

THE PILGRIM-IN-DIALOGUE IN MALAYSIA¹

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Inter-group exclusions and animosity are frequently framed as conflicts arising from cultural and particularly religious difference. These conflicts can lead to exhortations from political elites and those in religious authority to shun interaction with others who are different. In Malaysia there are numerous examples of this that range from the apparently trivial to the significant. This article focuses on the Malaysian context and seeks to describe how the writings of two individuals from the region have sought to facilitate inter-religious exchange and acceptance through their writing which draws on their religious traditions that, in the Malaysian context, are often framed as in conflict. I begin by describing two issues that have engendered inter-religious conflict and disharmony in Malaysia. The first of these is related to a Malay translation of the Bible and the second to the ability of Malaysians to convert officially from Islam to another religion. The description of these issues demonstrates the need for religiously framed discursive tools that encourage positive inter-religious interaction. I then turn to an examination of the work of John Prior, a long-time resident priest in Indonesia, and Jahaberdeen Mohd Yunoos, a Malaysian Muslim writer. Of particular interest to me are their renderings of the ideas of the 'pilgrim-in-dialogue' by Prior, and the 'Rapera' by Jahaberdeen. By bringing these two writers into conversation, as it were, I explore paths towards exchange and interaction emanating from those traditions that are ostensibly at odds.

Malaysia, a site of Muslim-Christian tension

Individuals and organizations of Islamic authority in Malaysia have periodically issued directives that seek to reduce interaction between Muslims and those of other faiths. An example of this occurred in late 2008 when the National Fatwa Council declared that it was *haram* (forbidden) for Muslims to do yoga. Although the fatwa qualified that yoga was *haram* when done while reciting mantras, the National Fatwa Council Chairman, Dr Abdul Shukor Husin, went on to note in an interview that 'doing yoga, even just the physical movements, is a step towards erosion of one's faith in the religion,

1 This article is a revised version of a chapter published in 2011 as 'Ziarah-Dalam-Dialog di Malaysia'. It appeared in the Indonesian language volume edited by P. B. Kleden and R. Mirsal, *Menerobos Batas – Merobohkan Prasangka, Jilid 1: Pendasarandan Praksis Dialog*, Maurmere: Penerbit Ledalero.

hence Muslims should avoid it'.² In Malaysia, there is a well-developed discourse that positions Islam and other religions as occupying mutually exclusive spaces. Even interactions by non-Muslims with Muslims as Muslims is discouraged.³ Although in Middle Eastern States it is common for Muslims and non-Muslims to exchange the greetings *Assalamualaikum* (peace be with you) and *Walaikumsalam* (and peace be with you), in Malaysia it is widely asserted that such greetings should not be exchanged with non-Muslims. Even if a non-Muslim were to initiate such a greeting, it should only be responded to by Muslims with something like 'good-morning'.⁴

The frequently expressed fear that Muslims may suffer from any contact with non-Muslim religions extends so far as informal warnings to refrain from even looking at non-Muslim places of worship, and to restrict, for example, Sikh gurdwaras from having domes on them lest Muslims mistakenly enter thinking that it is a mosque.⁵ Concerns over the impact of engagement by Muslims with other religions are well illustrated by guidelines from the National Fatwa Council in 2005 dealing with Muslim participation in non-Muslims events. Among events that Muslims should not attend are those where there is 'a speech or a sign that compliments the Non-Muslim's religion', where there is 'red clothing imitating Santa Claus', or 'sounds such as the church or temple bells, putting up decorations on a Christmas tree or enact acts such as breaking up a coconut'.⁶ To further ensure Muslims do not suffer from contact with non-Muslim ideas, free booklets distributed in temples and churches throughout Malaysia have printed on the cover 'For non-Muslims only'.

But it is not only publications from other religions that Muslims in Malaysia must be prevented from possessing, it is illegal to distribute literature, or even voice opinions, that contradict a fatwa. Although fatwa is commonly translated as 'opinion', in Malaysia fatwas can carry the weight of the law.⁷ Article 12 of the Federal Territories Syariah Criminal Offences Bill 1996 states that

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- 2 Mazwin Nik Anis, 'Fatwa Council deems ancient form of exercise from India "haram" for Muslims', *The Star* 23 November 2008, <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/11/23/nation/2626876&sec=nation>, accessed March 2011; see also Julian C. H. Lee, *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*, Singapore: ISEAS 2010, 133.
 - 3 For example, see Farish Noor, 'The battle for time and space in Malaysia's narrowing society', *Kakiseni.com* 28 May 2005, <http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/features/MDY3Ng>, accessed 30 May 2010.
 - 4 Sylva Frisk, *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press 2009, 84-5.
 - 5 See Lee, *Islamization*, 88.
 - 6 Website of *e-Fatwa*, <http://www.e-fatwa.gov.my/fatwa-kebangsaan/garis-panduan-orang-islam-turut-merayakan-hari-kebesaran-agama-orang-bukan-islam>, accessed March 2011.
 - 7 As Islam is administered at the state level and not the federal level, federal bodies, such as the National Fatwa Council do not have any law-making power. However, national bodies do seek to formulate laws, policies and fatwas to then be replicated at the state level and thus come into law. Therefore, when the National Fatwa Council declared yoga as haram, it is not illegal to practice yoga, or to disagree with that view, until it is reiterated by the relevant state body (usually the Majlis Agama Islam).

Any person who gives, propagates or disseminates any opinion concerning Islamic teachings, Islamic Law or any issue, contrary to any fatwa for the time being in force in the Federal Territories shall be guilty of offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding three thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to both.

There are thus multiple exclusions in Malaysia – those that seek to circumscribe inter-faith dialogue, and those that seek to restrict intra-faith discussion. Such exclusions in other settings have been criticized at a number of levels. With reference to inter-group exclusions, Ulrich Beck has suggested that non-engagement with others is sometimes ‘justified with the argument that the chasms between two cultures are too wide to be bridged.’ However, he goes on to say, this ‘incommensurability assumption amounts to a non-intervention pact between cultures that can easily degenerate into violence’.⁸

Similar arguments have been used with respect to the notion of ‘tolerance’ with regard to inter-group relations. The Malaysian scholar of Islam, Patricia Martinez, pointed out to me that the problem with ‘tolerance’ can be found in the word’s roots. She noted that ‘the etymology of the word “tolerate” started in the eighteenth century, in relation to experiments related to how much poison a person could tolerate before it killed him or her. Thus, this notion of endurance, as the term means now, means that one “suffers” the Other. It is, therefore, an inadequate paradigm for thinking about positive inter-ethnic or inter-faith relationships’.⁹

The nature of the inter-religious unease that prevails in Malaysia is illustrated by two issues which I explore here in order to provide the context for my remarks that follow later on about the establishment of grounds which may facilitate inter-religious dialogue. The first issue is that of the banning of translations of the Bible into Malay. The second relates to the inability for Malaysians to formally convert from Islam to another religion, despite the Constitution containing a provision on freedom of religion.

The ‘Allah issue’

On 31 December 2009, Justice Lau Bee Lan overturned a 2007 ban imposed by the government on the use of ‘Allah’ by the Catholic weekly publication, *The Herald*, which had challenged the ban.¹⁰ The response to Justice Lau’s ruling, both before and after it was stayed on 6 January at the request of Malaysia’s Attorney General, included protests held at mosques. Most notably, however, a number of churches were attacked with Molotov cocktails. In these attacks, significant damage was done to the Metro Tabernacle Church and minor damage done to other non-Muslim places of

8 Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2006, 55.

9 Personal communication in 2011.

10 There was, however, also an older ban on the non-Muslim use of ‘Allah’ from 1986, along with the words ‘solat’, ‘Kaabah’ and ‘Baitullah’.

worship. Later in the month of January, a number of severed pigs' heads were found at mosques in what appeared to be reprisals for the attacks on churches, but which some commentators, including a Muslim opposition politician, believed was the work of agent provocateurs.¹¹

The rhetoric from segments of the Muslim community in response to the overturning of the ban has been severe. Much of it affirms the view that 'Allah' is a word that can only be used by Muslims, and the strength of sentiment around the importance of this restriction of use appeared considerable. According to one protestor at the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur, 'We can fight to the death over this issue'.¹² The manner in which the issue was framed by some politicians, commentators and particularly protesters, was that this challenge by *The Herald* threatened the inter-ethnic harmony of the nation through its insensitivity to the 'feelings of Muslims'.

The Herald's difficulties began in 2007 when the paper's publishing permit was withdrawn on the grounds that it used 'Allah' for 'God' in its Malay language section. However, when the permit was reissued soon after, the permit contained no proviso relating to restrictions on its use of 'Allah'. This permit, however, was quickly withdrawn again and subsequently reissued with the restriction on the use of 'Allah'.¹³

While the difficulties experienced by *The Herald* may be the highest profile of their kind, they are by no means isolated. In 2008, the Ministry of Internal Security confiscated 163 publications because they were non-Muslim publications that had used 'Allah'. In March 2009, 5,100 copies of a Malay translation of the Bible, which were imported from Indonesia by the Bible Society of Malaysia, were confiscated at Port Klang on the same grounds. This issue arose again in March 2011, when 30,000 Bibles imported were impounded in East Malaysia.¹⁴ And in 2004, a government directive sought to ban Christmas carols that referred to Jesus at a celebration to be attended by the Prime Minister and the Sultan to 'protect Muslim sensibilities'.¹⁵ These restrictions are among many faced by non-Muslim religious groups in Malaysia which also include being able to build houses of worship and have (non-Muslim) cemeteries.¹⁶

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- 11 Ahmad Dzulkefly, 'Pig heads flung into mosques to confuse, divide M'sians', *Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad* 27 January 2010, <http://blog.drdzul.com/2010/01/27/pig-heads-flung-into-mosques-to-confuse-divide-msians/>, accessed 3 March 2011.
 - 12 BBC 8 January 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8447450.stm>, accessed 2 April 2013.
 - 13 Asia Sentinel 3 January 2010, http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2217&Itemid=164, accessed 3 March 2011.
 - 14 Christian Federation of Malaysia, 'Media Release: Detention of Bahasa Malaysia Bibles Yet Again', *NECF Malaysia* 10 March 2011, <http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=43&action=view&retrieveid=1275>, accessed 12 August 2012.
 - 15 Ioannis Gatsiounis, 'No invite for Jesus to Malaysian Christmas', *Asia Times* 23 December 2004, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/FL23Ae01.html, accessed 13 March 2011.
 - 16 Lee, *Islamization*, 88.

Many Malaysians, including non-Muslims, frequently did not understand the rationale behind *The Herald's* desire to legally fight for the right to use 'Allah'. Some of this rationale was outlined in an article by Research Director of the Kairos Research Centre (Malaysia), Ng Kam Weng.¹⁷ It begins by noting that elsewhere in the world 'Allah' is used commonly by non-Muslims to refer to God in the context of other religions. More importantly, however, Ng seeks to justify *The Herald's* position that there is a need for 'Allah' to be used in Malay translations of the Bible on the grounds of 'a coherent linguistic philosophy of translation of Scripture'.

The idea that 'Allah' might be amicably replaced by the word 'Tuhan' is rejected by Ng because the meanings of the words are different, with 'Allah' referring to 'God' and 'Tuhan' to 'Lord'. 'Allah and Tuhan have different senses even though they have the same reference'. Furthermore Jesus Christ is referred to as Tuhan Yesus and if Tuhan were to carry the meaning of God instead of Lord, 'many Biblical references to God and Jesus Christ [are rendered] incoherent'.

First, the substitution is incorrect since the meaning of Allah and Tuhan are different. Second, it creates an absurd situation when Christians try to translate the paired words Tuhan Allah (LORD God). Are Christians now required to call the LORD God, Tuhan Tuhan? This sounds like committing linguistic redundancy. Worse still, the repeated words Tuhan Tuhan come across to Malay readers as suggesting that Christians believe in a plurality of Lords/Gods.¹⁸

As well as its importance at the linguistic level as described by Ng, the contest by *The Herald* also has a wider ethno-political importance to which Ng does not refer. It is part of a wider contestation that is ongoing in the socio-political field in Malaysia in which claims to ethno-religious precedence are being affirmed by individuals, parties and organizations that ostensibly seek to 'protect' Muslims/Islam from the 'threats' they/it face from non-Muslims. Muslims and their religion are portrayed as requiring defense from attacks that come in the form of challenges to the rights and privileges that Muslims enjoy over non-Muslims, or when Muslims are allowed to convert to other faiths.

Lina Joy and the issue of religious freedom in Malaysia

The question as to whether a Malaysian who is administratively regarded as a Muslim may officially convert to another faith is among the most contested political and legal ones in Malaysia.¹⁹ Of particular issue is the meaning behind the interpretation

17 Ng Kam Weng 'Allah can't be substituted with Tuhan in Bible translation', *Mysinchew.com* 5 January 2010, <http://www.mysinchew.com/node/33523>, accessed 3 April 2013.

18 Ng. In Malay, a noun is made plural by repeating the noun. Therefore book is *buku*, whereas books is *buku-buku*. Thus *tuhan-tuhan* would be lords.

19 Michael Kirby, 'Fundamental Human Rights and Religious Apostasy: The Malaysian Case of Lina Joy', *Griffith Law Review* 17 (2008), 153-5.

of Article 11 of Malaysia's Constitution. Article 11 states that 'every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it.' (Clause 4 gives territories and states power to control the propagation of religion to Muslims.) However, in the case of a woman who wished to officially convert from Islam to Christianity, the High Court found in 2001 that she was not freely able to do so.

This woman, Lina Joy, was told to apply to the Syariah Court in her state for a declaration to that effect because the civil courts have no jurisdiction in this matter which related to the Islamic faith. Lina Joy's counsel appealed to her constitutional right under Article 11 but was told that even though that article states that 'every person has the right to profess and practice his religion', this did not imply that she 'was to be given the freedom of choice to profess and practice the religion of her choice'.²⁰ Malaysia's highest court later concurred that Lina Joy did not have the right to choose her religion. While the arguments deployed to both defend and deny her right to convert from Islam were at times complex,²¹ the judges, in short, found that she could not be regarded as a non-Muslim without a declaration emanating from the Syariah Courts.

The civil courts' decision not to recognize Lina Joy's right to unilaterally change her faith was informed by the notion within orthodox Islam that apostasy (*murtad*) is not permissible. Among the impacts on Lina Joy and others who are unable to convert from Islam are that she is unable to marry a non-Muslim (unless he converts), she has little control over how her estate is disbursed upon her death, and that she is subject to behavioural constraints including being unable to drink alcohol in public and needing to observe the fast during Ramadan.

A parallel case illustrates the possible wider implications. In 2002, the previously Hindu husband of a Hindu woman converted to Islam and subsequently converted their two young children to Islam. This woman, Shamala Sathyaselaan, applied to the High Court to annul the conversion and to obtain custody of them. This application was dismissed and she was told to wait for Parliament to address her quandary or to raise the matter in the Syariah Court. The latter she refused to do because, as a non-Muslim, she had no legal standing there. In 2004 she appealed the dismissal (in the civil court) and was granted custody. However, in a caveat, the judge ruled that should the mother attempt to influence the children's religion, for example by teaching them about Hinduism or by making them eat pork, she would lose custody of them.²² Of pertinence in this case was that even though the Guardianship of Infants Act declares both parents as having equal influence in determining a child's health, education and religion, and despite the mother's disapproval of the conversion, the children's religion was deemed

20 Faiza Thamby Chik, 'Lina Joy v Majlis Agama Wilayah and Anor', *Malaysian Law Journal* 2 (2004), 120; See also Lee, *Islamization*, 65.

21 For a treatment of this case, see Lee, *Islamization*, 62-82; see also Thio Li-ann 'Apostasy and Religious Freedom: Constitutional Issues Arising from the Lina Joy Litigation', *Malaysian Law Journal* 2 (2006), i-cxvi

22 For another discussion of this case, see Salbiah Ahmad, 'Lost in Interpretation', *Malaysiakini* 21 September 2004, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/30179>, accessed 2 April 2013.

by default to be Islam rather than their pre-conversion religion. Such an assumption indicates the privileging of Islam and Islamic Law.

The privileging of Islam and Islamic Law, and the consequent marginalization of non-Muslims (and unorthodox Muslims) has not gone unchallenged. Indeed, the cases of Lina Joy and Shamala Sathyaselaan precipitated the formation of a coalition of non-government organizations (NGOs) called *Article 11*,²³ named after the above-mentioned constitutional article.

The coalition was formed to organise social and political activism when members realised that political and legal attitudes that gave undue deference to conservative interpretations of Islam had significant social and legal impacts and was not a problem that could be remedied by action within the courtroom alone. It was a socio-political problem that could only be countervailed if accompanied by socio-political engagement. At a forum organised by *Article 11* (and which I attended), lawyer and activist Malik Imtiaz Sarwar said,

There is no benefit to be gained now...in waiting for some magic miracle to occur in the courts... The courts are merely, in their minds, correctly reflecting political will as they understand it... I think the issue is not a legal one at all. It is a socio-political consideration.

Thus, members of *Article 11* conducted their first public forum on Saturday 26 June 2004 in Kuala Lumpur to protest against the privileging of Islam in civil court cases and to argue for a liberal reading of Article 11 and freedom of religion in Malaysia.

It is worth pointing out that at stake for members of *Article 11* are not only particular judgements and political decisions with which they may disagree, but the very space in which they may register their protests and consequently behave as empowered citizens. This space was under threat owing to court findings suggesting that non-Muslims had to seek redress in Syariah courts where they had no legal standing and, furthermore, if they did attend them, would very likely have their cases found against them.

This diminution of this space necessitated the active creation of space elsewhere and thus public forums were held in various locations around Malaysia. In the state of Selangor in March 2006, more than eight hundred people attended another forum at which discussants affirmed that the constitution should be regarded as the supreme law of Malaysia. An open letter signed by 450 attendees – both non-Muslim and Muslim – expressed concern over civil court judges' declinations on ruling on cases that involved Islamic law, and which therefore left many litigants without legal remedy.²⁴ Toni Kasim, speaking of a forum in Selangor, noted the increasing willingness of people to

23 Where 'Article 11' appears in italics, it refers to the social movement here described. Where it is not in italics, it refers to the article in Malaysia's constitution.

24 Claudia Theophilus, 'Public reminder to uphold constitutional supremacy', *Malaysiakini* 16 March 2006, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/48253>, accessed 2 April 2013.

discuss issues such as those with which the forum dealt. Furthermore, she observed that 'the fact that all these people are here on a Sunday morning and stayed on till the end is very telling of the lack of discussion on the fundamental issues of freedom and rights. We need more space for dialogue'.²⁵

However, the attempt by *Article 11* to publicly discuss issues relating to the impact of Islam on non-Muslims and Muslims alike was interrupted in May 2006. Over one hundred Muslim demonstrators gathered outside the hotel in the island state of Penang in which the forum was being conducted to protest against the forum. One placard stated that '*Undang-undang Allah mengatasi hak asasi manusia*' (Allah's laws prevail over human rights). When some protestors 'tried to storm the hotel', however, the police asked the organisers to wrap-up the forum. One of the speakers said that 'it is of grave concern that we should stop a legitimate discussion when the people outside were the ones who were turning unruly'.²⁶ Emphasising that the forum was an open space where both affirmations and criticisms of *Article 11*'s agenda could be expressed, Haris bin Mohamed Ibrahim said that 'if [the protestors] had their own point of view, they should have come in and voiced it out.' He went on to affirm that 'We [*Article 11*] have never practised censorship. In fact, we allocated two hours for a question-and-answer session. They could have equally participated'.²⁷

I should note that subsequent to the ill-fated *Article 11* forum in Penang, then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi announced a gag order on discussions of the constitution, especially as it relates to freedom of religion.²⁸ And indeed, at the Fifth Malaysian Studies Conference which I attended in August 2006 in Malaysia, a panel on the topic of the constitution and freedom of religion was cancelled in view of this directive. But as one reporter wrote, 'Abdullah has seen enough - not from the hardliners, though, as one might expect, but from Article 11'.²⁹ On the same day and in the same paper that reported that the social science conference panel had been cancelled, it was also reported that a coalition of Muslim NGOs was to gather to discuss recent events and oppose any attempt to broaden Article 121 of the constitution (in a manner unfavourable to Islam) and 'to challenge Article 11 [of the constitution], which it sees as a threat to Muslim rights'.³⁰ And indeed, not long after, a different but related coalition of Muslim NGOs submitted a memorandum to Abdullah Badawi and to the Council of

25 Theophilus, *Public reminder*.

26 Claudia Theophilus, 'Police ignored mob, say forum organisers', *Malaysiakini* 15 May 2006, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/51087>, accessed 2 April 2013.

27 Theophilus, *Police ignored mob*.

28 See Ooi Kee Beng, 'Malaysia: Abdullah does it his own vague way', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2007), 185-6

29 Ioannis Gatsiounis, 'In Malaysia, "too sensitive" for debate, 4 August 2006, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HH04Ae01.html, accessed 12 April 2013.

30 See The Sun, '14 Islamic NGOs to stage religious forum on Saturday', *The Sun* 8 August 2006, <http://www.thesundaily.my/node/173168>, accessed 2 April 2013.

Rulers (the Sultans). This memorandum urged the Prime Minister ‘to act against those quarters who challenged [the position of Islam] and “encourage aberrations” in Islamic beliefs.’ It also urged Parliament to ‘amend Article 11 pertaining to religious freedom in conformity with syariah laws and teachings’.³¹

It is also worth noting that a number of members of *Article 11* have had various threats made against them. Most notable of these was the death threat made towards high profile lawyer Malik Imtiaz Sawar.³² The frequent threats of violence by sections of the Islamist community towards those who advocate for a liberal or secular understanding of Malaysian law and politics is naturally not conducive to an open public sphere but have become almost to be expected in Malaysia. A subsequent forum held in 2008 on the issue of freedom of religion organised by members of the Bar Council of Malaysia was also curtailed by police, owing to threats made by Muslim protestors outside the forum.³³

Conflict in Political Context

Contests over the right to use ‘Allah’ and freedom of religion in Malaysia may be seen as standing in as proxy battles over the legitimacy of non-Muslim/non-Malay belonging in Malaysia and the equality of non-Muslim and Muslim citizens. If it is the case that non-Muslims can be prevented from using ‘Allah’, and if those who are administratively regarded as Muslim can be prevented from apostatizing on orthodox religious grounds, and if those seeking even to hold discussions about liberal interpretations of laws pertaining to religion are prevented from so doing, then the underlying political and legal framework may be seen as unequivocally Islamic. This privileges Muslims and marginalizes non-Muslims, and discourages inter-group interaction.³⁴

However, these contests are also products of particular political contexts. It is important to acknowledge the views of many Malaysian commentators who note that the heat produced by religious issues serves specific political interests. Many would agree with Ng that the protests against the decision to overturn the ban on the word ‘Allah’ were ‘staged’ and ‘must be seen to be as cynical manipulations by Malay

31 Fauwaz Abdul Aziz ‘Muslim coalition submits 700,000 signatures’, *Malaysiakini* 29 September 2006, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/57511>, accessed 2 April 2013.

32 Yeo Yang Poh, ‘PRESS RELEASE: Death Threat Against Malik Imtiaz Sarwar’, *Malaysianbar* 22 August 2006, http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/press_statements/press_release_death_threat_against_malik_imtiaz_sarwar.html, accessed April 2009.

33 Julian CH Lee, ‘Batman, Gandhi and Democracy: A Closer Look into the Bar Council Forum’, *projectmalaysia.org* August 2008, <http://www.projectmalaysia.org/articles/batman-gandhi-and-democracy-a-closer-look-into-the-bar-council-conversion-forum.html>, accessed 1 March 2011.

34 Timo Kortteinen, ‘Islamic Resurgence and the Ethnicization of the Malaysian State: The Case of Lina Joy’, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 23 (2008), 216-33.

politicians to gain votes from their community'.³⁵ The respected Malaysian journalist Jacqueline Ann Surin has similarly observed that, despite the current government's gestures towards supporting inter-faith initiatives and financially assisting the Metro Tabernacle Church, the ruling Barisan Nasional (Nation Front) coalition is responsible for the way the 'Allah issue' manifested itself. As well as making use of draconian legislation and invoking the spectres of past inter-ethnic strife, the Barisan Nasional has played an overt role in scuttling (and demonizing) attempts from civil society to spearhead various inter-faith initiatives that have sought to address the fundamental issues that have given rise (and continue to give rise) to religious disputes.³⁶ In the view of many observers, the apparent (if not actual) strife caused by the 'Allah' and religious conversion issues serve the interests of the ruling government in a number of ways, including legitimizing the continued existence of draconian legislation which is used, so the story goes, to maintain social stability. The government comes to be framed as the maintainer of the inter-ethnic peace, and arguably benefits by distracting citizens from other issues. In his book, which was temporarily banned in Malaysia, the cartoonist Zunar depicts a scuffling crowd of men arguing over the 'Allah' issue (with individuals shouting 'Allah for everybody' or 'Allah only for Muslim') while Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak utters 'Thank God, he, he, he' and sweeps under a carpet other potentially damaging issues for the government including those relating to a murdered Mongolian model-cum-arms dealer and a new submarine bought by the government that is allegedly unable to dive.³⁷

In this context where religion is politicized, religious beliefs and behaviours are subject to law-making and policing, and where inter-religious suspicion and animosity may be deliberately provoked to serve political ends, there is a need to both recognize and foster genuine inter-religious exchanges that build bridges over the trenches that others seek to dig. Proliferating the idea that the conflicts serve the political ends of some can be seen as helping by reframing the issue as one related not to religion but to politics. Also helpful, however, would be illuminating discursive grounds that fostered inter-religious interaction, understanding and congeniality from religiously informed perspectives. Thus, I turn now to examining two such perspectives put forward by two individuals writing from the perspectives of their own religious traditions – Christianity and Islam – and which I seek to bring into conversation with each other.

35 Ng.

36 See Jacqueline Ann Surin, "'Allah' issue: Who started it?", *The Nut Graph* 12 January 2010, <http://www.thenutgraph.com/allah-issue-who-started-it/>, accessed 1 March 2011; See also Lee, *Islamization*, 83-97; Yeoh Seng Guan, 'Managing sensitivities: Religious pluralism, civil society and inter-faith relations in Malaysia', *The Round Table* 94/382 (2005), 629-40.

37 Zunar, *Cartoon-O-Phobia*. Kuala Lumpur: Kinibooks 2010.

**John Mansford Prior and Jahaberdeen Mohamed Yunoos:
The Pilgrim in Dialogue and the Rapera**

In his article *Dialogue and culture: Reflections by a temporary sojourner*, John Prior – a priest whose residence is on the island of Flores, Indonesia, and whose work has recently become the subject of a large *festschrift*³⁸ – outlines some of the dangers that he sees in some of the processes associated with globalization present in the world today. One of these is cultural globalization which results sometimes in materialistic orientations and bland homogeneity.³⁹ A second process or phenomenon – the one on which I focus here – is the tendency for societies or cultures to close in on themselves, to react with hostility to others, including neighbouring groups of different religions and ways of life. Drawing on his observations of society in Indonesia and elsewhere, Prior observes how, when threatened, ‘minority groups can become *mentally isolated and culturally encapsulated*’, and ‘the more encapsulated we are by our own group the less transcendent the values by which we live’. However, an ethnic or religious group need by no means be a minority to feel threatened. As we have seen with the Malaysian example, Muslims and Islam are positioned as being under threat by those with which they share social, political and national space.

In view of developments of concern to Prior both in Indonesia and abroad, and within and beyond Christianity, he declares that there is a need to ‘face the rise of religious and cultural extremism’, and at the same time there is a need to engage in ‘consciously creating an open communicative culture in the church itself’. This open communicative culture, he notes, ‘is created by the pilgrims, the probers, the adventurers among us.’ And it is Prior’s exposition of such persons, which he calls the ‘pilgrim-in-dialogue’, citing Walls’ ‘pilgrim principle’,⁴⁰ that I wish to explore here for what it can tell us about approaching the apparent inter-ethnic difficulties in Malaysia.

For Prior, there is an opposition between individuals whose orientation is towards dialogue and those whose orientation is more exclusively towards their own culture. The latter are orientated inwards, towards those who are the same. They inhabit their comfort zones. An orientation towards dialogue, however, ‘urges us to become pilgrims, to step out and go beyond, while “culture” encourages us to set down roots and feel at home.’ Thus the pilgrim-in-dialogue ‘lives at the frontier – socially, culturally and religiously’.

Life at the frontier, however, is not easy. Interacting with those for whom different vocabularies dominate, and different worldviews apply, can be difficult. And there is no

38 Paul Budi Kleden and Robert Minsel (eds) *Menerobos Batas, Merobohkan Prasangka*, Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero 2011.

39 John M. Prior, ‘Dialogue and culture: Reflections by a temporary sojourner’, *East Asian Pastoral Review* 39/4 (2002), 328–49, <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr002/prior.htm>, accessed March 2011. Throughout this chapter, quotations of Prior’s writing which do not bear a citation will have been taken from an electronic version of this article which is without pagination. Any emphases are original.

40 Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*. New York: Orbis 1996.

instruction manual to guide one's path, especially if that path is lined with the debris of past hostilities and failed attempts at bridge-building. 'Like sailing the ocean there are no fixed points, no certain current, and yet', Prior notes, 'there is a direction and there are stars indicating, beckoning on.' This journey is possible 'when we are open to what is genuinely human in the other, and where our own culture is open to the transcendent'.

Such difficulties are exacerbated when not only do community leaders portray others negatively, but when representatives of the State and members of the government seek to restrict, sometimes using the power of law, interfaith interactions. As noted above, in Malaysia such interfaith interactions have been curbed by the government. But not only has interaction between faiths been affected, so have interactions within Islam. An example of the latter occurred in 2009 when the former Mufti of Perlis, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, was arrested for preaching without a license while giving a religious talk in the house of a businessman to over a hundred listeners.⁴¹

For lawyer and writer Jahaberdeen Mohamed Yunoos, this incident raised serious questions about the openness of Islam in Malaysia. Among them, he notes in his book, *Rapera*, is whether this means that academics and other writers will have to seek prior approval when discussing Islam (which Asri's arrest indicates is the case). If so this will 'stifle academic and intellectual development in Islamic thought since the ones who are going to determine whether permission should be granted or not are paid civil servants.' Who then 'is to question whether what is stated is indeed consistent with the Quran and the Sunnah? Under such a regime, any sincere effort to invite alternative thinking and to consider alternative interpretations will become a state offence'.⁴² That Muslims may even freely speak about Islam among themselves, he goes on to point out, appears not even to be protected by the Constitution. Section 4 of Article 11 states that 'law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam', and arguably includes Islamic doctrines and beliefs.⁴³

Jahaberdeen sees this situation as having dire consequences and as being an outcome of the institutionalization of religion and attempts to legislate faith. He gives the name 'religionists' to those who participate in and advocate for such institutionalization. Such 'religionists' depart from the Prophet Mohammed's mission to facilitate people's personal relationship with God and to take apart religious institutions. As evidence of this view, he once quoted to me Chapter 9:34 of the Quran: 'O believers, many rabbis and priests devour the possessions of others wrongfully, and keep men away from the path of God'.⁴⁴

41 The Sun Daily, 'Hassan explains requirement for permit to give sermons', *The Sun Daily* 11 November 2009, Available at: <http://www.thesundaily.my/node/149294>, accessed 25 April 2013.

42 Jahaberdeen Mohamed Yunoos, *Rapera*, Batu Caves: Thinker's Library 2010, 97.

43 Jahaberdeen, 97.

44 Translation of Ahmed Ali. See also Julian C. H. Lee, 'Oversanctification, Autonomy and Islam in Malaysia', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11/1 (2010), 24-43.

Here a confluence of views between Jahaberdeen and Prior, despite coming from different traditions – traditions sometimes in contest with each other – becomes apparent. Prior notes that the religious ‘institution tends to acquire and control’, unlike the uninstitutionalised ‘reverential community [which] can let things be....’ The truth claims of religious leaders are for Prior ‘human arrogance at its most dangerous, the kindling wood that blazes into communal riots, racial hatred, religious violence.’⁴⁵ Jahaberdeen appears to concur, writing that ‘Religious arrogance among the people in power and in authority is the worst form of oppressive conduct...They are unable to accept dissenting views because they take it as a personal affront to their power’. Drawing a parallel between such persons and a negatively portrayed character in the Quran (who not incidentally punishes unpermitted faith beliefs), Jahaberdeen points out verse 7:123 which states, ‘Said Pharaoh: “Believe you in Him before I give you permission? Surely this is a trick which you have planned in the city to drive out its people: but soon shall you know (the consequences)’.⁴⁶

In the writings of both Prior and Jahaberdeen we see a commitment to openness. Diversity of opinion, culture and religion is something positive, and perhaps brings into relief that which genuinely binds us as humans. For Jahaberdeen,

We are beginning to learn about the futility and danger of racial polarization. We are very slowly accepting the fact that the Creator does not put all the good guys in one ethnic grouping and all the bad guys in another. We are also learning that racism and tribalism is a result of ignorance and [a] misconceived sense of comfort with ‘group identity’. We are also very slowly learning that decency, acceptance of each other as human beings, love, respect, mutual assistance, and such can be [a] strong binding force between us which [is] more real than ethnicity and racial similarity. The Creator has in fact disclosed to us the reason why He has created us in diversity:

‘O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other (not that you may despise (each other)). Surely the most honoured of you in the sight of the Creator is (he who is) the most righteous among you. And God has in full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).’ (Quran, 49:19).⁴⁷

Similarly, Prior has noted the need to be ‘open to what is genuinely human in the other’, and also recognizes that no faith has a monopoly on articulating what is right. ‘There is no system or frame large enough to hold the immensity of Truth. Great theologians from John the Evangelist (Jn 21:25) through to the present day have always

45 See also Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, 438-61.

46 Jahaberdeen, 92-3.

47 Jahaberdeen, 90.

acknowledged this.’ John 21:25, which concludes the Gospel according to John, avers that ‘Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written’ (New International Version English translation).

For Prior, the need to enter into the spirit of the pilgrim-in-dialogue is less an option than a duty. People are called to ‘step outside the comfort barriers of the enclosed Christian circle isolated in the cities or equally alone in the “Christian” village.’ By doing this, we participate in discovery, which ‘enlarges and refines our cultural and religious sensibility.’ For Malaysians of all religions, Jahaberdeen sees the same need. Rather than speaking in terms of a pilgrim-in-dialogue, however, Jahaberdeen writes of the Ropera, a neologism he coins.⁴⁸ The Ropera is a citizen, but much more than a citizen, a Ropera is ‘courageous in the struggle to create a just society where all of Allah’s creatures can have a dignified space. He is forever mindful that if he turns a blind eye to the injustices suffered by others, the injustice will visit him or his relatives one day’.⁴⁹

In Malaysia where ethnic, economic and religious issues are greatly conflated, Jahaberdeen suggests more than just a passing acquaintance with other groups to advance positive interaction. Addressing the reader as a Ropera who detests racism, he writes that ‘If a Ropera feels very strongly against racism and you feel totally helpless to “change the system”, here is something you can do alone – marry someone from another ethnic group’.⁵⁰ And he approvingly cites Gandhi’s advice to a Hindu man who believed he was destined to hell for taking the life of a Muslim child in vengeance for the life of his son. Here Gandhi’s path out of hell for that man was that he adopt a Muslim child whose parents had died in the riots, and raise him as a Muslim.⁵¹

Reading Prior’s and Jahaberdeen’s writing together, the closeness of the orientation of them both is clear. It may be argued that the scope for this similarity may be possible because of the closeness in the religious traditions – both of which are Abrahamic. This, however, is demonstrably not the case with discourses and projects that partake of the same spirit of the pilgrim-in-dialogue emanating from all other religious traditions.⁵² In fact, perhaps Prior’s and Jahaberdeen’s work is all the more important because, as has been noted by others, it is very often those with whom the distance is smallest – whether physically or in terms of religion – that the most severe conflicts often occur.⁵³

48 Jahaberdeen, 3-4.

49 Jahaberdeen, 15.

50 Jahaberdeen, 21.

51 Jahaberdeen, 20.

52 See Ajahn Brahmavamso, ‘What is truth?’, *Buddhist Society of Western Australia* 26 February 2010, <http://www.dhammadownload.com/component/k2/item/542-what-is-truth.html>, accessed March 2011. Hans Kung, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Special Edition*, New York: Continuum 2006.

53 Rappaport.

Conclusion

The presence of religious discord divides individuals into groups whose relationships are too often marked by fear and suspicion. The anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport warned of the dangers that religions may pose, particularly with respect to the claims to absolute truth that are, as put by Prior, the 'kindling wood that blazes into communal riots'. Rappaport writes that a religion's claims to truth

at least tacitly implies that other conventions, those espoused by the unorthodox and the orthodox conventions of other groups, are incorrect, immoral, or even unnatural. As such they may be regarded as abominations and thus evil. Those guilty of such 'unnatural acts' may therefore be regarded as other than, or less than human and, in full righteousness and justice, be treated as such.⁵⁴

Rappaport goes on to note that what may otherwise have been minor cultural differences appear to be, when shone through the prism of religion, 'fundamental natural differences' and that this 'may not only envenom enmities', but also define these enmities, 'thus setting humans and human communities against each other.'⁵⁵

In the Malaysian context, proof of Rappaport's concerns are illustrated by the prickly relationship between minority religions and the religion of its dominant ethnic group which is supported by the State. There, communal disharmony did 'blaze' when Christians sought the right to share the word for God with Muslims. In Malaysia, and as has been observed elsewhere, the reaction of some communities that see themselves under threat has been to close in on themselves, as Prior has suggested, '*to become mentally isolated and culturally encapsulated*'. But it is not only in the context of Malaysia that the discussions of Prior and Jahaberdeen have their relevance. Especially as they emanate from religious traditions frequently seen to be especially at odds, the fact they possess the same orientation towards others is important.

The ideas espoused by Prior in his concept of the pilgrim-in-dialogue, and which find resonance in Jahaberdeen's writing, is particularly significant in the contemporary age. Contact across ethnic and religious divides is especially common today, and records of the misdeeds of some can be rapidly transmitted long distances. There is then a clear need for co-operative efforts founded on common ground and goals, rather than on suspicion and political and personal gain. Co-operation is vital in efforts to offset harms done by humans to each other or the environment, to speak out against and work at overcoming the barriers imposed by both cross-national and cross-ethnic difference and blame, to be critical of the undergirding motive of contemporary political and economic systems, the profit motive. Ideas such as Prior's pilgrim-in-dialogue and Jahaberdeen's concept of the Ropera have a place in achieving such unified demands.

54 Raapaport, 438.

55 Rappaport, 438.

The openness demanded of Prior's pilgrim-in-dialogue, I note in ending, does not mean any abandonment of one's own faith or culture. In fact, as he notes, 'Only those profoundly at home in their own faith tradition can live at the threshold with integrity and creativity...Pilgrims of dialogue are rooted in one culture yet belong to many.' Concerns that exchanges with others will erode one's own faith are to be rejected, just as Jahaberdeen does to those Muslims who would believe that practising yoga may erode faith. When he was a teenager listening to the Beatles song 'Let it be', which he felt contained an important spiritual sentiment, a religious teacher rebuked him saying, 'How can you listen this song and say it is nice? *Jaga nanti termasuk kristian*' [Take care lest you inadvertently become Christian]. Today to such a rebuke, and similar sentiments, 'I will probably ask him if he really thinks I am [as] stupid as I may look or as weak as him to falter in faith due to a song'.⁵⁶

Indeed, far from faltering in one's own faith, exploring the perspectives, beliefs and worldviews of others may serve to enrich one's experience of one's own tradition. As Prior notes, the inter-faith cross-cultural pilgrim finds that 'There is great poignancy and pathos when we re-discover the riches of our faith in the depths of another's tradition.'

Biographical note

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56 Jahaberdeen, 87.

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