and disturbance to the peace and lifestyle of the local Muslim communities, especially in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago (Andaya 2016, 14). This attitude remains for centuries to come among the Muslims. Yet at the same time, the Dutch’s defeat of the Portuguese in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago in the early seventeenth century stalled the Portuguese aggressive advancement of

Catholic Christianity in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago and indirectly facilitated the spread of Islam in the region (Andaya 2016, 15-16; Franklin 2020, 583). At the end of the seventeenth century, Islam was entrenched in Southeast Asia and the Dutch has emerged as the most formidable western power in the region.

(Word Count: 1508)

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