

THE CHURCH IN A MOSLEM ENVIRONMENT IN INDONESIA

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Indonesia is a country with a population of more than 200 million, about 7 million are Catholics. In spite of its great majority the Moslems have never gained more than 45% of the votes in general elections. How come?

Indonesians, especially on the island of Java, have a tendency towards syncretism. This has been so in the past when Hinduism and Buddhism came to Indonesia. The Javanese, forming almost half of the population of Indonesia, adapted these two religions according to their own view, i.e. Javanese mysticism. Even Islam had to undergo a similar process of syncretism.

Among the actual Moslem elite we may distinguish between the leaders that take Cairo as their model and others that follow Mecca. The first like to involve themselves in political activities, whereas the others prefer to remain active in the traditional institutes that live close to the ordinary people like the Tarekats and Pesantrens. There are among them those who realize that Islam will be capable of taking roots only if it adapts itself to the religious life and mentality of the autochthonous people, which is strongly influenced by monastic and mystical ideas from Hinduism. They therefore try to proclaim the Islam with the help of the sufistic approach used by Al-Gazali, Ibn Arabi and Mohammed Ibn Fadiliah, the great teacher of Gujarat.

Today, after the fall of President Suharto, many Moslem tarekats arise forming small political parties that never get a significant number of votes. Perhaps this may be considered as a healthy reaction against the past regime. Suharto, who was in power from 1966 till 1998, depoliticized all social activities. He reduced the number of political parties to three. This measure forced all Moslem groups to form one single party, the P.P.P. But it did not take long for the largest of the then existing political parties, the Nadhatul Ulama, to leave the P.P.P.

The government then created the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (M.U.I.) as an independent moslem organ, which as such profited from the situation and was able to influence the government. Suharto, who has a Javanese sufistic background wanted the Christians to participate in the government. During this period many Christian technocrats could be found in governmental functions and through the Center for Strategic and International Studies (C.S.I.S.) they had a great influence on his policy.

This situation was not favorable for the Moslems. And so, those that finished their studies in Chicago, Montreal, Al-Azhar and Baghdad returned home to launch new strategies, strengthening the "Ministry of Religion" and the "Ministry of Education and

Culture" with great success.

It is clear that Suharto did not only use Islam but he was also used by Islam. The growing influence of the Moslems in the government made it difficult and gradually impossible for the Christians to stay on. Suharto was aware of this and tried to counter the growing Moslem influence by letting the Ministry of Internal Affairs play a crucial role in the government. This ministry was dominated by the military on his behalf; one of its tasks was to appoint the governors for the provinces, all of them military men and none of them Moslem.

IS DIALOGUE POSSIBLE?

It is necessary to keep in mind that there are two unequal partners here: the majority of Moslems and the minority of non-Moslems. It is the minority that needs the dialogue and not the majority. In spite of all, dialogue seems to be possible.

- a) On the academic level. However, the results here are very limited, because consent and consciousness of the intellectual group cannot directly be transferred to the public. For instance, the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Malang together with the Institute of Islam in the same town held a workshop for their respective students about Javanese Sufism, the mystical union between God and man in the Javanese tradition. During this workshop some Moslem students visited a village with a Catholic majority near Malang, setting the Moslem minority in that village against the Catholics in order to prevent the construction of a chapel in there. As the national crisis continues, intellectuals try to find a solution to overcome the problems. Here too, a dialogue is possible.
- b) Dialogue among the Ulamas. The question is here which Ulama should we take as a partner in dialogue? There so many different schools. In the past one could distinguish between those coming from urban areas and those from rural areas. The first were western educated, open minded, while the latter were more tradition-oriented (keeping to the Sunnah and Taqlid). Now we find the Muhanimadiyah. The founder of this school stated in 1912 that the Catholic and Protestant missions had already operated in the 19th century, and even the Catholic schools at that time enjoyed privileges granted by the Dutch government, whereas the Ummat Islam remained fanatic and narrow-minded, following Taqlid blindly and reasoning dogmatically. The life of the Moslem is at a standstill, marked by conservatism, formalism and traditionalism. A change has come: in our days many Moslem writers contribute, writing in medias run by Catholics. The Conference of Indonesian Bishops publishes a monthly review HAK promoting interreligious cooperation and dialogue.
- c) Dialogue on the level of the ordinary people. There are regions where dialogue develops well. In other regions of the country dialogue is not much in demand. Generally speaking, the East of Indonesia is more influenced by Christians, while the

West of the country is dominated by Islam. Dialogue is possible as long as the minority is not considered as a threat to the majority. A region like Aceh, the northern part of Sumatra, is declared to be Darul Islam, the territory of Islam. Apart from the issue of territory, dialogue depends also on ethnic issues. Certain ethnic groups are Moslem, others are Christian. One of the great mistakes of the government was the transfer of thousands of Moslem families to areas with a Christian ethnic majority. It is like planting a time bomb; and this bomb has already exploded in many places. The Chinese, who are mostly Christians, make this still more serious. In times of crisis the ordinary people used to blame the Chinese for the disasters, as they control the economy in Indonesia. However, one must not forget that corruption, collusion and nepotism in the government play a great role in the economic crisis. The anger of the people erupted between 1995 and 1999: 485 churches were set afire. But yet, examples of dialogue even during these happenings can be given, e.g. after the burning down of the Santa Maria Church in Situbondo (East Java) the leader of the Ndlatul Ulama approached the parish priest emphasizing that hidden hands had done the evil. He offered his help with a group Moslem youths. In another place, while a furious crowd attacked the church, a Moslem family helped the parish priest escape.

CONCLUSION

1. Indonesia as a pluralistic society grows by nature and history, which means that the people there have to live in a dynamic balance of many powers.
2. Its geographical situation at the crossroads of many cultures, religions and political systems, has made the Indonesian people more receptive to influences coming from abroad, which creates a character that tends to be syncretic.
3. The Islam in Indonesia which follows the line of Ahlu-Sunnah wal Jamaah with four mazhabs or schools, is not as radical as in Iran. There is a great resistance coming from the indigenous mentality deeply rooted in the old Hindu and Buddha religions so that it has to be modified and adapted; there will always be a permanent tension with the local mentality. Most of the Tarekats tolerate the new models, shaped by the local leaders. Some of them possess the charisma of reforming and actualizing Moslem orthodoxy according to the demands of the new times.
4. Nationalism in the beginning of the 20th century favored the progress of Islam in the confrontation with the Dutch colonial power. The vacuum of power at the end of the colonial period made some Moslem leaders think about the possibility of a Moslem Indonesia.
5. In such a situation, the realization of a dialogue depends to some extent on the initiative of the government. Besides that, people live together in a dialogue of suffering, mutual sharing of joy, hope, sorrow and anguish. They are able to do so because they share the same injustice and misery and are supported by a same basic attitude of their

religious culture.