CHRISTIAN MISSION IN MALAYSIA:

PAST EMPHASIS, PRESENT ENGAGEMENT & FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Submitted by
Maria Perpetua Kana LL.M.

A dissertation submitted in total fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Philosophy

School of Theology
Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Australian Catholic University
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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

This dissertation contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the dissertation.

This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the dissertation received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).

Dated this day of March, 2004.

MARIA PERPETUA KANA

ABSTRACT

The course of Christian mission in Malaysia spans a period of almost five hundred years. It traversed a path that began as a military crusade but then fell short of its goals in the centuries after and has now arrived once more at the crossroads. This dissertation reflects upon the course taken thus far and from its present juncture ponders the passage ahead.

The starting-point is mission as it was perceived in the past: an enterprise of "saving souls" and "planting churches" with the inculturation of the Christian faith all but neglected. Viewed as an institution of Western colonialism, the Church attained a degree of prestige and influence in society that has since been unsurpassed. With the birth of the new Malaysian nation in 1963, however, the marginalisation of the Church is increasingly apparent. Within the Church itself there is tension as it strives to understand mission not just in the traditional terms of conversion and church growth but as public engagement for common life in the Malaysian plural society. Such tension is evident in the different responses of the church hierarchy and the laity in the Malaysian Borneo state of Sabah to the powerful force of state-sponsored Islamisation during the early 1970s.

In the final analysis this study finds that socio-political forces operative in the contemporary Malaysian situation provide the greatest impetus for the emergence of a new approach to mission. This involves looking beyond church-centered goals to making a positive Christian contribution to national life. The fact that the Christian community is a marginal minority articulating its Christian viewpoint from within a context of religious pluralism means that the emphasis must necessarily be placed on interfaith dialogue as an integral part of the development of Christian missionary understanding today.

CONTENTS

Introduction

Christianity in Malaysia stands at a critical juncture. Introduced in 1511 by the Portuguese when they conquered the Malay-Muslim sultanate of Malacca on the southwestern edge of the Malay Peninsula under the flagship of the Military Crusading Order of Christ, the indigenous face of Christianity remains eclipsed. In more recent times, socio-political forces operative in Malaysian society and especially the rise of the Islamic polity have contributed to the marginalisation of the Church. Malaysian Christians are confronted with a difficult and complex situation but one that, at the same time, presents opportunities for a new way of being church and a fresh understanding of Christian mission. This dissertation traces the course of Christian mission thus far and, from its present juncture, ponders future missionary possibilities. It embarks upon a detailed examination of the concerns and responses of the Christian community to the challenges of its plural environment. The consequences these concerns and responses have on the development of Christian missionary understanding now, and in the years ahead, will also be considered.

A meaningful reflection on the present and future course of mission must have as its starting point the historical past. Chapter One traces the beginnings of Christianity in the Malay world and the setting up of a Borneo mission, as it was called, amidst the primal or popular religiosity of the indigenous peoples.

It will become obvious from the events that have unfolded since the arrival of the Europeans in the Malay Peninsula that the Christian cause was largely hampered on account of its association with military conquests, western colonialism and inter-religious rivalry. To begin with, Christianity was first brought to these shores by Portuguese invaders bent on wrestling control of the lucrative Asian spice trade from the Muslims. At the same time, the

Portuguese agenda included converting the "infidel" Muslim inhabitants to the Christian faith although their actions were construed as an arrogant attempt on the part of the victors to impose their religion on the vanquished. To be Christian was to be Portuguese as far as the Malaccans were concerned and their religion, Islam, was to serve as the binding force holding the sultanate together against Portuguese domination. Christianity, on the other hand, never took root in the Malay world then, not shedding its foreign image even until the present day.

Whilst the first missionaries came as part of a military crusade bearing an aggressive agenda geared towards the conversion of "infidels", the Church during the colonial age allowed the British to dictate its missionary agenda. The Christian colonial administration deliberately insulated the indigenous Malays from any Christian missionary activities, not completely out of a sense of respect for the religious beliefs of the people under its domain, but because the political costs would have been too high. This led to Christianity becoming the religion only of the immigrant communities leaving the Church with little to do with the indigenous Malays. Across the South China Sea different considerations seemed to prevail. In the province of Sarawak on the western side of the island of Borneo, for instance, Christianity was employed by its feudal ruler, the Englishman James Brooke, as a means of pacifying the unruly Malay pirates and Dayak headhunters thereby establishing some semblance of civil order. Temporal considerations rather than purely spiritual concerns thus brought the indigenous communities in Borneo into the Christian fold. Elsewhere in the peninsula, the general pattern historically remained one of converts to Christianity coming almost exclusively from the immigrant ethnic communities. This was to have lasting consequences for the future success of Christian mission in Malaysia.

The advent of European imperialism in the region ushered in the era of foreign missionaries. French missionaries from the *Societe des Missions*

Etrangeres de Paris –MEP (Paris Foreign Missionaries) first arrived in the northern part of the Malay peninsula towards the end of the 18th century. Missionary concern then lay with the number of conversions and baptisms, communions and confessions, churches and chapels, schools and orphanages, Catholic population and missionary personnel. In line with the popular notion of mission then, the aim was simply to preach, instruct, baptize and to build churches as the Catholic population increased (Chew, 2000, p 103). Some of the finest schools in the country which came to be known as mission schools were built during this period and the colonial government provided the best lands for Christian churches and schools. As such the Church came to occupy a position of privilege and prestige in colonial society that has remained unsurpassed to this day.

The scenario changed dramatically with the end of British rule and the attainment of political independence. With the implementation of the National Education Policy, the Church was no longer in a position to play a leading role in the field of education. Other developments in contemporary society continue to result in a steady erosion of the Church's influence in public life and the lack of a channel to transmit Christian values. Not surprisingly, the new environment has come to be perceived as nothing less than hostile.

Chapter Two focuses on the changing socio-political context in which the Church finds itself and related issues of particular concern to the Christian community. The study finds that ethnicity and Islamicity often stand in the way of sustaining the plural character of Malaysian society resulting in rising racial polarization. Prospects for building a harmonious multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysian society seem increasingly dim. An added complication in the Malaysian situation is that there are religious overtones to racial tension causing further divisiveness, not only between Malays and non-Malays, but widening the gulf between Muslims and non-Muslims. Furthermore, the entry of the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak into the

federation in 1963 led to conflicting notions of nationhood. Both states generally comprised peoples of non-Muslim stock and have neither Malay majorities nor Malay political hegemony . These realities have led to the rise of regionalism marring efforts at national integration.

Perhaps the deepest concern of Malaysian Christians, since the inception of the Malaysian state, is in the direction of religious freedom. To a major extent, this concern has heightened alongside the accelerated pace of state-sponsored Islamisation of Malaysian society over the last two decades. But even as far back as the 1970s, the Church had to grapple with an extreme situation when the Mustapha government embarked on an aggressive campaign of Islamisation in the East Malaysian state of Sabah.

Chapter Three elaborates on responses of the Christian community to socio-political forces operative in the contemporary context of Malaysian society, particularly ethnicity and Islamicity. It dwells at length on the Sabah situation since the experiences of Christians in Sabah provide an extreme example of the difficulties of being church under an Islamic polity. The tension in Sabah between the church hierarchy and the local indigenous Christians, as is evident from their different responses to a powerful government largely inspired by Islamic goals and ideals, stems at root from contrary perspectives on church and mission. At the same time the beginnings of a move beyond church-centered goals to a public engagement in socio-political issues may be detected. It is this engagement, itself indicative of a new Christian missionary understanding, that is reflected upon in Chapter Four.

Many Christians in Malaysia unconsciously abide by the view that the gospel deals only with the individual‘s salvation and private life and should not intrude into the public square, that is the realm of public affairs in the world (Hwa Yung, 1998, pp.6,7). Such thinking, coupled with the fact that Christians constitute less than ten percent of the population, accounts for the

reality that Christians have generally avoided confrontation on social and political issues. Even the charismatic movement, which is gaining ground in mainline denominational churches, emphasizes the Spirit's gifts and power over demons, but has very little to say about issues of public life. This means that the Christian community is traditionally saddled with a sense of political impotence and a lack of resources to secure a fair hearing leading some to take the road of escapism in the form of private religion. However, recent developments in contemporary society have caused many Christians to view the future with considerable anxiety. In particular, state-sponsored Islamisation is seen as likely to result in the withering away of non-Islamic elements in Malaysian public life. Such powerful socio-political forces operative in the Malaysian situation provide the greatest impetus for the emergence of a new Christian missionary understanding today.

In a context where there are influential voices calling for racial and religious hegemony, Christians now increasingly seek dialogue with adherents of other faiths with the primary aim of resolving inter-religious problems. The Church realises the necessity of collaborating with other believers, speaking the language of inclusion and civility, in order that religious freedom may not be jeopardised. Political and legal constraints in the Malaysian situation, therefore, have resulted in emphasis on interfaith dialogue as an integral part of contemporary Christian missionary understanding. This is evident from the participation of Christian leaders in the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS), the only inter-religious body in the country. Whilst the MCCBCHS has succeeded in bringing to the table of dialogue and fraternity leaders of all major ethnic and religious groups, mainstream Muslim groups in the country have not shown much inclination to participate.

Such a situation is reflective of the barriers of ethnic segregation and distrust that have been erected particularly between Malays and non-Malays since

historical times. Realising this, the political leadership is constantly urging Malaysians to ethnic and territorial integration through its Vision 2020 concept that envisages one *Bangsa Malaysia* or Malaysian Race. Ethnic and territorial integration is, however, possible only if relations between the various ethnic communities and regions in Malaysia are restored. Confronted with the pain of estrangement caused by decades of ethnic segregation, the Christian community is challenged to take on the mission of Christian reconciliation.

The engagement in inter-religious dialogue with a view to reconciling wounded ethnic and religious communities represent an earnest attempt by the Church to participate in national life. In the process of immersing itself in the struggle to nurture and sustain the Malaysian plural way of life, so that ethnic minorities and marginalized groups are not deprived of their rightful place, the Church in Malaysia comes into being. This signifies that inculturation is emerging as an important aspect of Christian missionary understanding. Long perceived as foreign and elitist, the Church in Malaysia is now increasingly aware of the necessity to attend to the missionary task of building up a church that is responsive to local needs.

By first reverting to events in the historical past, and then examining concerns and responses of the Christian community to present-day trends in society, this dissertation constructs an outline of a contemporary missionary agenda. The method employed corresponds to an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses historical research, sociological analyses and theological reflections.

Ultimately, the dissertation argues that the future of Christianity in Malaysia is not focused merely on gaining converts to the faith. Given the particular historical, cultural, socio-political and religious complexities of Malaysia the emerging theology of mission is one that is centered on bringing about the

reign of God through interfaith dialogue, Christian reconciliation, inculturation and an inclusive love for the poor.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the skilled guidance and constant prodding of Rev Dr Gerard Hall, Head, School of Theology, McAuley Campus, Australian Catholic University who supervised my work. I have learnt much from him as his student especially in developing and articulating my thoughts and arguments on the subject in hand. Embarking on this project too afforded me the opportunity to study the impressive works of Peter C Phan, now professor and chair of Catholic social thought at Georgetown University. I am grateful that Professor Phan took time off his busy schedule during his lecture tour of Australia in June 2002 to provide me with valuable insights and a new perspective on mission in Asia. I am also much obliged to Rev Dr Jojo Fung Jee Vui, a highly regarded Christian scholar in his own right, for his willingness to dialogue and share resources with me thus allowing me to construct a Malaysian theology of mission.

On a personal note, I thank Dr Alan Moss at the School of Theology, McAuley Campus for his support and encouragement from the moment I set out on this dissertation. I must also extend my thanks to Ms Fran Wilkinson, Administration Officer at the School, for going out of her way to help me overcome the hassles of student life and beyond. Last but not least, I thank the indigenous peoples in my home state of Sarawak. I am privileged to be one of them. Like the indigenous communities in neighbouring Sabah, their simple steadfast faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour in the midst of adversity and their deep commitment to the Church remain a source of inspiration for me. It is my hope that the emerging theology of church and mission I present in this dissertation will, in a small way, contribute to our empowerment.

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CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE PAST

INTRODUCTION

Leading his fleet of nineteen ships and with more than one thousand soldiers under his command, Viceroy Albuquerque was a formidable sight to behold as he made his approach towards the fortress of Malacca on the southwestern edge of the Malay Peninsula. The Malay defenders were no match to the obvious maritime superiority of the invading army and were swiftly subdued by the powerful Portuguese guns. His crusade in the name of Christ victorious, Albuquerque hoisted the Portuguese flag with the emblem of the cross on it and urged the eight chaplains who accompanied him on his conquest to begin their work of converting the "infidel" Muslims. For the inhabitants of Malacca life in the Malay world would never be the same again.

That day in August almost five hundred years ago marks the starting point of Christian mission in the Malay Peninsula. Across the South China Sea on the island of Borneo, missionary activity is believed to have begun close to two centuries later in 1688 though by 1692 Pope Innocent XII was ready to declare the Borneo mission a Vicarate Apostolic. This chapter traces the origins of Christianity in Malaysia from the Portuguese invasion and the early days of the Borneo mission till events on the eve of the formation of the Malaysian state in 1963. A study of the course taken by Christian mission in the past is the first step towards obtaining a better grasp of missionary issues and concerns today.

A RELIGIOUS CRUSADE

Malacca at the time of the Portuguese invasion in 1511 was the commercial capital and the centre of Islamic proselytising activities in South East Asia. Long before the conqueror Albuqurque and his eight chaplains descended,
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Muslim traders from India had arrived and in the course of conducting their business transactions, engaged enthusiastically in the propagation of Islam. By the time of the Portuguese invasion Islam had become a highly successful missionary movement in Malacca to the extent that Malay society in all its political, economic and cultural aspects had become almost totally islamised. Malacca's astute founder, Parameswara, had himself converted to Islam at the age of seventy two years to seek solidarity with the Muslim world and so ward off constant threats to the sovereignty of the sultanate from Buddhist Siam. Thus the rise of Malacca from an obscure fishing village to the most powerful and prestigious city state in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago can be attributed mostly to its conversion to Islam from as early as the first part of the fifteenth century. The Portuguese were to discover that the crescent was ahead of the cross and, as subsequent events proved, never lost its lead.

From the beginning, Christianity was perceived by the local populace as the religion of the invaders. To be a Christian was to be Portuguese in their eyes and this evoked resentment even antagonism amongst the Malays towards Christian missionaries and Christian converts. Moreover Albuquerque's efforts to carve out an alternative and lucrative trade route that would wrestle control of Asian spices away from the Muslims did not help the cause of Christianity. This was, in fact, Albuquerque's real motive in coming to Asia and eventually conquering Malacca. He cloaked a purely business enterprise with the "respectability" of a religious crusade against the Muslims. In adopting an anti-Muslim stance he set the stage for Christian-Muslim rivalry in the Malay Peninsula even as he may have succeeded in attaining his commercial goals. The inflicting of this "wound" on the ethnic and religious landscape of the country upon the arrival of the first European conquerors is a burden that Christianity and Christian mission bears even to this day.

By contrast the introduction of Islam to Malacca and the rest of the Malay Peninsula did not appear to have created any such societal upheaval. Brought

by Asian traders who zealously assumed the role of missionaries the influential Islamic school of Sufism in particular was attractive for its toleration of popular usages and beliefs not in accordance with the strict practice of Muslim orthodoxy (Hall, 1968, p.218). Furthermore after the Portuguese captured Malacca, Islam was to become the cohesive force holding the Malaccan empire together against Portuguese domination. (Hall, p.213).

Given such circumstances and in spite of the valiant efforts of such great missionaries as Francis Xavier, the conversion of Malacca never achieved the degree of success the Portuguese had hoped for when they first captured the sultanate. Maureen Chew, quoting Rev. H.J. Coleridge SJ, wrote that:

> Malacca was never thoroughly converted by St. Francis Xavier though he spent more labour upon it, perhaps, than upon any other city in the east and though it was the scene of his greatest and most famous miracles. He left at last – as the Apostles were told to leave the cities which would not listen to them – shaking off the dust from his feet as a witness against it, ordering the priests of the Society to withdraw from it, and having prophesied calamities which were to befall it. (Chew, 2000, p.60).

The fall of Malacca to the Portuguese prompted the Muslim merchants to transfer their trading headquarters from Malacca to Brunei on the island of Borneo. Thereafter Brunei was to become the new centre for the spread of Islam taking over from Malacca. Portugal did develop commercial relations with Brunei. However, for the Portuguese, Borneo was merely a transit point on the spice trade route from Malacca to the Moluccas. With no substantial commercial gains in sight, the Portuguese all but lost their missionary zeal as far as Borneo was concerned. Indeed Rooney reports that the Portuguese Jesuits in Malacca never heeded the call by Fr. Antonio Pereira, one of their

members, to send missionaries to Brunei (Rooney, 1981, p.9). The Portuguese too appeared to have directed none of their fiery anti-Muslim rhetorics at the Brunei Muslims in sharp contrast to their arrogant attitude towards the Muslims of Malacca.

Chaplains amongst those on board Portuguese merchant ships which called in at the port in Brunei ministered only to Portuguese nationals residing in the Muslim kingdom (Rooney, p.7). Thus in spite of opportunities abounding aplenty for evangelisation, Portugal preferred that the status quo be maintained and largely neglected these potential fields for propagating the faith, a preoccupation sometimes bordering on to an obsession they so single-mindedly pursued elsewhere. Sabah and Sarawak were to remain in name and in creed Muslim within the Brunei empire from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

Yet, though evangelisation did not generally form part of their agenda where Borneo was concerned, the Portuguese did not hesitate to use religion when the opportunity arose to advance their political and trading interests. In a bid to contain growing Dutch influence in the region and in order to establish direct trading ties with the natives in the interior of Borneo, Viceroy Dom Rodriguo da Costa invited missionaries of the Theatine Order to Borneo at the suggestion of the Sultans of Sukadana and Banjirmasin. Both the Portuguese and the Sultans conspired, in actual fact, to use the missionaries as tools to convert and control the unruly native tribes in the interior (Rooney, p.13). Natives who were "christianised" were presumably thought to be more kindly disposed to trade links with Portugal and to accepting the authority of the Sultans over them. Thus it was that on 2nd February 1688, Rev. Antonino Ventimiglia, a Theatine priest, landed in Banjirmasin on the south coast of Borneo. Anxious as the Portuguese were to have direct access to the pepper trade in the interior, and without seeking the Sultan's prior approval, they lost no time in despatching Ventimiglia to travel up the Barito river and open a mission amongst the Ngadjiros.

By all accounts, Ventimiglia's work amongst the natives was a success and in 1690 it was reported that over one thousand eight hundred Ngadjiros had converted. Even Rome was impressed and on 7th January 1692 Pope Innocent XII, by the brief Commissi Nobis, declared the Borneo mission a Vicarate Apostolic with Ventimiglia as the first Vicar (Rooney, p.15). This was a significant milestone and one would have expected Christianity to flourish further in Borneo.

The haste with which the Portuguese went about using Ventimiglia to get direct access to the Ngadjiros and their pepper produce infuriated the Sultan of Banjirmasin. Enraged at being outplayed in the entire affair, the Sultan set out to kill the priest and prevent supplies from reaching him. The Portuguese quickly abandoned Ventimiglia and no more was heard from him after 1691. Ventimiglia's death presumably in 1691 or 1962 meant the end of the Theatine Mission and Portuguese plans to gain direct control over the pepper trade of Borneo. Rooney quotes Nicholl who argued that Ventimiglia was the victim of political intrigue (Rooney, p.16). Certainly, the Portuguese lost no time in making the Theatine missionary the scapegoat for the failure of their own political and commercial plans. Henceforth Portugal lost all interest in Borneo and though the Theatines continued to harbour hopes of reopening the Borneo mission these never materialised.

The doomed Theatine mission in Borneo underscores the historical fact that the pursuit of Christian mission was at times solely to further the political and commercial interests of the Europeans in the Malay-Dayak world. Likewise the fortunes of Christianity in the seventeenth century were dependent upon the military might of the Portuguese. With the end of Portuguese rule and the fall of Malacca to the Dutch in 1641, Catholicism suffered a severe setback.

From the first year of the Dutch occupation, Catholic worship was prohibited in Malacca (Chew, 2000, p.66). Difficult years of persecution and suppression followed. It was only around 1703 that Dutch aversion to Catholicism lessened when the Dutch entered into a political alliance with Portugal. Political constraints imposed upon the Dutch the obligation to be more tolerant of the Portuguese Catholics in Malacca. Generally, however, unlike the Portuguese before them, the Dutch were indifferent to the cause of Christianity and the pursuit of Christian mission. As a consequence of Portuguese insensitivity and Dutch passivity, therefore, Christianity made little or no impact when it first arrived on these shores almost five hundred years ago.

THE PENANG REVIVAL

Whilst Malacca provided a foothold for Christianity in the Malay Peninsula, the island of Penang to the north of the Malay Peninsula was to present the fledging Christian Church two hundred years on with a fresh impetus to grow and take firm hold. In 1786 the English East India Company took possession of Penang as a matter of naval strategy and to secure the China trade (Hall, p.489). Captain Francis Light was appointed superintendent of the settlement. The acquisition of Penang by the British heralded the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Christianity in this country in which efforts of Christian mission were revived and sustained.

The acquisition of Penang by the British had an immediate cosmopolitan effect upon church life. French missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions or *Societe des Missions Etrangeres de Paris* (MEP) expelled from neighbouring Siam eventually made their way to Penang. One of them was Bishop Garnault who was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Siam whilst he sought refuge in Penang. Garnault soon ingratiated himself with Francis Light and as a result obtained tremendous support for his mission (Chew, p. 84). A period of intense activity followed. Numerous churches were built and the number of

converts increased noticeably. In 1809 the Major Seminary or College General as it was eventually called was re-opened in Penang and served as a regional seminary for Siam, India, Cochin China, China, Japan and Korea and in later years, Burma and the Federated States of Malaya. According to Chew, the College General in Penang was a key element in the work of the Catholic Church not only in Malaysia but also in South East Asia and further afield (Chew, p.86). To these pioneer French missionaries can also be attributed the establishment of missionary schools in Malaysia, a powerful instrument of enduring evangelisation in the Malay world for the next two centuries.

From 1815 onwards Portuguese and French Catholic missionaries were joined by Protestant missionaries. The London Missionary Society (LMS) which pioneered Protestant evangelism on the Peninsula, focused on the Malay and Chinese communities in Penang (Ackerman & Lee, 1990, p.29). The underlying factor, which brought about an upsurge in Christian missionary activities was British presence and British support for Christian mission. Unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch who preceded them the English did not come openly as invaders but rather as power brokers who provided "peace havens" in their settlements in the midst of much political strife between the Malay chieftains themselves. English motives were not altogether altruistic either moved as they were by military naval and trading concerns. But they were master tacticians and their military prowess was much sought after by the warring Malay powers. In return for British protection the grateful Sultan of Kedah agreed to cede Penang but the British reneged on their side of the bargain leaving Superintendent Light with a reputation for duplicity (Khor , 2001, p.20).

Penang therefore became the starting point for renewed evangelisation and missionary work in the Malay Peninsula beginning from the late 18th century. Thereafter the work of evangelisation was carried out on a sustained basis

mostly by French and Irish missionaries.[1] However, the presence of foreign missionaries and European territorial expansion also cast a dark shadow over missionary activities. French and Portuguese missionaries were constantly engaged in a tussle over ecclesiastical jurisdiction. At the same time, the British and the Dutch were embroiled in an acrimonious exchange over territorial rights in the region. Revival and renewal in the missionary arena sometimes appeared to be in serious jeopardy.

POLITICAL BICKERING AND ECCLESIASTICAL CONFLICT

From Penang the British went on to occupy Malacca and then proceeded to set up a settlement in Singapore. Malacca actually came under British rule from 1795 as part of a deal worked out with the Dutch to prevent any Dutch territories in the East from falling into French hands after Napoleon conquered the Netherlands. In 1818 the Dutch assumed control of Malacca again until 1824 when it was returned to the British in exchange for Bencoolen in Sumatra. Malacca was deliberately stripped of all its glorious past under the British in their desire to attract trade from Malacca to the new settlement, Penang. Hall reports that in British hands the opportunity was seized of demolishing the splendid old fort *A Famosa* lest one day the British might have to attack the city (Hall, p.506).

Throughout the early 18th century the British were constantly bickering with the Dutch as to their respective spheres of influence. To put an end to all the rivalry and hostility in the East between Britain and the Netherlands the Anglo-Dutch Treaty was concluded in London on 17th March 1824. Under its territorial provisions the Netherlands ceded to Britain all her factories in India, withdrew her objections to the occupation of Singapore, ceded Malacca and engaged never to form any establishment on the Malay Peninsula or conclude any treaty with any of its rulers. The British ceded to the Netherlands

[1] This period until the mid-twentieth century has been described as the era of the missionaries in Malaysia (Chew,2000, p.83).

Bencoolen and all the East India Company's possessions in Sumatra and pledged themselves never to form any settlement on the island or make any treaty with any of its rulers. None of the ceded territories was to be transferred at any time to any other power, and if either of the parties should ever abandon the ceded possessions the right of occupation should at once pass to the other. (Hall, p.509). No mention was made of Borneo and neither party asserted any claim to supremacy over the vast island under the terms of the Treaty.

The Anglo-Dutch Treaty was an indication of the extent of European domination and arrogance in the Malay world where the future of Malaya and Indonesia were decided by two European powers conferring in a foreign land half way across the world without any regard whatsoever for local sentiments and sensitivities. As it turned out, the British Government of India and the directors of the East India Company were not the least bit interested in assuming any responsibility in Malaya. The fact that the Malay states were in a state of chronic unrest, external and internal, and had become completely incapable of putting their house in order was conveniently ignored (Hall, p.512). Malayan affairs were of little importance as opposed to the events in India and the struggles to open China to British commerce. Only the people on the ground realising the need for a stronger policy in relation to the Malay states pursued it often at their own risk and incurring the strong disapproval of their home government. The truth of the matter was that these territories and their people were considered no more than mere possessions to be acquired or disposed off as and when it suited the various European powers. This sad state of affairs was to have its repercussions in the religious field.

In a span of thirty years from 1795 to 1824 Malacca was tossed back and forth between the British and the Dutch. According to Chew this contributed to missionary indecision and to a certain amount of uncertainty in the planning

of the early missionaries as well as to a lack of concentration of effort (Chew, 2000, p.69). Moreover, the British policy of suppressing Malacca and favouring Penang resulted in migration of Christians from Malacca to Penang. This depleted the local church in Malacca of its Christian population. Those who remained in Malacca were Portuguese Catholics using the Portuguese language in their worship and maintaining their Portuguese culture and traditions.

In 1841 Pope Gregory XVI issued a decree elevating the church in Malaya (including Malacca) to the status of Vicariate Apostolic of Malaya under the jurisdiction of the Paris Foreign Missions. The Portuguese missionaries in Malacca, however, were allowed to retain their churches and chapels under the patronage of the Portuguese Government.

The placement of Malacca under the jurisdiction of the MEP precipitated a bitter rift within the Church between French missionaries and Portuguese missionaries over the question of jurisdiction. Indeed initial efforts to open a French mission in Malacca in 1841 failed on account of disagreements with and stiff opposition from the Portuguese missionaries. Some years were to lapse before a fresh attempt was made this time by French priests from the Vicariate Apostolic of Siam. Catholics numbering about fifteen in number who were "loyal" to the Vicariate Apostolic of Siam became the first parishioners of the new parish of St. Francis Xavier founded by the French priests (Chew, p.91).

This simmering hostility between the Portuguese missionaries aligned to the Portuguese Crown and the MEP missionaries favoured by Rome finally erupted into a major and open ecclesiastical conflict over jurisdiction. As Chew points out, it was a situation, not without its irony, of Catholics from two European powers disputing who should run a mission to Chinese, Indians and Eurasians in a Malay part of the world under British rule (Chew, p.92).

The situation was in effect a territorial dispute between two of the most powerful European powers of the Christian world then, Rome and Portugal. It was a dispute not unlike the territorial conflicts then raging between the Netherlands and England culminating in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty and its demarcation of Dutch and English spheres of domain in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago without a thought spared for the peoples who dwelled in those lands. Like the British and Dutch Governments of the day the Church too was preoccupied with the competing claims of both the French MEP missionaries and the Portuguese missionaries to control and exercise jurisdiction over the Church in Malaya. Needless to say this detracted from the carrying out of Christian mission and the work of evangelisation suffered a major set back.

Finally in 1886 Pope Leo XIII and King Dom Luis of Portugal came to an understanding between themselves by which all Catholics in Malacca and Singapore and the old Portuguese diocese of Malacca were placed under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Macao residing in the Far East. The rest of the Malay Peninsula remained in the Vicariate Apostolic of Malaya. This artificial demarcation of ecclesiastical jurisdiction was glaringly at odds with the geographical and cultural realities but then it was a compromise that seemed to appease the European powers of that age squabbling over claims to territorial and religious supremacy in Asia. However, this ostensible concession to Portuguese national pride was short-lived. Two years later, in 1888, Pope Leo XIII himself appeared to have a change of heart when he re-established the ancient see of Malacca and elevated the Vicariate of Malaya to a diocese as a suffragen to Pondicherry, a French colony, in India. As a consequence the new diocese comprising of the whole of the Malay Peninsula and Singapore reverted back to the jurisdiction of the MEP Bishops though the Portuguese missions in Malacca were allowed to “keep their churches and territorial parishes within the overall structure” (Chew, p.93).

It took the Catholic Church forty-seven years to settle the thorny issue of jurisdiction. The shifting back and forth from the French to the Portuguese and finally to the French MEP Bishops and the discord, uncertainty and lack of focus it generated meant that opportunities for greater evangelisation were lost just as the Church had begun to make its presence felt.

BRITISH IMPACT ON MISSIONARY AGENDA

A protracted internal dispute over jurisdiction was not the only problem confronting the Church. The years following upon the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 saw the Malay states in the Peninsula plunging deeper into anarchy and chaos. There were endless feuds amongst the Malay chieftains. A large migrant population of Chinese miners in the tin areas of Perak, Selangor and Negri Sembilan saw the emergence of rival societies engaged in clan fights. The old problem of piracy which was one of the evils addressed by the signatories to the Treaty of 1824 had become increasingly worse. In these conditions of growing lawlessness one could hardly expect Christian mission to make much headway.

As the situation in the Malay Peninsula deteriorated further the mercantile communities in the British settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore lobbied vigorously for the transfer of responsibility and control of these settlements from the East India Company to the British Colonial Office. In 1867 the actual transfer took place and the first Colonial Office Governor was installed. To the utter disappointment of those who had agitated for the transfer, the policy of non-intervention in the Malay Peninsula was steadfastly maintained.

By 1873 a new political order took shape in South East Asia. France assumed the status of an imperialist power in Indo-China. In the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, the Dutch were strengthening their hold over Indonesia. Confronted with the perceived threat of growing European expansion in Asia,

Britain was constrained to review its policy of non-interference in the Malay Peninsula. But the most important factor that finally led to greater British involvement was the realisation that if peace and order were restored the rich natural resources in the interior of the Peninsula could be better exploited and British trade in the Malay archipelago further enhanced.

The persistent clamour for greater British involvement led eventually to a meeting on the island of Pangkor between the Governor of the Straits Settlements, General Sir Andrew Clarke and the Perak chiefs in January 1874. At the end of the meeting the Pangkor Engagement was drawn up. Whilst this treaty signaled the beginning of active British involvement in Malayan affairs its impact upon the Christian missionary agenda in the Malay Peninsula was even more significant. Its most crucial clause would have to be that which provided for the appointment of a British officer, to be called Resident, whose advice must be asked for and acted upon by the Sultan in all questions other than those touching Malay religion and custom. This same provision appeared in all subsequent treaties entered with the other individual Malay states after Pangkor. The explicit exclusion of Malay religion and custom from the purview of the British Resident was a carefully crafted concession on the part of the British to placate the Malay rulers all of whom sought British protection but were anxious at the same time not to lose their sovereignty. In this way the British succeeded in maintaining the illusion that the Sultans were sovereign Malay rulers reigning over Malay states. But the situation in reality was quite different as the status and role of Islamic law, the Shariah, was made subservient to British legal codes and enactments. Islam became highly bureaucratised with the establishment by the British of a centralised religious authority in many states to oversee Islamic affairs in those states (Hussin Mutalib, 1993, pp.20-21).

Various consequences flowed from this ostensibly “hands off” policy of the British with regard to Malay religion and custom. Throughout their stay in the

Peninsula the British discouraged evangelisation amongst the Malays notwithstanding that there was no formal prohibition in this direction. Chew states that the commercial interests of the British unofficially but effectively prevented any growth of evangelisation among the Malays (Chew, p.110). Taking their cue from the British upon whom they were dependent on presumably to provide the necessary peace and security, the European missionaries readily acquiesced to the exclusion, for political and commercial reasons, of one ethnic community in their work of Christian mission. Desultory attempts to evangelise amongst the Malays were quickly abandoned. Instead the missionaries focused only on the non-Malays mainly the migrant Chinese and Indian population.

On reflection a missionary agenda that excluded the Malays so as not to jeopardise British interests gave the unfortunate impression that the Church chose to have nothing to do with the Malays. It also sealed the fate of Christianity as a non- indigenous minority religion. Furthermore, the "wound" of religious divide between the indigenous Malays and the migrant Chinese and Indian communities was inflicted. Since Malays were excluded and non-Malays became selected objects of missionary zeal a situation arose whereby only non-Malays became Christians. Racial differences along religious lines were thus emphasised. Whilst the British are to be faulted for creating this unhealthy state of affairs in the first place, the Church too, by allowing the British to dictate its missionary agenda and by its practice of "selective" evangelisation must accept some measure of responsibility.

It would appear that a missionary agenda drawn along racial lines was not confined just to the Malay states. This was also an imposition that the ruling Brooke family in Sarawak sought to foist upon the first missionaries arriving from England in the mid-nineteenth century.

FOUNDING A BORNEO CHURCH MISSION

In 1839 the Englishman, James Brooke, arrived in Borneo on board his yacht, the Royalist, supposedly to carry on exploration and scientific research. Instead he befriended Pangeran Muda Hashim, the Sultan of Brunei's uncle and heir and became embroiled in local politics. Brooke helped Hashim to quell a rebellion by the native Dayaks in the province of Sarawak against the Sultan of Brunei. In the process he not only rose in Hashim's esteem but gained the unexpected allegiance of the local Malays and Dayaks who had long suffered under the misdeeds of Brunei rule. For his efforts Hashim appointed Brooke the *rajah* or governor of Sarawak.

The deed of appointment to which Hashim had affixed his seal on September 24, 1841 gave Brooke free rein in matters of governing Sarawak but imposed the obligation "not to infringe upon the customs or religion of the people". (Baring-Gould & Bampfylde, 1989, p.85). This deed was subsequently confirmed by the Sultan of Brunei in 1842.

Brooke's immediately declared his intent to establish a just and humane government. He faced a number of pressing problems: rampant piracy and slavery amongst the Malays and Dayaks, headhunting and lack of law and order in the interior and financial difficulties. In a bid to resolve some of these problems he tried to interest the British Government into appointing British residents "on each river to develop trade and suppress pirates". At the same time he also appealed to the Church of England to send him spiritual helpers hoping to use the Church to pacify and develop Sarawak (Varney, 1968, p.377). Indeed Brooke entertained hopes that eventually a missionary could be attached to each resident.

In 1846 a provisional committee for a "Borneo Church Mission" met in London to discuss Brooke's call to establish in Sarawak a mission of the Church of England. The idea of a Christian mission engaged in civilising

these notorious pirates and headhunters had a particular appeal to English clergy of the mid-nineteenth century. Adopting language that sometimes bordered on condescension the committee noted that in furtherance of Brooke's "enlightened views for the improvement of the Dayak and Malay races, for whom God has already enabled him to do so much, he will encourage by all means in his power any well-advised scheme for their education and elevation in scale of social beings; the crowning purpose of which will be to bring them to the knowledge of the saving truths of the gospel" (Varney, p.378).

Whilst Brooke did not succeed in his attempts to interest the British Government in Sarawak his appeals to the Church for help bore fruit with the arrival of the first Anglican missionaries in 1848. Brooke's policy was that his government and the Church should work closely together since their aims overlap. He recognised that the Church in its work of providing education and medical services could greatly assist him as he went about "pacifying and developing" Sarawak. But Brooke was also conscious that his own political survival and his right to govern depended upon him remaining on cordial terms with the Muslim Sultan of Brunei to whom he was obliged to make annual money payments, tributary in nature. His deed of appointment dictated only one condition: he was not to infringe upon the customs and religion of the people. Even though this constituted a general prohibition as regards customs and religion Brooke was careful only to protect the Malays and their Islamic faith from outside interference presumably because of their loose cultural and religious ties with the Sultanate. He had no such reservations about actively encouraging the Church in its work of evangelisation and mission amongst the Dayaks and the Chinese (Varney, p.381),

This policy of protecting the Muslim Malays from any attempts to convert them to Christianity ironically by the Christian government of the day led to some conflict between Brooke and the early Christian missionaries. The Rev.

Francis Thomas McDougall and his assistant, Deacon William Bodham Wright, had laboured under the impression, even before they arrived from England, that their task was to impart the truths of Christianity to all the peoples of Sarawak including the Malays. Upon arrival they, therefore, not unreasonably aspired in the "not very distant period" to bring the "Malays of Sarawak within the Christian fold" (Varney, p.391).

In spite of the Rajah's disapproval, McDougall and Wright proceeded to pursue their work of evangelisation amongst the Malays. They intended to forge common ground between Islam and Christianity and then bring the Malays "gradually to embrace those higher truths, the sudden introduction of which would drive them away" (Varney, p.391). With this in mind McDougall & Wright started the first mission institution in Sarawak which was a day school intended to attract the local Malay population. A few Malays did attend but enrolment never reached the great numbers envisaged. Religious teaching was apparently attempted but with Wright's abrupt departure in 1849 this was abandoned. The local Malays in any case insisted that religious teaching should not go beyond the common ground between Islam and Christianity. McDougall had to concede that "no direct proselytism can or ought to be attempted with them in their present state" (Varney, p.386).

By 1850 McDougall had begun to realise that his attempts at evangelisation amongst the local Malays were an exercise in futility. Instead of winning the Malays over to "the higher truths" of Christianity he found to his dismay, that a great revival of Islam was taking place. It would appear that the arrival of European Christian missionaries had aroused the Malays out of their state of religious indifference and stirred up "their zeal and bigotry for Islam" (Varney, p.392). Part of the reason for this revival can be attributed to the arrival of a new batch of missionaries from Arabia. As Baring-Gould and Bampfylde observed, though the majority of Malays were indifferent to their religion all would be united in bitter opposition to any intermeddling with

their religion (Baring-Gould and Bampfylde, p.444). In the end McDougall was constrained to conclude that his optimism about converting the Malays was quite unfounded.

Brooke expeditiously took advantage of this turn in events and he once again urged McDougall to make the Church's work with the Dayaks its main concern (Varney, P.393). For the most part Brooke was driven by motives that were not exactly spiritual in nature. He hoped to restrict the known propensity of the Dayaks, as he put it, to be pirates and headhunters, which reduced the interior of Sarawak to a state of anarchy. Curing them of these inclinations by way of them embracing a new faith would aid in the restoration of law and order thus making the task of governing Sarawak more manageable. Still bruised over the lack of success in his work amongst the Malays McDougall readily fell in with the bidding of the Rajah this time. His fear was that with their newly acquired "bigotry for Islam" the Malays would now direct their religious fervour towards converting the Dayaks to Islam thus forestalling the efforts of the Anglican missionaries (Varney, p.392).

It was with this sense of urgency that the work of evangelisation was undertaken by McDougall and his associates amongst the Dayaks. As far as he was concerned, the Dayaks were in danger of being converted to Islam unless the Christian church made strong efforts towards their conversion (Varney, p.393). The historians, Baring-Gould and Bampfylde do not, however, echo McDougall's fears. According to them toleration and a deficiency of zeal had, in the first place, rendered the Malays indifferent propagators of their faith amongst the indigenous tribes around them. The Christian missionaries therefore did not face any challenge from the Muslim Malays who were unconcerned about the "work of conversion" undertaken by the former amongst the Dayaks. Baring-Gould and Bampfylde in fact were of the view that the "feeling" of the Malays "towards the Christian religion is one of respect". (Baring-Gould & Bampfylde, p.445).

In order to properly appreciate the impact of Christianity upon the Dayaks in the late nineteenth century, it is necessary to firstly understand their cultural and political orientation and their relationship with the other ethnic communities in Sarawak.

The Dayaks made up of the Iban and Land Dayak tribes inhabit the interior of Sarawak. Gentle in disposition the Land Dayaks were consistently harassed by their neighbours throughout history. They were governed by local Malay chieftains or datus and these were not above murdering, fleecing or enslaving the unfortunate Land Dayaks. The Malay chieftains and their families claimed the right to buy the rice, edible birds' nests, wax and other produce harvested by the Land Dayaks at a price fixed by the chieftains. This unequal trading position reduced the Land Dayaks to abject poverty. If the amount produced did not meet the requirements of these chieftains then Land Dayak girls and children were taken to make up the deficient and sold into slavery (Baring-Gould and C A Bampfylde). Such misfortunes at the hands of the Malay chieftains and other neighbouring tribes caused the Land Dayak population to dwindle and it was only with Brooke rule that the population began to increase (Runciman, 1960, p.7-8).

Whilst the Malays were able to murder, rob and enslave the Land Dayaks, the Sea Dayaks or Ibans proved to be an entirely different proposition. Indeed the Ibans were far too independent, warlike and powerful to submit to oppression. To begin with they had scant respect for the Brunei Sultanate which exercised nominal rule over Sarawak. Brunei too showed little interest in the Ibans and displayed no inclination to dominate these people with a reputation for engaging in raids, headhunting, plunder and piracy. The Malays of Sarawak and the Ibans intermingled and engaged in trade mostly of Malay salt fish for Iban rice. However there were never any attempts on the part of the Malay chieftains to institute an effective trade monopoly as they did with the more

docile Land Dayaks. Malay-Iban interaction was superficial since the Malays were always wary of the aggressive Ibans.

Both the Land Dayaks and the Ibans practised animism. Theirs was the world of spirits with controlling power over the air, the earth and water. They believed in omens as given by birds, animals and reptiles and in dreams through which the spirits convey warnings or encouragement with regard to events taking place in the present and in the future. They believed in an after life that was no different from the present (Baring-Gould & Bampfylde, p.446).

Islam made no impression on the Dayak world even though it was the religion of the Malays who ruled the Land Dayaks and intermingled with the Ibans. In the case of the Land Dayaks, the injustices they suffered under the Malay chieftains deterred them from embracing the faith of their oppressors. Indeed most of them fled to the mountain tops to escape from Malay tyranny. As far as the Ibans were concerned Islam presented a cultural force that was at odds with Iban culture. Pringle points out that the Malays upon conversion to Islam could no longer eat pork whereas the pig was a pillar of Iban village life and a major source of protein in the interior (Pringle, 1970, p.59). McDougall too attested to this fact when he wrote in 1850 that nothing but the prohibition of pork had prevented the Dayaks from embracing Islam (Varney, p.394). There were also other aspects of Islam which did not quite appeal to the Dayaks in general and the Ibans in particular. Islam sanctioned polygamy whereas Iban society was and is strictly monogamous. Furthermore the Hindu-derived features of the Malay heritage and Islam itself encouraged the Muslim Malay chieftains to proclaim themselves rulers of each of the various rivers in the territory regardless of the power they actually wielded over the local population. This concept of overlordship practised by the Malay aristocracy with its reverence for royalty and emphasis on high lineage was alien to the

world of headhunting and migration inspired by the vigorous animism of the Ibans (Pringle, pp.59, 60).

Into the Dayak world of spirits and spells, sacrifices and magical rites, sorcery, charms and taboos stepped McDougall and the first Anglican missionaries. At the invitation of the Rajah, McDougall went along on a visit to a longhouse along the Merdang River in November 1850. A traditional welcome was accorded to the Rajah and his party which included the performance of ceremonial rites containing elements of witchcraft and the use of spells and charms. McDougall himself did not demur but rather participated in these rites for fear of offending his native host (Varney, p.394). McDougall's policy thereafter was to seek compromise with what seemed best in native religion. He professed an interest in understanding Iban traditional religion in order to find common elements with Christianity through which he could approach the Ibans. To this end he was prepared, if necessary, to adapt Christianity to local beliefs and practices.

McDougall's liberal approach evoked different responses. Some did not doubt that the Church "seems to have been genuinely concerned to understand and take from the traditional religion whatever it felt it could." (Varney, p.397). Others including "the English churchmen" in England sitting on the committee for a "Borneo Church Mission" which paid McDougall his salary of 300 pounds a year deemed his ideas of compromise "too radical" (Varney, p.395). McDougall himself was quite unmoved by the criticisms levelled against him by his detractors. Supported by the Rajah he maintained that his policy was actually one of "humility and charity towards Mohammedans and heathens." (Varney, p.395). It would appear that from the onset the Christian church had to grapple with the issue of inculturation and its attendant fears of syncretism. Missionaries after McDougall condemned much of these traditional beliefs and practices which he and his associates praised. Varney reports that the approach to the Ibans and their religion continued to be a

subject for debate. Dayak Christian conferences held over the subsequent years called for the imposition of stricter rules. However these were never widely observed prompting calls to revert back to the liberal approach of McDougall and the first missionaries (Varney, p.401).

Whilst there were obviously differences of opinion as to the best approach to be taken, the missionary enterprise to convert the Dayaks to Christianity achieved far greater success than all the attempts to evangelise the Malays. Neither did McDougall's fear of competition from the Malays and Islam ever materialise. But most of all, the transmission of the "white man's" faith was considerably made easy by the high regard the Dayaks and in particular the Ibans had for Rajah Brooke. Whilst there were attempts to undermine Brooke's rule firstly by the Chinese in 1857 and then again by some disgruntled Malay chiefs in 1859 the Ibans remained steadfastly loyal to the man who had cured them of piracy. His considerable influence over the Ibans led to the establishment of mission stations comprised of churches and schools from as early as 1852 in Lundu, Skrang, Banting, Sabu and Sebetan, all remote traditional Iban country.

By 1855 the Church of England or the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.), as it came to be known later, successfully lobbied for the formation of a Borneo Bishopric. The island of "Labuan and its dependencies" including Sarawak was raised to the status of a diocese with McDougall as bishop. Coincidentally or not, this development in the Anglican Church had its parallel within the Catholic Church. In 1855 too, Pope Pius IX erected the Prefecture of Labuan and North Borneo and appointed Rev. Carlo Cuarteron to be its first Prefect Apostolic. The Prefecture of Labuan and North Borneo comprised the whole of Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei. A Spaniard with a colourful reputation, Cuarteron had a grand vision of mission aiming to announce the Gospel in Borneo and the islands around it. He was shrewd enough to appreciate that missionary work and commerce should work in

tandem, a formula that worked well for Muslim missionary work and one that was advocated by Protestant missionaries of the day. However, Cuarteron's work turned out to be a failure hampered as he was by lack of missionaries to assist him, indecisiveness and a spirit of wanderlust. Rooney writes that the mission of Cuarteron started with much fanfare only to end in a whimper (Rooney, 1976, p.23). Cuarteron's failure meant that, in spite of the erection of a Prefecture, the Catholic Church did not go beyond being a mere token presence. By contrast the Church of England could lay claim to being the pioneer Church to successfully and effectively carry out the work of propagation and evangelisation on these shores. It is only to be expected then that efforts by the Catholic Church to re-enter the missionary field again some fifteen years later brought on denominational rivalry. A headstrong Rajah bent on preserving the domain of the Anglican Church in certain areas meant a missionary agenda limited by the Brooke policy of church zoning.

REKINDLING THE CATHOLIC CAUSE IN SARAWAK BORNEO

In 1870 there was fresh interest by the Catholic Church to revive missionary activities and it was proposed that Mill Hill Missionaries be assigned to the Prefecture. Nothing came of the proposal and it was reported that no sooner was the idea germinated then fears of scorching heat, malignant fevers and possible opposition from the Muslims assailed Herbert Vaughan and his Mill Hill Society. (Rooney,1981, p.24). Towards the end of 1876 Cuarteron requested Charles Brooke, who had succeeded his uncle as Rajah of Sarawak, to approve the posting of Augustinian missionaries but his request was denied. At about the same time the Borneo proposal resurfaced and on 18 June 1880 Bishop Vaughan, by then the Bishop of Salford, wrote directly to the Rajah and approval was obtained for the setting up of a Mill Hill Mission.

There were two conditions attached to the Rajah's approval. Firstly, the Brooke Government would direct the Mill Hill missionaries to suitable areas of work where there would be no danger of conflict with the work of the

Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.). Secondly, it would be "undesirable to endeavour to convert the Mahommetan and it should only prove fruitless". (Rooney, p.175).

It was with considerable trepidation that the first Mill Hill missionaries stepped ashore in July 1881. Summoned upon arrival to an audience with the Rajah they were served with notice that the Rajah had no intention of allowing the Mill Hill missionaries or Catholicism, for that matter, to make any headway in the capital, Kuching, and the surrounding districts. This was, after all, the domain of the Anglican Church. He had therefore decided that the main effort of the Catholic Church should be directed to Upper Sarawak and the Rejang. So single minded was he about achieving this goal that he immediately despatched them off to the Rejang in his own yacht.

Even as the Mill Hill missionaries acceded to the Rajah's wishes and dutifully concentrated their efforts in the Rejang area they almost immediately incurred his displeasure when they decided to settle at Sari near the mouth of the River Rejang. For reasons not known, the Rajah objected to the choice of Sari and the Prefect, Rev. Thomas Jackson, hastily ordered his assistant, Rev. Edmund Dunn, to seek an alternative mission site. Taking advantage of the Catholics' embarrassment, an SPG missionary, the Rev. Bywater, quickly moved in to set up an Anglican posting in Sari. Jackson protested to the Rajah who eventually agreed "tacitly" to Catholic presence in Sari. By then Dunn had moved to Kanowit which came to be regarded henceforth as the headquarters of the Catholic Mission in the Rejang (Rooney, 1981, p.31).

The Sari incident indicated the tremendous influence the government of the day exerted over the Christian Church. It was not only that Charles Brooke appeared to favour the Anglicans over the Catholics but he deliberately planted different Christian denominations in different parts of Sarawak. His policy was to place them in different zones each separate from the other. It

was no accident therefore that Catholicism made a stronger showing in central Sarawak and the Rejang area whilst Anglicans were more numerous in Kuching and the southern region of Sarawak. In the early part of the twentieth century, Brooke, however, allowed Methodist missionaries entry into Sibu thereby effectively ending Catholic monopoly of Sibu and the other riverine settlements in the Rejang region.

Not only did Charles Brooke delineated the zones in which the different Christian churches were permitted to establish mission stations, but his was the final authority that decided whether or not the Church was permitted to carry out its work of mission and evangelisation amongst a particular ethnic group. Like his predecessor and the British in the Malay Peninsula, he was careful to exclude and isolate the Malays from any Christian missionary enterprise. He had made it clear to the Mill Hill missionaries upon their arrival in 1881 that he would brook no opposition in this direction. However this policy of "protecting" the Malays and Islam was taken even further when the Church sought to begin missionary work amongst the Melanaus, an indigenous community living along the coast between the mouths of the Rejang and Baram rivers.

In 1897 the new Prefect Apostolic, Edmund Dunn, evinced a desire to open a station amongst the Melanaus. He proceeded to draw up plans but these had to be shelved when Charles Brooke decided the Church's excursion into Melanau country was not such a good idea. Apparently a large number of Melanaus had recently converted to Islam and the Rajah feared that there would be "local friction if the Catholic mission were to move into the district". (Rooney, p.44). In the face of the Rajah's misgivings, the Church agreed to a compromise and ended up establishing a station on the fringes outside the Melanau heartland by a small river called the Cut. It was only five years later that the Rajah decided, on the basis of his discussions with the Muslim Melanau headmen of the Oya district, that it would be permissible for

the Catholics to evangelise amongst the Melanaus after all. As it turned out the move by the Catholic Church from its station along the Cut river to Dalat could not be completed until 1906, almost ten years after Dunn first drew up his plans and at no mean financial outlay.

The story of the Church's work of evangelisation had a happy ending and generations of Muslim Melanaus and Muslim Christians have lived harmoniously together putting to rest the Rajah's initial fears of religious conflict. Upon one man, an outsider though ironically a Christian, was the religious affiliation of an ethnic group decided. The final decision not to exclude the Melanaus from the work of evangelisation meant that, at least in one moment in the history of Christian mission in this country, ethnic isolationism was avoided. The question unanswered was whether the Church could have been more assertive in making its case for reaching out to the Melanaus in 1897 instead of allowing itself to be cowed by the Rajah's lack of support in the matter.

With the advent of British colonial rule in 1946 the missionary zoning policies of the Brookes were reversed. When the Evangelical missionaries first arrived in 1928 they were permitted by the Rajah to enter only the Limbang district in northern Sarawak, till then not the subject of conversion efforts by earlier missionaries. Hudson Southwell, one of the pioneer missionaries responsible for establishing the Borneo Evangelical Mission, was under specific instructions not to venture into the Baram district since this region had already been delineated to the Catholic Church. However, this policy of delineating the zones in which each Christian denomination was allowed to evangelise was reversed by the colonial government. Apparently the Governor was so impressed with the Borneo Evangelical Mission and its positive impact on the indigenous Kenyah tribe that he agreed to allow the Mission to work in the Baram region. (SIB Sarawak Visi AD 2000, 1995, p.10). Henceforth the Evangelicals and the Catholics competed with one another to win converts

amongst the Kenyahs. The allegiance of a longhouse often went to the missionary, Evangelical or Catholic, who happened to arrive first. (Rooney, 1981, p.118). All these events seem to suggest that it was as much through the intervention of temporal powers as it was divine grace that led these early converts to embrace Christianity.

If the Church's stance towards the State was often one of accommodation and submission to political restrictions as illustrated by its meek acquiescence to the dubious authority of the Brookes and the colonial government to make and reverse missionary zoning policies as well as to dictate the religious affiliation of each particular ethnic group, its attitude to indigenous customs and traditions was more difficult to decipher.

There were times when the Church presumed along with the State to know what was best for the indigenous communities. The Iban tendency to migrate and practise shifting cultivation of hill padi particularly irked Charles Brooke who decided that this hampered his efforts to bring stability and civilisation to the Ibans. Having failed in his efforts to legislate against migration the Rajah turned to the Church to persuade this nomadic people to settle down to a quieter less warlike existence (Rooney, p.114). Convinced that this practice of the Ibans stood in the way of making any "mission progress", the Church obliged by setting up Christian villages on lands which the Rajah readily made available. Once set up, an alternative village economy to replace the traditional shifting cultivation economy had to be engineered. Initially the cultivation of wet padi was attempted and when this did not quite take off, attention turned to coffee cultivation. The collapse of coffee prices in the 1890s was a serious setback and in some measure sealed the fate of these villages. Ironically, this custom of migrating and building new longhouses wherever their travels took them was to eventually advance the cause of Catholicism amongst the Ibans. Once they had settled down and built their longhouse they would send for the priest to come and bless the house and the

crops. In this way, Catholicism followed the path of Iban migrations into the Upper Rejang and as far away as Limbang in northern Sarawak (Rooney, p.114).

The failure of the Christian village concept meant that in that instance the Church attempted to replace but in vain the traditional way of life and its attached customs and values with an alternative value system, that of the Western Christian church, which was touted as more desirable in improving and binding society.

At other times the Church avoided a direct confrontation with native customary practices. In 1885 it was decided to undertake the conversion of the Land Dayaks and Rev. Felix Westerwoudt ventured straight into the heart of Land Dayak country, the longhouse on the slope of the mysterious Mount Singai. Here the people practised a form of religion shrouded in mysticism and dabbled in black magic. During his twelve years stay on Mount Singai, the young priest managed to convert only seven families, built a chapel and established a convent before succumbing to typhoid fever. So beset was the small Catholic community by harassment and hostility from their non-Christian neighbours that the decision was made to move away and start a new settlement at Sagah on the foothill of Mount Singai where a church was constructed and a school started. Gradually the remaining villagers up Mount Singai began to send their children to the Catholic mission schools in Sagah and the surrounding areas. The children learnt catechism in these schools, were converted to Catholicism and in time their parents too joined the Church. Those who converted moved down from Mount Singai until, in time, the whole mountain was completely deserted. All this took place over a long period of time and conversion to Catholicism amongst the Land Dayaks was slow and protracted. In fact it was not until the late 1940s that large numbers of Land Dayaks began to be converted. Today 95% of the Land Dayaks living

in the Mount Singai and Bau regions are Catholics. (Vincent Eddy, 1999, p.66).

Rooney offers an intriguing explanation for the long delay in Catholism making any significant impact upon the Land Dayaks. Their traditional religious system was centered round the *menang*, the priest who performed all the rituals and ceremonies in the village. Challenging the power of the *menang* outright by pointing to an alternative religious system in the Catholic Church would probably have hastened the progress of Catholicism. However the Church was careful not to engage in a direct confrontation with the *menang* and there is no record of any such open conflict between the latter and the Roman Catholic priests. Rather it was the Christian mission schools that contributed to the eventual downfall of the *menang*. Young men who would have qualified as apprentices to the *menang* after an arduous period of learning by rote all the necessary rites and incantations instead began to enroll in schools opened by the European missionaries. Here they were taught a curriculum comprised of reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. Over a period of time there were no longer any qualified *menang* resulting in the creation of a religious vacuum in the Land Dayak community. During this period the Church remained close to the people as "a sympathetic religious presence and was chosen naturally to fill the vacuum". (Rooney, p.117).

It would appear that from the beginning the Church also had to grapple with the problem of finding a criterion to determine the indigenous customs to accept as social obligations and those to reject as pure paganism. Throughout his term in office the first Prefect Apostolic, Rev. Jackson, was taken up with seeking guidance from various quarters on the stand to take on native customary law. He referred the matter to the Mill Hill Society in London but no definitive ruling was forthcoming. Instead the matter was referred to the Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus which in turn could offer no assistance. Thereafter the Prefect consulted scholar after scholar but received

no clear answers or guidelines on the proper course of action to take. Presumably he was seeking a solution that would be acceptable to canon law whilst at the same time accord native customary law the sensitivity and respect it deserved. The issue was never resolved and the Prefect was so troubled over it that he felt completely inadequate as Prefect Apostolic and sought to resign his office (Rooney, p.35).

The foregoing seems to infer that the challenge of inculturation was never taken up by the early Church. Gradually the spread of education and the subsequent creation of a middle class with its acceptance of Christian values of the western church, as an alternative value system meant that the need for inculturation or even a meaningful response to indigenous customs and traditions was no longer an issue for consideration. Henceforth, in keeping with the prevalent missionary understanding then the Church directed all its energies to converting the "heathen" and the erection of a hierarchical Church that leaned heavily on Roman structures of church government.

There is no doubt that in education and the mission schools set up by the early missionaries was the Church's mission of evangelisation most successful. Whilst the Church had no qualms about using these schools as a means of gaining converts and in time many of the Dayak and Chinese students in Catholic mission schools did gradually join the faith. Notwithstanding their obvious Christian character these schools also attracted a significant Muslim enrolment. Surprisingly most Muslim parents insisted that their children attend catechism classes but never with a view to conversion (Rooney, p 159). As a result there grew up a generation of Muslim boys and girls completely at ease in a Catholic atmosphere without ever in danger of compromising their Islamic faith. Thus it was that, whilst the early Christian missionaries in Sarawak failed in their mission of converting the Muslim Malays to Christianity, they succeeded, to some extent, in educating them in Christian

values. Perhaps this contributed as well to cordial Christian-Muslim relations in Sarawak long after the European missionaries left.

The pivotal role assumed by the Church in the fields of education and health services was not matched by the Church's socio-economic efforts which some felt were often "too little and too late" (Rooney, p. 173). It was not a question of insufficient funds being at the disposal of the Church. In 1905, for instance, the Mill Hill Society provided the Borneo mission with a benefice of ten thousand pounds, the bulk of which was channeled into enhancing the investment portfolio of the Church. Hence money was spent in the acquisition of lands, rice mills, sawmills, rubber and pepper gardens. Rooney for one laments that the Church could not see beyond its own needs and realise the missionary importance of improving the economic position of the people. (Rooney, p.174). Yet this is but a reflection of missionary concerns of that age that tended towards the salvation of souls and not economic improvement. It was only in the aftermath of the Second World War and the post-war movements towards decolonisation that organisations such as the Sarawak Catholic Welfare Association were set up by the Church. Even then the Church was mainly motivated by the desire to take advantage of aid provided by a host of international agencies including Caritas Internationalis, Missio, Misereor, Catholic Relief Services and Cafod.

From the foregoing it is obvious that the early Christian missionary agenda of ethnic isolation and denominational zoning in Sarawak was largely decided by the powerful Brooke family and after them by the colonial rulers. This factor both aided and stifled the Church. One is left to ponder if a different Christian story might have unfolded if the Church had pursued its mission without outside interference.

CONCLUSION

Christian mission in the past fell far short of the conqueror Albuquerque's glorious goal of converting the infidels when he first set foot in the Malay world. Neither was the Spanish missionary Cuarteron's flamboyant vision of mission to announce the Gospel in Borneo and the islands around it ever accomplished. From an arrogant start Christianity never did quite shed its image of a foreign religion even to the present day mainly because of its historical links with the era of European expansion and western colonialism. This was in spite of the earnest attempts by missionaries like McDougall and Jackson to approach the customs and traditions of the indigenous communities with respect and humility. The formation of Malaysia in 1963 that enjoined the Malay Peninsula with Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo, brought about a fundamental change in the relationship of the Church with the State. In 1963 too, the Second Vatican Council was to usher in a new way of being church, a process that is still being translated into reality in the Malaysian context. These events were to influence the direction and understanding of Christian mission in this country. A study of the contemporary Malaysian situation and the forces in society which have a bearing upon the Church and its missionary agenda will be the focus of the next chapter.

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A SOCIO-POLITICAL REVIEW OF THE MALAYSIAN SITUATION

INTRODUCTION

Much has changed in the situation in which the Church is placed since the end of the British colonial era and the birth of the Malaysian state in 1963. The creation of a plural society, one of the legacies of the colonial past, brought on a perpetual racial problem as soon as the British left with relations between the ethnic communities often simmering in a state of tension and turmoil. In recent years, Islamisation sponsored by the state has become an increasingly dominant force shaping Malaysian public life bringing in its wake an assertive Islam and further ethnic divisiveness. Regional differences between the peninsula, on the one hand, and Sabah and Sarawak, on the other, have not abated even with the passage of forty years leading to conflicting notions of nation. The constant emphasis on ethnicity, the rise of an Islamic polity and different regional perspectives as regards the attributes that should constitute the Malaysian nation largely define the contemporary socio-political context within which the Church is situated. A study of these social and political forces operative in the Malaysian context will provide the necessary background to a presentation of contemporary concerns of the Christian community and its understanding of Christian mission today.

A PLURAL HISTORY

When the powerful Portuguese army captured Malacca on the southwestern edge of the Malay peninsula in 1511, they found a prosperous city state populated by peoples from all over Asia. Arabs, Chinese (Muslim and non-Muslim), Indian Muslims and Hindus, tribal animists, some Christians and even visitors from distant Japan converged to “the Venice of Asia”, as Malacca was then known, to trade in rice, precious metals and most important, spices. With the exception of Christianity, it was commerce not military

expeditions that brought the world religions to the Malay- Indonesian archipelago. Hinduism and Buddhism arrived in the first centuries of the common era. Islam began to spread from the thirteenth century onwards and by the seventeenth century it was established as the religion of the region. From the beginning, therefore, the major Asian civilizations and great world religions have interacted in a plural setting giving Malaysia a long history of cosmopolitan roots (Embong, 2001, p 60).

By the 1850s the Malay Peninsula was almost singularly inhabited by the Malays apart from the aboriginal tribes (collectively grouped under the term *orang asli*). Most of the Malays had originally come from Sumatra and the Celebes and settled by the banks of rivers along the coast. The rivers became their principal means of communication and their source of food. A majority of them were engaged in rice cultivation on the fertile plains stretching from the foothills of the central range to the coast and were content with maintaining, by and large, a sedentary agricultural lifestyle. Around 1860 the demographic landscape changed drastically with the discovery of new tin fields. As a consequence of rising world demand for the ore it was necessary to look for labourers overseas to work the mines. Chinese immigrants provided the much needed work force and the mid nineteenth century saw a great influx of Chinese to Malaya. However, the Chinese always considered their stay in Malaya as transient and hence did not interact with the Malays. Indeed the majority of these immigrants were motivated by a desire to grow rich and then to return to China with their wealth. Chinese political activity in Malaya was also influenced by events in China rather than in Malaya. Like the Chinese, Indian immigrants began arriving in large numbers in the early twentieth century to work in coffee plantations and rubber estates. Again the Indian population remained largely transitory as the majority of the Indian workers returned to India annually only to be replaced by a new batch of workers.

By treaty the Malays had a special position and the safeguarding of this position was the responsibility of the British. Since the Malays were considered to be economically backward as compared to the Chinese and deserving of assistance from the colonial government a pro-Malay affirmative action policy was initiated. At the same time, the transitory character of the immigrant Chinese and Indians and the insular nature of their existence meant that they took little interest in local politics and were content to leave the ruling of the country to the Malays even though they resented Malay authority (Mahathir Mohamed, 1970, p.26). In any event, the slightest indication of Sino-Malay antagonism was quickly suppressed under the might and authority of the British colonial regime. As long as the Malays remained in their *kampungs* or villages in the rural districts and tended to their crops, the Chinese in the tin mines and towns where they specialized in trade and commerce and the Indians in the estates and plantations, the task of governing the country was rendered relatively easier for the British. Given this division of labour, each racial group had its own economic function in the colonial economy (Wan Hashim, 1983, p.62). The evolution and consolidation of racial categories in this country and the reconstruction of the plural Malayan society thus began with the divide and rule policies of the British during the colonial era. The introduction of laws like the Malay Reservation Act, the setting up of a Department of Chinese Affairs and the special government-approved toddy shops for the Indians further served to emphasise the point at the grassroots level that racial categories such as Malay, Chinese and Indian mattered very much if one was to take advantage of what the colonial bureaucracy had to offer (Shamsul, 1996, p.14). As such the situation developed into one of ethnic segregation and the demographic reality of colonial society in British Malaya was said to resemble that of multiple ethnic colonies (Lee, 1986, p 30). About the only thing the various ethnic communities had in common was the fact that they lived in the same country.

Upon their return to Malaya after the Second World War, the British proceeded to introduce a series of political proposals aimed at setting up a Malayan Union. These were prepared in London by the Colonial Office Planning Unit during the war years without consulting the Malay rulers. Perhaps the most controversial proposal was as regards the issue of citizenship. A Malayan Union citizenship was created which gave equal rights to members of all races. Faced with the prospect of losing their special political status and of being displaced by the three million immigrant Chinese and Indians, the Malays vociferously opposed these proposals (Ryan, 1971, p.229). The result was an unprecedented aggressive display of Malay nationalism. In March 1946, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was founded supposedly due to "the Malay fear of losing out to the Chinese" (Mahathir Mohamed, p.10). Confronted by rising racial tension and harsh criticism by the British Parliament itself, the Malayan Union proposals were hastily withdrawn. Even though the Malayan Union Plan was abandoned, the need to frame an acceptable formula to meet the changing political situation in Malaya still remained. The immigrant Chinese and Indians had by then become permanent residents and sought to secure their future by demanding rights they considered were due to them as residents of the country. This demand for rights by the non-Malays made the Malays even more determined to safeguard their special position as indigenous dwellers of the land. The British saw the urgent need to work out some political arrangement which would grant the immigrant communities status in Malaya without compromising the rights of the Malays. In 1948 a new constitution was proposed establishing a federation rather than a union. Whilst a common form of citizenship still prevailed under the new constitution, the method of acquiring citizenship was made more stringent than that under the Malayan Union plan. Most importantly, the special rights of the Malays remained intact under the new constitution.

The Malayan Union proposals brought into the open the true nature of Malay-non-Malay relationship in post-war Malaya. For the first time and in spite of the best efforts of the British, Sino-Malay antagonism and resentment threatened to ignite the political field. The situation was further exacerbated by the growing influence of the Malayan Communist Party amongst the Chinese. With the rise of Communist China and the inclination of the Chinese in Malaya to be swayed by political events in the country of their origin, the Malayan Communist Party quickly became a Chinese dominated party though it made little inroads into the Indian and Malay communities (Ryan, p.234). When the Malayan Communist Party attempted to take over the government of each of the Malay states, bloody Sino-Malay clashes were precipitated. Only the swift imposition of a state of emergency and the formidable presence of the British Military Administration averted such a catastrophe from erupting (Mahathir Mohamed, p.7).

From 1948 until after independence was attained in 1957 Communist insurgents infiltrated the Chinese-dominated Malayan Communist Party. The ensuing protracted struggle against the communists brought with it the realisation that the Chinese community had become alienated from the rest of Malayan society. The Malays, in particular, viewed the loyalty of the three million Chinese and Indian immigrants in the country as rather dubious (Ryan, p.229). In an attempt to break the insular existence of the Chinese, the British launched the Briggs Plan. This involved the resettlement of some 400,000 Chinese squatters living in remote isolated areas on land to which they had no title or ownership, a situation that began with the displacement of Chinese workers during the economic slump of the early 1930s and grew steadily worse with the Japanese Occupation that followed. It was these squatters living away from towns and villages along the fringes of the jungle who were coerced into supplying food, medicine, money and information to the Communist insurgents. Under the Briggs Plan, Chinese squatters were resettled in “new villages”. For the first time about 500,000 people, mostly

Chinese, were brought back to live in settled communities and came into contact with the government and ostensibly with the mainstream of society. As it turned out, the success of the Briggs Plan was a major factor contributing to the eventual defeat of the Communist uprising in post war Malaya (Ryan, p.239).

Once resettled in the new villages the British went about attending to the "rehabilitation" of the Chinese community. Interestingly, one of the measures taken in this direction was the considerable effort expended in encouraging Christian missionaries forced out of Communist China to come to Malaya to help "win the hearts and minds" of the thousands of resettled Chinese. Government financial aid was promised to missionary bodies engaged in educational and medical work. However neither the Vatican nor the Bishop of Malacca were particularly impressed with British efforts in this direction. Likewise the other Christian churches were also not persuaded and refused to have anything to do with government sponsorship. Nevertheless it would appear that the Christian Church did make some effort to address the needs of the new villages described by some as being no better than concentration camps (Roxborogh, 1989, p 11). During this period new batches of priests and religious of different Orders arrived at the invitation of the local Church adding variety to the missionary scene (Chew, 2000, p.118). Indeed the arrival of new denominations and missions including American Lutherans, Southern Baptists, the Church Missionary Society and China Inland Mission, which subsequently changed its name to Overseas Missionary Fellowship, contributed to the largest influx of missionary personnel to Malaya (Roxborogh, p 11). However, there is little to indicate if the British effort to win the hearts and minds of the Chinese community through the Christian faith and Christian missionaries bore much success. Chew quotes the case of the Jinjang New Village in Kuala Lumpur. In 1952 there were three Catholic families and by 1980 the Catholic population had increased to a modest one hundred and twenty families (Chew, p.118). The crux of the matter was that

since the population of these new villages was overwhelmingly Chinese, only Chinese speaking missionary workers ventured into and worked in this new mission field. On the whole it was observed that support for new village work from existing churches in Malaya was not as forthcoming as might have been hoped. It therefore should come as no surprise that the problem of ethnic alienation, which in the first place led to the setting up of the new villages, was never quite resolved and neither the government nor the Church seemed quite in possession of the requisite ability and sustained determination to overcome it.

With the communist threat effectively contained other concerns gained priority particularly the desire to secure political independence from Britain. For once the various ethnic communities in Malaya were united in working towards a common goal. Indeed it has been suggested that only during this period immediately preceding independence was there some semblance of harmony between the races (Mahathir Mohamed, p.8). The same observation was made by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of independent Malaya, when he noted that "for generations past the three races had led differing lives, living together in the same land but separately" resulting in each race being "wary of the others, each wished to preserve its own identity, safeguard its own interests". Such grim realities only changed with "the Elections victory" in 1955 that "brought mountains of understanding between the various races" (Tunku Abdul Rahman, pp.44, 51). This was the period of the rise of Malayan nationalism that led the Chinese and the Malays to cooperate politically. Hence an "alliance" was forged between the Malayan Chinese Association, an anti-communist political party formed originally in 1949 as an organisation to do welfare work in the new villages, and the Malay party, UMNO, in order to take part in the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Elections. The success of this alliance led to further political cooperation at state and federal elections. Subsequently the Malayan Indian Congress joined the other

two parties to form the Alliance Party representing the three major ethnic communities (Ryan, p.245).

It was within this political alliance comprising Chinese, Malays and Indians that thorny issues relating to the status of the Malay rulers, the special position of the Malays, citizenship and national language were settled in a genuine spirit of racial cooperation. The Alliance Party was understandably anxious to avoid turning such issues into cause for racial strife as it did with the introduction of the Malayan Union proposals. Eventually the memorandum submitted by the Alliance Party to the Commonwealth Commission, which was established with the task of drawing up a constitution, formed the basis of the Malayan Constitution in 1957.

One of the points of agreement reached between the racial partners of the Alliance was that special privileges should be given to the Malays for a period of ten years after independence to enable them to improve their economic position. Furthermore it was agreed that the national language of independent Malaya would be ultimately Malay but until 1967 both Malay and English were to be official languages. At the same time the realities of a plural society could not be ignored and the future prospects of non-Malays had to be considered. Therefore the general consensus was that citizenship was to be as a matter of right for all those born in Malaya after independence regardless of ethnic origins whilst some of the qualifications for obtaining citizenship for those already residing in Malaya were to be relaxed for a limited period after Malaya became independent (Ryan, p.249).

On 5 August 1957 the Federation of Malaya Agreement was signed in Kuala Lumpur by the rulers of the Malay states and the High Commissioner representing the British monarch and paved the way for the creation of Malaya as an independent state. The new federation comprised all the Malay states in the Peninsula as well as two of the three former British Straits

Settlements, Penang and Malacca. The third Straits Settlement of Singapore was pointedly excluded from the Malayan federation. One of reasons for the decision to let Singapore exist as a separate Crown Colony was Malay reservations about Singapore's overwhelming Chinese population which would tilt the racial balance in the Malay Peninsula in favour of the non-Malays specifically the Chinese (Ryan, p.252). Yet such reservations appeared to have been swept aside in the face of a different set of political considerations prevailing when Singapore joined Malaya and the former British territories of Sabah and Sarawak to form the Malaysian state in 1963.

RATIONALE FOR MERGER

Even before the Prime Minister of Malaya first broached the notion of Malaysia at a press luncheon speech in Singapore on 27 May 1961, the possibility of a political merger had already been discussed informally amongst the parties.

Since 1959 the Communist cause appeared to be gaining the upper hand in Singapore politics. The People's Action Party (PAP) government of Lee Kuan Yew was beset by security and political woes arising from the threat posed by a breakaway group of left-wing extremists coming together under the banner of the Socialist Front. Merger with Malaya seemed to offer the best solution to overcoming this deteriorating situation at least for the beleaguered PAP government. As for the Malayans, the possibility of a communist dominated Singapore evoked unhappy memories of the Emergency years and heightened anxieties of Communism spreading through South East Asia. In order to retard the spread of Communism the Malayan government was prepared to cast aside its longstanding reservations and explore the possibility of a political association with Singapore. However, as soon as this idea was hatched the Malay leaders in the Alliance Party were confronted with opposition from amongst its Malay followers to the idea of absorbing the one and a quarter million Chinese in Singapore. It was in these circumstances that the Borneo

territories with their substantial non-Chinese population provided a way out to ensure that the racial balance would not be in favour of the Chinese (Ryan, p 262).

By 1960 the Borneo territories of North Borneo and Sarawak were amongst Britain's last colonial responsibilities in South East Asia and the British Government evinced a desire to grant independence to all its colonial territories as soon as "they are ready for it" (*The Birth of Malaysia*, 1995, Appendix E, p.104). Initially, independence for each of the territories by itself or in association with each other was contemplated. But this option was later abandoned. The British government was of the opinion that an independent North Borneo would be plunged into a turbulent and predatory world facing a precarious future on its own. Likewise the British subscribed to the view that, by itself, an independent Sarawak, already immersed in battling a clandestine communist army, would be doomed to "a perilous existence as a small defenseless country in a large and predatory world" (*The Birth of Malaysia*, p.111). It was then that the British and Malayan governments began to explore as a "desirable aim" the creation of a Federation of Malaysia comprising the eleven states of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei (*The Birth of Malaysia*, p.108). The British government was particularly bent on bringing the merger proposal to fruition having convinced themselves that "from the standpoint of economic development and in general of the future welfare and happiness of their peoples the best hope of the Borneo territories lies in their forming part of a larger unit". A further justification advanced in support of the Malaysia concept was that "the peoples of Malaya and Borneo have cultural, economic and historical ties which make them fit naturally together as a group" (*The Birth of Malaysia*, p.104). Such rationale appeared at odds with the actual situation in hand given the historical fact that in the years preceding 1963 there had been little contact between the peoples of Malaya and the Borneo territories. Furthermore, the economies of the three parties were "non-complementary" and looked beyond one another towards

London (Pairin, 1986, p 12). These circumstances lend credence to the opinion that there seemed to be no compelling reasons for North Borneo and Sarawak to join the proposed Malaysian federation. It would appear that the deciding factor was the desire of the British to ensure that their economic and strategic interests in the region remained intact. At the same time the demand for political and constitutional independence could also be met (Chandra Muzaffar, 1986, p29).

Once agreement on the formation of a Malaysian federation was reached in principle between the British and Malayan government, a Commission of Enquiry with Lord Cobbold as chairman was constituted to ascertain the views of the peoples of North Borneo and Sarawak.

In the paper issued by the Government of North Borneo in February 1962 it was noted that there had been strong criticism in the local English and Chinese press of the concept of Malaysia. Generally opinions tended to run on racial and communal lines. The Malays in Sarawak and the Muslim indigenous peoples of North Borneo were in favour of joining up with Malaya to form Malaysia. On the other hand the Chinese in both territories were not amiable to the concept of Malaysia. Most Chinese harboured various fears of discrimination against them as an ethnic group particularly in the acquisition of Federal citizenship (Cobbold Commission Report, 1962, paragraphs 75, 77 and 123). As far as the non-Muslim indigenous racial groups were concerned, there were genuine fears of Malay domination. Such apprehension stemmed from the unhappy relationship they had in the past with the Malay rulers of the Muslim sultanate of Brunei when Sarawak came under its domain and their fear of its return with the new Federation (Cobbold Commission Report, paras. 23, 178). Generally the indigenous peoples of both territories were acutely conscious of their economic inferiority and disadvantage as compared to the other races. Even amongst those in favour of Malaysia there was unanimity that special privileges should be accorded them and that their

position in Malaysia should be analogous to that of the Malays in Malaya. There was general consensus too that economic development should be accelerated and increased attention paid to education with particular reference to the needs of the natives. Great emphasis was also laid on the need to safeguard customary rights and practices (Cobbold Commission Report, paras.35 & 112). Still, some from the indigenous communities were to remain steadfastly skeptical of the concept of Malaysia. These included a certain number of Ibans, the largest indigenous group in Sarawak. Being primarily a rural community, some Ibans expressed fears that their relative backwardness and inexperience might placed them in a position of disadvantage as compared to the more advanced and sophisticated Malays. There were misgivings too that a large proportion of Sarawak's revenue would be handed over to the Federal Government without a corresponding return in the shape of services to the people of Sarawak (Cobbold Commission Report, para. 46).

An examination of the findings made by the Commission in the course of its inquiry points to the position of religion as a major bone of contention between the Muslims and non-Muslims. Both the Governments of North Borneo and Sarawak subscribed to the view that neither territory should be required to accept Islam as the State religion since there was no established religion thus far in either state. (*North Borneo and Malaysia*, 1962, paragraph 10 and *Malaysia and Sarawak*, 1962, para.15). The Cobbold Commission noted that feelings on this point ran stronger than even those touching on matters of language, name and head of the proposed Federation.

There was no doubt whatsoever that all Muslims in the two Borneo territories would welcome a provision that Islam should be the national religion of Malaysia. But the Chairman and the two British members of the Commission expressed concern that even with guarantees of freedom of religion there was strong resistance from many non-Muslim communities to the idea that the existing Malayan constitutional provision on Islam as the national religion

should be applied to the Borneo states. Accordingly and in deference to the fact that both territories have a non-Muslim majority, the British members recommended that the matter be best left to the peoples of North Borneo and Sarawak to decide for themselves at a later stage when fully elected representative bodies would have been constituted. However, a different stand was adopted by the remaining two Malayan members of the Commission even though they too acknowledged that there were "genuine and understandable fears" of Malay domination and Muslim subjugation stemming from the proposal that Islam should be the official religion (Cobbold Commission Report, para.178). Their observation was that a substantial number of the non-Muslims who appeared before the Commission were satisfied with the provisions for fundamental liberties and freedom of religion in the Malayan Constitution. Going on that premise they presumed that this same substantial number would not object to the existing practice in Malaya on Islam as the national religion. As for a number of non-Muslims who were most anxious that there should be no national religion for Malaysia, the Malayan members took the view that these non-Muslims would, nonetheless, be prepared to consider that Islam might be made the national religion provided that it should not be the religion of their particular state. Such a line of reasoning led the Malayan members to eventually throw in their lot with those in favour of the proposal that Islam should retain its status as the national religion for the new federation. Their response to fears expressed that such a position would place the right of freedom of religion in jeopardy was to assure that in effect Malaysia would be a secular state and not a theocracy (Cobbold Commission Report, paragraph 148(e)(i) & (ii)).[2] The recommendation of the Malayan members was subsequently adopted and the position of Islam as the religion of the federation was entrenched in the new constitution. At the same time,

[2] It would appear that there was a pointed effort made here to separate religion from the state in order that the interests of non-Muslim citizens of Malaysia would not be jeopardized. Religious freedom that allows the practice of one's own religion is accepted as an important attribute of a secular and democratic state. However, this has not prevented the Prime Minister from describing Malaysia as an Islamic state in a public speech at a political gathering in 2001.

freedom of religion was affirmed as one of the fundamental liberties though the right to propagate one's faith was subject to restrictions.

Whilst religion proved to be a divisive subject, there was a significant degree of solidarity amongst all ethnic groups in matters touching on immigration, Borneanisation of public services and political representation.[3] All races supported the move to place immigration into the Borneo states from other territories of the proposed Federation under the control of the respective State authorities. This was primarily to preempt any large scale migration of peoples from Malaya and Singapore to the Borneo states that would mean taking undue advantage of land and opportunities available to the detriment of the peoples of North Borneo and Sarawak (Cobbold Commission Report, paras. 36, 112). Members of the Commission of Enquiry concurred with the need to provide the Borneo states with some form of protection against unrestricted movement of people from other parts of the Federation. In view of the small population of the two states in relation to their size the Commission recommended that the question of entry from any other Malaysian territory to North Borneo or Sarawak should be subject to the control of the state concerned rather than the federal government, (Cobbold Commission Report, para.148(g)). Consequently, the Immigration Act of 1963 which came into effect simultaneously with the creation of Malaysia vested upon the Borneo states the power to control immigration into these States not only of aliens but also citizens from other states in the federation.

It would appear that the proposals for Malaysia brought a new dimension to political life in North Borneo and Sarawak. This was the emergence of the trend towards regional politics prompted by fears of being rendered politically marginalised and economically subservient. Presumably the considerable

[3] The term "Borneanisation" referred to the policy as regards places in the Public Services in Sarawak and North Borneo, then occupied by expatriates. Eventually, when these places were vacated, they should preferably be filled by natives of both territories rather than Malaysians from the peninsula.

geographical distance between the Borneo territories and the centre of the Federation in Kuala Lumpur raised serious concerns that the interests of the territories might be overlooked or given too little weight (Cobbold Commission Report, para.118(e)). Even though the combined population of North Borneo and Sarawak then was only 17.5 per cent of the population of Malaya, the combined geographical area of the two states is approximately one and a half times the size of Malaya. The point was made that size alone justified special treatment and that due consideration be given to the "strong desire everywhere expressed" in both states that their representation in the Federal Parliament should take account not only of their populations but also of their size and potentialities (Cobbold Commission Report, para. 190(g)). When the Malaysia agreement was finally signed in London in July 1963, 104 seats in the new federal Parliament were allocated to the eleven states of Malaya, 24 to Sarawak, 16 to Sabah and 15 to Singapore.

The regional slant in the response to the concept of Malaysia is further accentuated in the push towards Borneanisation rather than Malaysianisation and the emphasis on regionalism instead of federalism. Thus one of the points which Malay opinion in Sarawak attached great importance was their demand that Borneanisation of the public services should be accelerated with the imminent creation of Malaysia. The Commission of Enquiry readily acceded to such demands and responded by recommending that Borneanisation of the public services should proceed as quickly as possible. Furthermore they called for every effort to be made to encourage British officers to remain in the service "until their places can be taken by qualified people from the Borneo territories" (Cobbold Commission Report, para. 148(i) & (j)). As far as Federal posts and services in the two Borneo States were concerned, the recommendation was that these should be regionalised. This would mean that each Federal department should have a regional head in Borneo with sufficient authority to deal with local problems.

The Commission also appeared mindful of regional sentiments when it ventured into the delicate area of finance and revenue. There was no doubt that the central government should be endowed with necessary powers to ensure the maintenance of a sound and stable economy. Nevertheless the Commission could foresee that this would lead to and must inevitably give rise to "a feeling" that much of the revenue earned at present by the state would be retained by the central Treasury. The situation therefore warranted the extension of certain unequivocal assurances and safeguards to the states by the central government. One of the measures recommended in this direction by the Commission was to strongly urge the working out of a formula whereby the new states would be assured of an annual grant such that the total revenue of the state after the addition of this grant would generally meets its total expenditure (Cobbold Commission Report, paras. 216, 217).

After holding a series of fifty hearings at thirty five different centres throughout Sarawak and North Borneo between February and April 1962, the Commission concluded that " a Federation of Malaysia is an attractive and workable project and is in the best interests of the Borneo territories" (Cobbold Commission Report, para. 237). In summing up the various recommendations, Lord Cobbold however cautioned that there was a necessary condition attached for ensuring the future success of the proposed new state. Such success hinged on the need by all concerned to view Malaysia as an association of partners retaining their own individualities rather than a take-over of the Borneo territories by Malaya.

On 16th September 1963, the new state of Malaysia comprising Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah came into existence. Almost immediately there were threats from within and without. The external dangers were posed by the Indonesian campaign to crush Malaysia and the Philippines' claim to the state of Sabah. However it was the internal threat that posed the greater concern.

Barely a year after the creation of Malaysia, the sceptre of racial discord reared its ugly head once more. This time the issue of Malay rights was raised by the Chief Minister of Singapore. He declared that Singapore had never agreed to Malay rule when it joined Malaysia but rather agreed only to Malaysian rule. The abolition of Malay rights was necessary if there was going to be a Malaysian-Malaysia. (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1977, p.122). Inter-communal tension soon struck a high note. The central government found it an increasingly arduous task to rein in the PAP government in Singapore, which showed no inclination to tone down its anti-Malay rhetorics. With friction escalating between an increasingly irate Kuala Lumpur and a persistently defiant Singapore the Malaysian Prime Minister suggested that it would be in the interests of both Malaya and Singapore if the latter left the Federation and became an independent state. Apparently pressure was exerted on the Chief Minister of Singapore to agree to this suggestion and he finally, albeit reluctantly, did so in August 1965. Thus it was that after a mere two years, Singapore ceased to be part of Malaysia (Ryan, p. 269). Perhaps this was not an altogether unexpected turn of events since on hindsight the concept of Malaysia seemed an attempt to find a solution to too many problems at the same time (Cobbold Commission Report, p.263).

In present day Malaysia issues revolving round race, religion and regionalism still hold sway and have in fact become entrenched in Malaysian public life. The situation appears to have deteriorated somewhat if one takes into consideration the ethnic riots of 1969, the instances of religious tension alongside accelerated Islamisation and an upsurge in regional sentiments.

RECONSTRUCTING MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

The outbreak of racial violence on May 13,1969 was the turning point in ethnic relations in this country.

In the campaign period leading to the 1969 general elections much of the focus was on the distribution of political and economic privileges among the ethnic groups. The outcome of the elections was a reduced majority for the ruling Alliance Party and an increase in the number of seats won by the non-Malay opposition parties. This made the latter bolder in voicing their anti-Malay sentiments culminating in the staging of victory parades in the streets of Kuala Lumpur that were abusive to the Malays (Lee, 1986, pp. 33,34). The result was the racial riots on May 13, 1969 that left at least 200 dead and over a thousand injured in the capital, the majority of them Chinese. More violence on 28 June claimed over a dozen Indian lives and further damage to property (Amyn B Sajoo, 1994, p. 45).

In the aftermath of the May 13th racial crisis, a new Malay political leadership rose to power bringing with it a firm resolve to translate Malay constitutional privileges into actual policies (Lee, p. 34). Many Malays felt that the failure to correct some of the perceived economic deficiencies of the existing political order was the real cause of the racial unrest of 1969. The outcome was the launching of the New Economic Policy (NEP) popularly known as the *Bumiputra* (literally "sons of the earth") Policy in the early seventies aimed principally at the ethnic restructuring of Malaysian society. In a sense the NEP continued the policy of pro-Malay affirmative action first introduced by the British colonial government. The term *bumiputra* has become synonymous with "Malay" even though the indigenous tribal communities of Sabah and Sarawak are officially also categorized as bumiputras. This is evident from the emphasis on Malay identity on matters of policy and practice including civil service appointments in both states (Amyn B Sajoo, p. 49). Specifically the NEP was framed to promote the creation of a commercial and industrial community among Malays and other indigenous people in order that, within one generation, they will own and manage at least 30% of the total commercial and industrial activities of the country in all categories and scales of operation (*Mid Term Review of the Second Malaysian Plan 1971-1975*,

1973, pp. 61-62). It was argued that earlier economic or socio-psychological handicaps experienced by Malays should be balanced by special rights and ethnic preference policies so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function (Means, 1991, p 311). Hence large-scale economic concessions were accorded to the Malays in the form of scholarships, housing preferences, employment and business opportunities (Lee, p 34). It is an often forgotten fact that the NEP was also intended to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty among all Malaysians but in practice this goal was clearly overshadowed by its ethnic restructuring objective.

The implementation of the NEP has had a deep impact upon Malaysian society. It has largely succeeded in its aim to restructure society: a Malay-Muslim middle class has emerged. As far as the economically strong and pragmatic Chinese community is concerned, the affirmative action programmes of the NEP have not apparently diminished their capitalist and middle classes. This is largely due to the fact that the Malay-dominated state has generally been market-friendly and actively promoted market growth even when implementing the NEP programmes. Economic growth and market expansion have, therefore, allowed the Chinese to expand its middle class as well (Embong, 2001, p. 61). All these developments have led some to take the optimistic view that a multiethnic class speaking the language of inclusion and civility is taking shape. A new political culture that nurtures universal values such as human rights, democracy and interfaith cooperation is a distinct possibility (Embong, p. 81).

Yet there is no denying that for most non-Malays, the NEP and the ethnic preference system is an open and blatant form of racial discrimination (Means, 1991, p. 313). A further charge leveled against the manner of its implementation is that of bureaucratic racism to refer to the unhealthy practice amongst some bumiputra bureaucrats of resorting to the NEP to intimidate non-bumiputras, to relax the enforcement of rules and to lower academic

standards (Lim Keng Yaik, 1986, p 22). The resultant non-Malay resentment has inevitably contributed to the widening of the Malay/non-Malay chasm. It is widely held that whilst the NEP has succeeded in giving new opportunities to Malays the gap between the rich and the poor has grown within each ethnic community (Means, p. 312). Even amongst the Malays criticism has been directed against the government's role in incubating a Malay capitalist class which might ultimately become the exploiters of their own race (Wan Hashim, 1983,p 87). The Malay-led government, on its part, appears to have come to realize that overdependence on privileges and subsidies for the Malays may prove to be self-destructive, disabling them from facing new challenges ahead especially in a global environment (Lim, 2003, p 9). All this points to a clear dissatisfaction across Malaysian society over the NEP and its implementation (Shamsul, 1996, p 26).

A major off-shoot of the NEP was the New Education Policy (NEDP) which was essentially the implementation of the educational policy of Malaya as embodied in the Education Ordinance of 1957. The main thrust of the NEDP was to make Malay the medium of instruction in schools. This was supposed to have been implemented in 1967 as part of the Malayan educational policy to enable Malays who were educated through the Malay medium to take up better employment than to be just teachers, clerks, peons, typists or the lower ranks of the police and armed forces. However, the Alliance government failed to implement this policy "satisfactorily", a failure that led some quarters to charge that the government back in 1967 then was indecisive (Wan Hashim, p 72). After the May 13th riots, all schools started using Malay as the medium of instruction starting from Standard One and then proceeding to Standard Two the subsequent year and so forth. The active pursuance of the NEDP saw many Malay youths and students furthering their education up to the tertiary level both at home and overseas.

Even as more Malays became better educated, their commitment to Islam increased. For Malay youths educated overseas, a sense of disillusionment and sometimes revulsion against Western liberal values and lifestyle developed. Those educated in local universities had to cope with the change of language emphasis from English to Malay with its attendant conflicts and doubts over the efficacy and utility of the Malay language compared to English. In this situation a "return" to Islam offered a way out of their predicament and frustration (Hussin Mutalib, 1993, p28). At the same time there was a general uneasiness among the various ethnic communities and a growing disenchantment afflicting both Malays and non-Malays over the inadequacy of the existing political system particularly in fostering equitable and harmonious inter-ethnic relations. Following the 1969 riots the government had in fact made concerted efforts to form and shape public attitudes and beliefs. The pursuit of national unity became the order of the day. A Department of National Unity was set up. The need to preserve national unity was deemed justification enough for the enactment of legislation such as the amendments to the Sedition Act of 1970 which defined as seditious and therefore punishable any public discussion or questioning of Malay special rights and the common right to citizenship. But the most significant enterprise has to be the drawing up of a National Ideology or *Rukun Negara* which was propagated as embodying the country's original "Social Compact" or basic political agreements worked out by the first leaders of the ruling Alliance Party (Means, p 292).

The *Rukun Negara* sets forth five principles: belief in God, loyalty to King and country, upholding the Constitution, rule of law and good behaviour and morality. Parallel with the five stated principles was a declaration that the Malaysian nation was "dedicated", *inter alia*, to achieving a greater unity of all her people, maintaining a democratic way of life and creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation should be equally shared. It further declared that Malaysia is committed to "a liberal society in which its members are free

to practise and profess their own religions, customs and cultures consistent with the requirements of national unity" (Amyn B. Sajoo, 1994, p 46). Whilst the national ideology was expressly aimed at national unity and integration in the critical days following the 1969 breakdown in racial relations its implicit intent was to promote political consensus, legitimize authority and thus to strengthen the *status quo* (Wan Hashim, pp. 90-92). At the time of its formulation the *Rukun Negara* was touted as representing the minimum consensus necessary to sustain social order and foster polite communal relations. By the early 1980s, however, these assumptions to reduce social conflict had changed. Some political parties were aggressively offering a non-ethnic style of politics revolving round the establishment of an Islamic state which promised to be just and equitable to all irrespective of race or religion as an alternative to the government's secular, ethnic-nationalistic political system (Hussin Mutalib, p. 38). This meant that for a substantial number of dissatisfied Muslims, Islam, at least at the emotive level, began to be perceived as a viable alternative solution to many of the problems inundating the country. The ground was thus laid for the movement towards Islamic revivalism in contemporary Malaysia to take root.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MALAYSIAN ISLAM

In Malaysia two factors have hastened the advent of Islam as a dominant force in the political and religious arenas: political conflict within the Malay-Muslim community and a resurgence of Islam around the world generally and within South East Asia specifically.

By 1974 the government had begun to initiate measures aimed at neutralizing the rising threat of student dissension and in 1975 amendments were made to the draconian Universities and University Colleges Act to control the political activities of student dissidents on university campuses (Lee, 1988, p 401). Shortly after that the *dakwah* movement began to manifest itself in the activities of Muslim organisations throughout the country. In particular,

dakwah culture flourished in the midst of the disillusionment and dissatisfaction permeating university campuses. Perhaps the most influential and respectable of *dakwah* organisations was the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement or ABIM led by Anwar Ibrahim, a former student activist leader and political detainee. ABIM soon acquired a reputation as an Islamic body with strong anti-establishment leanings. This was perhaps not totally unexpected since the *dakwah* movement was largely confined to the urban centres and drew its members from alienated Malay youths and dissatisfied Malay professionals (Lee, 1988, pp. 401,402). The Arabic word *dakwah* literally means "to call to action" and *dakwah* groups such as Jamaat Tabligh and Darul Arqam were missionary in outlook and chiefly concerned with changing individuals and society to become more faithful to Islam according to their interpretation of Islam (Barton, 2002, p 95). The consequence of all such *dakwah* activities was a resurgent Islam and a clear push for more Islam in the country. Obviously it was a demand that politicians and non-Muslims could not ignore.

In 1981 Dr Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister and, under his stewardship, the era of Islamisation commenced. Notwithstanding his earlier communal inclinations, Mahathir's "Islamic" bias became obvious as soon as he assumed office (Hussin Mutalib, 1993, p. 30). His government was confronted with two main issues and both were associated with Islam: Islamic resurgence as expressed through the *dakwah* movement and the threat posed by the Malay religious opposition led by the Islamic political party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS.

Inasfar as the *dakwah* phenomenon was concerned, Mahathir's approach was one that oscillated between co-optation and coercion. Perhaps the most spectacular example of the successful appropriation of the method of cooptation was when Mahathir persuaded Annuar Ibrahim from ABIM to crossover and join his government in 1982 (Lee, 1988, p 402). Almost

simultaneously the government began to accede to the earlier demands of ABIM. An Islamic bank and an Islamic university were set up and Mahathir launched his famous "Look East" policy which included for a time the "Buy British Last" stance. A *Dakwah* Foundation was established to co-ordinate all *dakwah* activities throughout the country and an announcement made of a big plan to develop "Islamic villages' in the cities beginning with Kuala Lumpur in 1988. Under the "National Culture Policy" non-Malay cultures were acceptable as long as such cultures were deemed to be not against the teachings of Islam (Hussin Mutalib, p 31). All these indicated an alignment with the Islamic revivalist trend and a rejection of the West (Barton, p. 115). At the same time the government moved in quickly to quell Islamic groups perceived to be either deviationist in orientation or held accountable for the spread of Islamic dissent. Thus in 1994 the authorities officially banned the *dakwah* group, Darul Arquam, which had grown increasingly critical of the government and had a strong following among the Malay youth (Barton, p. 109). Earlier on in 1985 coercion too was employed in the arrest of a dissident Muslim leader in the infamous Memali episode which ended in a shootout that left eighteen people dead (Lee, 1988, p 402).

Apart from the *dakwah* issue, Mahathir's attempt to out-wit the Islamic party, PAS, in their legitimacy quest for Malay- Muslim votes prompted to a large extent his government's supportive policies in favour of Islam (Hussin Mutalib, p 32). The long-standing political rivalry between Mahathir's party, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and PAS has perpetually revolved around the issue of the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia. As a result, UMNO, which is the dominant political party in the government, developed its own Islamic programs to meet the challenges of PAS (Lee, p.401). In 1984 Mahathir declared his intention to Islamise government machinery. He also resolved to revise the national legal system to make it more in line with Islamic law. There were clear policy shifts in matters involving education and the economy such as the policy-declarations to re-

model Malaysia's economic system to an Islamic one. In addition there was a sharp increase in programmes about Islam over the state's radio and television (Hussin Mutalib, p 30). The "Islamicity race" between UMNO and its political opponents notably PAS up to the present day means that each tries to prove themselves more Islamic than the other (Barton, p 119). Thus much of what happens in Malaysian society today with reference to Islam has some political purpose or origin (Barton, p. 121). The result is an Islam politicized (Hussin Mutalib, p. 34).

As a consequence of the government's Islamisation policies Malaysian public life has become increasingly Islamic in character (Lee, 1988, p. 405). But Islamisation brings with it a further complication to the already fragile state of race relations. The Islamisation programmes of the government have always been interpreted as benefiting exclusively only one racial group of the Malaysian society, namely, the Malays. This has generated a sense of acute alarm and anxiety among the non-Malays even though Mahathir himself has assured that Islamisation is not intended to convert non-Muslims to Islam. The perception still persists that the entire process of Islamisation can only lead to an ominous encroachment upon the rights of non- Muslims as well as a further tightening of the already strong political control of the country by Malays (Hussin Mutalib, p. 107). All this means that as far as race relations are concerned Islamisation is likely to cause greater divisiveness between the Malays and non-Malays (Lee, 1988, p. 415).

The rise of Islamic resurgence has been matched by religious revivalism in the non-Muslim religions as well in contemporary Malaysia. This development may simply be a matter of coincidence given the fact that such revivalism seems to be part of a global revivalist event. However, the fact remains that the growth of non-Muslim revivalist movements has been accelerated in the face of the perceived threat posed by the government's push towards greater Islamisation (Lee, p. 406). At this juncture there has not been any organised

political resistance from non-Muslims though there have been attempts at some inter-religious cooperation leading to the formation of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) in August 1983. This body represents the only inter-religious organization in Malaysia that projects an image of a united non-Muslim front against Islamic domination (Lee, p. 414). The government has been concerned enough over the apparent organized response of non-Muslims towards its Islamisation policies to order the arrest of 106 people under the Internal Security Act between October 27 to November 20, 1987. Those arrested included members of opposition parties, Chinese educators, social activists and Christian clerics and workers (Lee, p. 417).

Recent developments in Malaysian Islam essentially centering round the transformation of Islam from a purely ceremonial role to that of a religion politicised must inevitably lead to religious tension and is bound to push religion into a major role in inter-ethnic assertion (Northcott, 1990, p. 272). Yet it is not the religion Islam *per se* or the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism that poses a threat to sustaining the plural character of the Malaysian context. Rather it is the increasing hold over Muslims of a more conservative and intolerant strain of Islam. This tends towards a narrowly restrictive interpretation of Islam, discrimination against women, intolerance of mixing with non-Muslims and blanket condemnation of Muslims who disagree with these things as infidels or deviationists. Such inclinations challenge the liberalism, tolerance and accommodation that should be the hallmarks of a plural society (Zainah Anwar, 2001, p. 243). It seems likely that the tension in Malaysian Islam between Muslims advocating a progressive and plural Islam to meet the challenges of contemporary society and conservative groups hankering for a return to an idealized golden age will remain in the foreseeable future (Zainah Anwar, pp. 239, 250). More than anything else the outcome of this tussle will likely shape the Malaysian context to come.

Whether the plural character of society will be nurtured or further diminished remains to be seen.

Whilst religion, particularly in instances where it tends towards a position of uncompromising fundamentalism in the hands of certain political quarters, has accounted for considerable friction and discord between Malays and non-Malays, it has also featured rather prominently in intra-indigenous relations. Within the bumiputra community itself there has been much uneasiness between the indigenous Malays in the peninsula and the non-Muslim indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak. As it is, regional sentiments, which surfaced even prior to the formation of Malaysia, have not apparently diminished with the passage of forty years. Islamisation with its consequent intermingling of religion and politics has now placed an extra burden upon already strained center-state relations.

THE SABAH AND SARAWAK PERSPECTIVE

Sabah and Sarawak are two of the biggest states in Malaysia but their history, geographical location, politics and socio-cultural characteristics set them apart from the rest of the country. Yet the extent of their difference is not always appreciated and this gives rise to a center-state relationship that is often fraught with difficulties.

Historically, Sabah and Sarawak developed independently of each other and of the states in the peninsula. When the proposal to form Malaysia was first broached it evoked enough apprehension and misgivings for the two states to seek and to obtain special terms before they agreed to join the new federation (Ratnam, 1986, p. 39). It was only after they became a part of Malaysia that their political history and traditions began to evolve. All political parties in Sabah and Sarawak till the present day have been entirely state-oriented and no party based in either state has ever had a presence outside that state. Until the early nineties no political party from the peninsula has seriously ventured

into the two states. Significantly, state elections in Sabah and Sarawak do not coincide with parliamentary elections at federal level and this may explain the lack of impact national issues and national campaigns have on state electoral activity. Given this scenario, it is only to be expected that regional sentiments and concern over state rights dominate local politics rather than national issues. Hence, over the years slogans like "Sarawak for Sarawakians" have been coined and misgivings over the role of federal officers in both states as well as the occasional secessionist talk have surfaced (Ratnam, pp. 39-41).

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Sabah and Sarawak, which sets them apart from the peninsula, is their ethnic and cultural composition. Both states have non-Malay majorities and are generally comprised of peoples of non-Muslim origins. There are no less than nineteen ethnic groups in Sarawak and about twenty-nine ethnic tribes in Sabah each with their own languages and traditional cultures. In Sabah, the Kadazan, Dusun and Murut are the major indigenous communities whilst the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau and Orang Ulu constitute the main indigenous groups in Sarawak. The majority of the indigenous communities is organized along tribal lines and owes their allegiance to their tribal leaders. This ethnic and cultural diversity and different world-views are often not fully appreciated by the people in the peninsula accustomed as they are to the usual racial categories of Malay, Chinese and Indian and the notion of a Malaysian nation as a Malay-Muslim polity. It has been noted that Malaysians in the peninsula often harbour misconceptions about the two states. In the process, the peninsula is seen as being superior and refined whilst Sabah and Sarawak are reduced to an inferior (marginalized) and impure (raw) status (Mohd Dahlan, 1986, p. 54).

These differences are manifested in the different response to Islam and the divergence in opinion as to the manner in which political power should be constituted (Chandra Muzaffar, 1986, p. 31). There is also the matter of variance in viewpoints taken in defining the core elements that should form

the national identity.[4] In all these instances the two states are often seen as taking up positions which do not conform to the accepted norms subscribed to by the dominant political elites in the peninsula. Needless to say this state of affairs has sometimes contributed to a falling out in relations especially between the center and the non-Muslim indigenous leaders of Sabah and Sarawak.

As far as Islam is concerned there is no quarrel with Islam as the official religion of the federation as long as the freedom to practise other religions is guaranteed. However Christians in Sabah have alleged that they have been discriminated against by Muslim chief ministers and sometimes even coerced into converting to Islam. The result is a sense of frustration and resentment towards Islam as practised by Muslims in power. The situation is exacerbated by the seeming indifference and reluctance of Malay-Muslims leaders in the central government to act against such discrimination. In turn, this has led to the further grouse that the federal powers are unfair and biased (Chandra Muzaffar, p. 31).

Apart from this view of Islam, the indigenous non-Muslims in both states find it difficult to reconcile with the notion of Malay and Muslim political supremacy prevalent in the peninsula which dictates that top political leaders especially the head of state and the chief minister should come from the indigenous Muslim groups. In 1986, the rise to power of Joseph Pairin Kitingan, a Christian Kadazan, and the formation of his Kadazan–dominated Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) state government in Sabah challenged precisely this notion of the center on the manner political power should be constituted in a Malay polity (Chandra Muzaffar, p. 31). State-federal relations deteriorated in 1990 when Pairin abruptly brought his party out of the

[4] Shamsul A B says that the government has pushed for a bumiputra-defined national identity whilst the Kadazans of Sabah argue forcefully for the non-Muslim bumiputra case (Shamsul, A. B., 1996, *Debating about identity in Malaysia: A discourse analysis.* South East Asian Studies, Vol 34, No. 3, pp. 15,16).

government coalition to join the opposition alliance. Thereafter the UMNO-led federal government sought to topple Pairin and his PBS government. The rise of Kadazan nationalism during this period also led to accusations being levelled against PBS of stirring up racial sensitivities. Several PBS supporters were in fact arrested under the Internal Security Act for allegedly planning the secession of Sabah from Malaysia (Hussin Mutablib, pp. 110, 111). In its bid to gain control of Sabah, UMNO set up its own branch in the state and finally succeeded in ousting PBS in the state elections of January 1994. The entry of UMNO on the Sabah political scene represents a departure from the general trend in which parties from outside have not seriously ventured into the state giving the impression of a tacit understanding with local leaders not to intrude or "meddle" in state politics (Ratnam, p. 41). In a way it also attests to the centre's reservations over the assumption of political power by non-Muslim indigenous communities and its implicit preference for and stress upon the indigenous Muslim dimension of leadership (Chandra Muzaffar, p. 32). This is in spite of UMNO breaking away from its tradition of being a political party exclusively for the Malays and opening its membership to all bumiputra groups in Sabah including the non-Muslim indigenous communities. Indeed this unconventional move may be construed as nothing more than a cultural concession made merely for reasons of political expediency (Shamsul, 1996, p. 30).

The fact that regional sentiments persist in the forty years since the formation of Malaysia underlies the need to reexamine the fundamentals of center-state relations so that causes of friction and misunderstanding may be removed. Regional differences must be accepted as a reality of life in the Malaysian nation but they need not necessarily be obstacles in the path to national bonding. This can only come about if pluralism rather than racial and religious hegemony is affirmed as the Malaysian way of life now and in the future.

CONCLUSION

The forces of ethnicity, Islamicity and regionalism continue to shape Malaysian society and sometimes threaten racial harmony, religious freedom and territorial bonding. Of late, there are powerful voices raised in the name of religion denying the pluralism and diversity of the Malaysian heritage and the democratic principles and liberties which most Malaysians profess (Zainah Anwar, p 320). At the same time there is much preoccupation with creating a united Malaysian nation. The question that remains contested is whether it is possible to create a united Malaysian nation in which the different ethnic groups share a common "national identity" and yet continue to thrive in plurality. On its part the government has approached the issue by advocating a bumiputra-defined national identity. This approach touts bumiputra culture as the "core" of the Malaysian national identity with token recognition given to the cultural symbols of the other ethnic communities. Such an approach has not gone well with various segments of Malaysian society. As expected, the non-bumiputras, notably the Chinese, call for a more pluralised national identity in which the culture of every ethnic group is treated on par with bumiputra culture. The non-Muslim Kadazan bumiputras of Sabah support the concept of a bumiputra–defined national identity provided that Christianity and native religions are accorded equal status to that of Islam within such a definition of identity. Finally, the more radical Islamic bumiputras represented by Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) reject the secular modernist Islamic component of the identity in preference for a "truer and purer" Islam (Shamsul, 1996, p 16). Given such divergence in opinion it remains to be seen if a united Malaysian nation is possible.

Issues such as these and socio-political developments in present-day Malaysian society give rise to specific concerns for the Malaysian Christian community. It is these concerns that shall be discussed next.

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CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY CONCERNS AND RESPONSES TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

INTRODUCTION

The political decision to form an independent Malaysian nation through a merger of the eleven states in the Malay Peninsula with Singapore to the south and Sabah and Sarawak across the South China Sea in 1963 was to have a profound effect on the Church and the course of Christian mission[5]. From a position of prestige and privilege during the colonial era the Church now finds itself quite at odds with its new social and political setting. The "old" problem of ethnicity and the more recent development of state-sponsored Islamisation pose fresh challenges to a Church that in the past was more concerned with church-centered goals. With the entry of Sabah and Sarawak into the new political merger a further dimension is added to the existing state of racial and religious pluralism. Members of the Malaysian Christian community now include those from the indigenous communities in the two states bringing with them their own distinct history and identity. Regionalism becomes a force to be reckoned with not only outside the Church but within it. This chapter looks at the socio-political forces operative in the Malaysian situation that have a direct bearing upon the Church, the specific concerns they give rise to and the responses they evoke from the Christian community. The experiences of Christians in Sabah under the Mustapha government in the 1970s are dealt with at length given that theirs was an extreme case in a situation generally perceived as difficult and hostile (Ackerman & Lee, 1990, p. 63). Seldom since then has the tension within a Church struggling to come to terms with its changing environment been more obvious.

[5] Until it joined the Malaysian federation, the state of Sabah was known as the territory of North Borneo.

THE ETHNIC BARRIER

From the inception of the Malaysian state, ethnicity has emerged a problem. To a large extent it was the divide and rule policy of the colonial government which erected the barrier of racial segregation in the plural society of British Malaya. With the imminent departure of the British and the attainment of independence in sight, there was preoccupation with forming ethnic-based political parties. The United Malay National Organisation, the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress were each concerned with preserving the rights and position of their own racial community (Hunt, 1991, p. 421). Communal rather than inter-communal solidarity was the primary concern of political leaders then. Sabah and Sarawak, on the other hand, were countries initially "blessed" with great harmony in racial and personal relations until the "somewhat sudden introduction of the Malaysia proposals" disrupted racial harmony and caused division along racial lines (Cobbold Commission Report, para. 244). It would appear that such experiences are not confined just to the historical past. Malaysians, it has been noted, are more race conscious than most people whilst nothing in contemporary Malaysian society makes anyone forget the fact of race (Mahathir Mohamad, 1970, p. 175). The course of Christian mission in the past was also determined by ethnic considerations and, like the rest of society, there is till today a racial component to church life.

In keeping with the dictates of the colonial power in the first part of the last century the Church evangelized along ethnic lines. By the Pangkor Treaty of 1874 and all treaties drawn up thereafter, the British agreed to uphold Malay custom and religion as a condition for their entry into the Malay states. Even though there was no formal prohibition the British unofficially discouraged any Christian missionary endeavours among the Malays (Ackerman & Lee, p.30). Dependent as it was on the British to provide an environment conducive to missionary activity, the colonial church deferred to the wishes of the

powers that be and limited the scope of Christian evangelisation to the non-Malay immigrant population. In turn, the British provided the best lands for Christian churches and apart from disapproving the proselytisation of the Malays, allowed Christian missionaries to propagate their religion with as much freedom as was possible (Chandra Muzaffar, 1986, p. 31). Relations between state and church were mostly tranquil with the Church, in fact, retaining a position of privilege and prestige in colonial society that has remained unsurpassed to this day. However, the failure to propagate the faith among the Malays makes Christianity essentially a non-Malay religion from the very beginning (Ackerman & Lee, p. 62). There was a valiant attempt by the Malaya Christian Council during the period leading up to independence of the Malay states in 1957 to keep the door open for Malays to convert to Christianity. In its memorandum to the Reid Commission which was appointed to make recommendations for a federal form of Constitution, the Council urged that all persons be "equally entitled to freedom of conscience and have the right freely to choose, profess, practise and propagate any religion". This was tantamount to seeking religious freedom for all persons, including Muslims, in society. Such a position seemed inconsistent with the Church's earlier conduct in colonial times. Perhaps there was later on a realisation that the Church had been amissed in its mission in the past and a sincere effort made to correct its previous neglect of the Malays. Regrettably for the Church the effort to leave the path open for future evangelism of the Malays failed since, by then, Islam had become an ethnic religion and a necessary focus of Malay solidarity. Christian evangelism threatened precisely that solidarity which the leaders worked so hard to preserve so as to be in a position to bargain for the continuation of Malay special rights (Hunt, p. 421).

Not only is the Church aligned to the non-Malay ethnic groups but the internal organization of the churches also reflect ethnic division. Within the various mainstream Christian churches there is to this day a tendency to organize themselves along racial and linguistic lines. The Methodist Church was

divided principally into two annual conferences, the influential Chinese Annual Conference which was officially recognized in 1947 and the English-speaking churches served primarily by Tamil pastors (Hunt, p. 418). Parishes of the Roman Catholic Church were likewise divided into English-speaking, Chinese-speaking and Tamil-speaking each independent in its own right with no intercommunication or link (Chew, 2000, p. 179). The Lutheran and the Anglicans were also inclined to internal divisions along ethnic lines thereby retarding racial integration in their environment. Such trends are tantamount to condoning the colonial policy of racial segregation.

Whilst the traditional denominations have divided their local congregations into linguistic and racial groups, the newer charismatic churches are evidently organizing themselves on more inter-racial lines. It appears that the charismatic emphasis on community and sharing allows for better inter-ethnic interaction. In particular, younger Malaysians who have been educated in the common national language of Malay are attracted to charismatic churches because of their ethnic integration. However, this development has not diminished a strong sense of non-Malay ethnic identity in the charismatic churches. In fact the government's pursuit of new economic policies in favour of the Malays and the accelerated pace of Islamisation have, in the first place, contributed to the phenomenal rise of charismatic Christianity especially in the urban areas. The charismatic renewal movement provides adherents with a powerful counter measure to the threat of Islam and the difficulties experienced in ethnic, economic and political competition (Northcott, 1990, p.272). Seen in this light, the rise of charismatic Christianity in Malaysia is, in effect, an articulation of concerns over religious freedom in contemporary society.

It is obvious that the force of ethnicity operative in the Malaysian context has had an impact upon the Church since colonial rule and continues to do so till the present moment. However the simultaneous interaction of ethnicity with

religion and in particular with Islam means that, for Christians, concern has perennially revolved round two issues. These are the thorny matter of religious freedom and the nature of the Malaysian State, whether Islamic or secular. Islam has always been a contentious issue more so since it has now assumed the identity of an ethnic and political religion (HussinMutalib, 1993, p. 109). This intermingling of religion and ethnicity which has emerged as a powerful force in the contemporary context and its impact upon the Christian community shall be examined next.

CHRISTIANS AND THE INTERACTION BETWEEN ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND POLITICS

As the colonial era drew to a close in the years leading up to independence in 1957, the Church in British Malaya felt constrained, for the first time, to venture into the public arena. This was the period when the various races in the country were engaged in intense negotiations over communal rights and position. Amongst the fiercely debated issues of the day were the religion of Islam and the safeguarding of the special position of the Malays. Since Islam was the religion of all Malays by birth it carried considerable political weight and occupied a superior position in relation to the other religions (Ackerman & Lee, pp. 39,40). Given this fact, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the Malays should push for the recognition of Islam as the official religion of independent Malaya alongside their special position and rights. As the constitutional arrangements of Islam vis-à-vis the other religions were being worked out, concerns over religious freedom were voiced. The Malaya Christian Council (MCC) which was comprised of representatives of most mainstream Protestant churches and organizations became the forum for developing Christian efforts aimed at resolving such concerns. Much of the MCC discussion with regard to religious freedom focused on preserving the right to propagate the Christian religion and the right of Muslims to convert to Christianity. The Christian vision of the ideal Malayan society was one that respected individual rights, especially the right to freely choose a religion. But

the political leaders were more interested in insuring political power through communal solidarity forged in the case of the Malays by the bond of Islam (Hunt, p. 421). In the end, communal interests prevailed over individual rights. Consensus was eventually reached between the various ethnic groups whereby the supremacy of Islam as the religion of the federation and the special position of the Malays were enshrined in the Constitution in return for citizenship rights for the immigrant ethnic communities (Ackerman & Lee, p. 41). More importantly, the Constitution took the unusual step of defining "Malay" as a person who professes the Muslim religion besides being proficient in the Malay language and conforming with Malay custom.

When constitutional provisions on freedom of religion were initially announced, the MCC was slow to appreciate their full import and actually interpreted Article 11 of the Constitution on freedom of religion as placing no restrictions upon evangelism. A possible explanation could be that the MCC might have been unduly lulled into a false sense of security by the open declaration of the ruling Alliance Party that whilst Islam shall be the religion of the new state this would not imply that "the State is not a secular state" (Report of the Federation of Malaya Constitutional Commission, 1956-1957, paragraph 169). However, within a period of three years thereafter, stringent Islamic laws were swiftly enacted by nearly all the Malay states. These were aimed at defining the religious obligations of Muslims as well as controlling the activities of non-Muslims. Evangelism among Muslims was effectively prohibited. Non-Muslims who attempted to proselytize Muslims and whose activities were construed as insulting to Islam would be penalized (Ackerman & Lee, p. 40). By then the Church had to concede that religious liberty "seems to be in some jeopardy in Malaya" (President's Report, MCC, 1959, p. 1).

From 1960 onwards, all regular broadcasts of religious services over Radio Malaya except for those of the Islamic faith were discontinued. This prompted the MCC to take up the matter with the Malayan government and a letter of

protest was sent to the Prime Minister. In both the reports of the President and the General Secretary presented to the General Council at Kuala Lumpur in February 1960 there were indications, especially in the language employed, of increasing alarm over recent developments and a call to urgently draw up defence strategies. Hence the President rallied the MCC's member churches to prepare "to defend the Constitutional right of religious freedom, not in any narrow sectarian interest, but in the national interest, since a threat to religious freedom is a threat to all other freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution" (President's Report, MCC, p. 2). The General Secretary was even more forthright in calling for action "In Defence of the Faith" and pledged that the matter of "the restrictive State laws in the Federation on religious liberty and the dissemination of the gospel of Jesus Christ-----should not be allowed to rest till the Churches are satisfied"(General Secretary's Report, MCC, 1959, pp. 3, 4). There were, however, no decisive defence plans, so to speak, spelt out during the 1960 Conference and from subsequent events one can only draw the conclusion that the MCC did not meet with much success in reversing the situation. Indeed, since then churches affiliated to the MCC have acted on the basis that evangelism amongst Malays and Muslims is legally forbidden.

In the face of a perceived threat to religious freedom, the Church responded with a call to uphold religious pluralism. However, its earlier decision to exclude the Malays from the church community contributed in no small measure to the Church being rendered politically inconsequential. As such it could not effectively advance the Christian notion of an ideal Malayan plural society in which every person, irrespective of ethnic origin, has the right freely to choose, profess, practise and propagate any religion.

Just as there were concerns over religious freedom amongst Christians in 1957, the same situation prevailed when the idea of forming a political association between Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak was first

broached in the early 1960s. In this instance, it was the main Borneo Christian groups which vociferously questioned the necessity of Islam as the national religion of the proposed new state. Like the majority of Sabahans and Sarawakians, Christians in the two Borneo territories feared that the proclamation of Islam as the national religion of the proposed new federation would relegate Christians and other non-Muslims into second-class citizens and create a political imbalance that would place too much power in the hands of the Muslim minorities (Rooney, 1981, p. 210).

Aware of these objections, the Malayan government sought to allay Christian fears and invited a delegation of representatives of the main Borneo Christian groups to visit Singapore and Malaya to see for themselves that religious freedom was in truth practiced. However, far from being reassured, the members of the delegation came home unconvinced that the religious rights of non-Muslims were properly guaranteed in Malaya (Rooney, p. 212).

One of the areas of concern pertained to the right to propagate the Christian religion, including the right of Muslims to convert to Christianity. The delegation noted that such rights were effectively nullified under the Constitution of Malaya. It was the position of the aboriginal tribes in Malaya that was viewed with grave perturbation by the members of the delegation. Under the Malayan Constitution, the Sakai, an aboriginal tribe, were made wards of the Sultans and placed under the administration of state officials called the Protectors of Aborigines. State laws permitted the Sakai to worship as Christians in their own homes but nowhere else. Furthermore, the Protectors of Aborigines had effective power and authority to restrict Christian evangelistic activities amongst the Sakai. The members of the delegation returned home determined to avert the same fate from befalling upon the non-Muslim indigenous peoples of the Borneo territories. Joint Christian representations were made to the Council Negeri Sarawak (State Legislative Assembly) to block the resolution that Islam be adopted as the

national religion of Malaysia. The Council Negeri passed the resolution but took pains to assure the Christian leaders that religious freedom was adequately guaranteed under the proposed constitution. In Sabah the State Constitution was amended to provide that Islam would be recognized as the national religion of Malaysia but not of the state of Sabah (Rooney, pp. 211, 212).

The Constitution of Malaysia did eventually retain the original provision in the Malayan constitution whereby Islam was duly declared the religion of the federation. Clause 4 of Article 11 of the Constitution that permitted state law to control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief amongst persons professing the Muslim religion was extended to the whole of Malaysia. But the spirited resistance put up by non-Muslims and the churches in Sabah and Sarawak led to an additional protection being extended to the Borneo states in this regard. Both states were at liberty to include in their respective state constitutions provisions requiring a special majority of two-thirds of the total number of members of the state legislative assembly concerned before such laws as envisaged by Clause 4 of Article 11 may be enacted. Furthermore, Sabah and Sarawak were excluded from having to confer on the *Yang di Pertuan Agong* (the Malaysian constitutional monarch) the position of Head of the Muslim religion in their respective states.

Groves notes that the merger with the Borneo states had the effect of somewhat reducing the significance of the constitutional proclamation of Islam as the religion of the new federation (Groves, 1964, p. 149). Nevertheless, events since the end of the colonial era point to a steady decline in the influence exerted by the Church and the conspicuous lack of a channel to allow for the dissemination of Christian values in society. This is obvious in the field of education where the Church once assumed a leading role.

As far back as the Portuguese era in Malacca in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the last millennium there were already Catholic schools in existence. The Methodists were also long involved in setting up some of the finest schools in the country and have the added distinction of being the pioneers of private education. All this changed after independence with the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEDP). The NEDP purported to convert the racially polarized education system into a unified school system and the Malay language became the medium of instruction in all schools and higher institutions of learning (Pappu, 1996, p. 6). Mission schools were absorbed into the government educational system and were subject to greater governmental regulation. As a result these schools continued to exist as mission schools only in name. The Church no longer had administrative control and religious subjects in the curriculum were gradually eliminated. All these developments effectively secularised, or at least, "dechristianised" mission schools and an important avenue for evangelism or indirect transmission of Christian values was lost (Ackerman & Lee, p. 63).

A major obstacle to continuing Christian involvement in education stemmed from the fact that mission schools before independence were English medium schools. As such there arose problems of abiding by national educational goals which established Malay as the unifying medium of instruction. With the schools' absorption into the national system, church authorities began to lose interest in the "education" aspect of Christian mission. About the only link left was the landed properties on which mission schools were built that belonged to the Church. As a result these schools were often allowed to drift without any clear sense of direction. There was also little coordination between churches in responding to the steady erosion of their influence in the mission schools (Pappu, 1996, p. 6 quoting Gleeson, 1994). A special seminar was held in 1994 for the leaders of churches involved in education with the aim of demonstrating "support and solidarity to the cause of Christian education in the country". However, no firm resolutions were adopted apart

from leaving open the possibility of exploring further the question of private education (Pappu, p. 109).

The diminishing role of mission schools in public life leading to the further marginalisation of the Church is perhaps inevitable given the lack of resources and power to cope with the increasing complexities and demands of the national education system. But it is possible too that Christian groups today are relinquishing too readily a role and responsibility for which expatriate missionaries once struggled (Lee & Chan, 1991, Paper presented at the 4th National Christian Conference). This has contributed to a distinct lack of Christian presence in Malaysian society amidst increased concerns over religious freedom, a situation that has become more critical with the rise of the Islamic polity.

THE ERA OF ISLAMISATION

In the years after independence Christians have become increasingly conscious of their position as non-Malays devoid of political clout in a Malay-dominated society. Since the 1980s the government's resolute in pursuing the eventual Islamisation of the Malaysian nation adds a further complexity to an already difficult situation. For Malaysian Christians comprising less than ten per cent of the population, theirs is now perceived as nothing less than a hostile political environment (Ackerman & Lee, p. 63). This perception is shared by Christians in the East Malaysian state of Sabah notwithstanding the constitutional "guarantees" extended to the Borneo territories at the time of the formation of Malaysia. A point worth noting, however, is that the neighbouring state of Sarawak has the distinction of being the only state in Malaysia that has not moved to have the national religion, Islam, declared constitutionally as the religion of that particular state.

Intrusions of Islam into non-Muslim affairs have become the abiding feature of this hostile postindependence environment (Ackerman & Lee, p. 41). The

formulation of policies particularly in matters of land and language since the early 1980s are perceived by non-Muslims in general as intended to limit their resources and block their growth and have further intensified fears of Islamic domination (Lee, 1988, p. 410).

In December 1981 the government imposed a ban on the sale and distribution of the *Alkitab* (Bible) and the *Perjanjian Baru* (New Testament). Both publications of the Christian scriptures in the Indonesian language, which bears close similarities with the Malay language, had been imported from Indonesia since the mid-1970s. They were extremely popular with the younger generation of Malaysian Christians who have been educated largely in the Malay language. On its part the government was concerned that the wide and uninhibited circulation of the *Alkitab* might inadvertently influence the Muslim population. Christian leaders appealed to the Minister of Home Affairs to revoke the ban order resulting in an amendment to allow the use of *Alkitab* and the *Perjanjian Baru* only within church grounds. Further negotiations finally led to an agreement in March 1984, which allowed for ten authorized outlets to import and distribute these Indonesian versions of the scriptures. Elsewhere the government continued to press with the language issue. In 1980 and 1981 the state governments of Trengganu and Kelantan enacted legislation prohibiting non-Muslims from using, for purposes of worship, twenty-one words and ten expressions in Arabic. Then in 1986 the government ordered the Roman Catholic Church in Sabah and other Christians to refrain from using sixteen Arabic words in their publications. A list of alternative terminologies in the Malay language was provided. Catholic and Protestants leaders alike refused collectively to acquiesce to the government's demands and after a series of protracted negotiations the list was reduced to four forbidden words: *Allah* (God), *Baitullah* (House of God or the mosque in Mecca), *Kaabah* (cube-like stone building found in the mosque at Mecca) and *Solat* (prayer) (Lee, 1988, pp. 412, 413).

The issue of land allocation for non-Muslim religious buildings is also one that has increasingly vexed the Christian community. With the strong push for Islamisation in public life, non-Muslims find it increasingly difficult to acquire land for religious purposes and often have to resort to renting shophouses and private homes for worshipping and congregating (Lee, p.410). The problem is not just financial given the increasing cost of land and buildings in residential and commercial areas. In addition government bureaucracy has made it difficult to obtain approval for use of land for building places of worship. Even if approval was obtained, authorities have been known to withdraw such approval after considerable financial costs had been incurred. Such was the case with the proposed Roman Catholic Church to be built in Shah Alam in the state of Selangor.

On 18 August 1977 the Church first applied to the government of the state of Selangor for land to build a church. It was only after the Sultan made the observation that there were no non-Muslim places of worship in Shah Alam that the state allocated and sold to the Church 1.116 acres of land in 1985. Formal approval to build was obtained on 11 May 1993 and construction works of the three and a half million Malaysian Ringgit church began on 1 June 1993. However, a memorandum of protest was sent by certain quarters to the chief minister of the state on 16 August 1993 alleging that the construction of the church could challenge the sanctity of Islam as the country's official religion and the position of Muslims as a whole. Three days later the chief minister instructed the municipal council to withdraw its earlier approval to construct the church. In spite of the fact that the Church had already incurred the sum of five hundred thousand Malaysian Ringgit on piling works, construction works had to cease on 19 August 1993. It would appear from subsequent meetings with the authorities that the size of the proposed church was considered too big and that its originally approved height of eighty-five feet was now deemed to be too high. After a new set of building plans was submitted formal approval was given some two years later on 17 June 1995.

Piling works resumed but soon certain parties in the district again voiced their objections. On 2 February 1996 all works on the site had to be stopped in compliance with new orders received from the Shah Alam Municipal Council (Chew, 2000, pp. 272,274). Thereafter the site of the proposed Shah Alam church was twice relocated apparently without the state government furnishing any reasons for its decision. Finally on 9 February 2001 legal proceedings seeking judicial review of the decision of the state government were commenced in the Shah Alam High Court by the Titular Roman Catholic Bishop of Kuala Lumpur (Selvarajah, Catholic Asian News, April 2001, p. 3). The entire episode adds to the general atmosphere of powerlessness prevailing among non-Muslims including Christians and has heightened their sense of vulnerability to external pressure (Lee, 1988, p. 410).

All these developments as well as amendments to the penal and criminal codes vesting wider powers on the government to curb religious dissent have once again roused non-Muslim concerns over religious freedom (Ackerman & Lee, p. 58). In the case of the Christian community the situation has prompted moves towards promoting the cause of Christian unity. Dialogue and collaboration with other non-Christian religions have become a necessary pursuit in order to achieve a unified stand on national policies perceived to infringe upon the rights of non-Muslims in the country.

Early on in 1973 the Council of Churches in Malaysia (CCM) comprising nine denominations was formed and attempted to serve as an organizational basis for greater unity among Christians. However overtures made by the CCM to the fundamentalist, evangelical or Pentecostal churches and the Roman Catholic Church were rebuffed. The stumbling block appeared to be the CCM's links with the World Council of Churches (WCC) warily regarded by the other churches as a liberal ecumenical body dominated by doctrinally flexible Protestants. In spite of such reservations and a certain measure of distrust between them there was basic consensus among church leaders of the

urgent need to work towards Christian unity in the light of Christianity's progressive marginalisation. In 1979 the CCM organized the First National Christian Conference which was attended by one hundred and forty three participants including representatives from the Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and evangelical churches meeting under the theme *Working Together For Christ*. Three years later in 1982 the Second National Christian Conference was convened by the CCM. Two hundred and eighty participants from the various churches met with the theme *Witnessing In A Multi-Religious Society*, with discussions based on three main subjects: witnessing through evangelism; witnessing through cooperation, and witnessing through Malaysian cultures. It was at this Conference that a resolution was passed to form a national Christian body. In 1985 representatives of the Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia, the CCM and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship met in fulfillment of that resolution. It was then decided that these three Christian bodies which represent more than ninety per cent of Malaysian Christians would constitute the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM). The stated objectives of the CFM were "to bring together all Christians who accept the authority of the Holy Bible and who subscribe to the cardinal doctrines of Christianity as set forth in the Apostles' Creed; to reinforce and extend, wherever possible, through dialogue and consultation, the common areas of agreement among the various Christian groups in the country; to look after the interests of the Christian community as a whole, with particular reference to religious freedom and rights as enshrined in the Federal Constitution; to represent the Christian community in Malaysia on all matters that affect or are of interest to it; and to consult and work with the government and nongovernment bodies (religious or secular) at all administrative levels, on matters of common interest and concern." An application of registration was submitted and approval given by the Registrar of Societies on 14 January, 1986.

The CFM took over the organization of the next two national Christian conferences. In his opening address at the Fourth National Christian Conference in 1991, Bishop Dennis Dutton observed that the existence of the CFM had changed the scenery of Christian expression and ushered in a new wave of thinking. However, any ground gained is more in terms of administrative and structural organization rather than doctrinal or ecumenical success. Thus far the CFM may well have succeeded in speaking in one voice on matters affecting the Christian community particularly with reference to religious freedom, but its ecumenical objective is far from accomplished.

Parallel to the movement to nurture Christian unity, efforts by Christians and non-Christian religious groups such as the Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs to come together under one umbrella organization for the common good appear to have achieved some measure of success. An interreligious body known as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) was officially registered as a society on 6 August 1983. Besides promoting understanding, mutual respect and co-operation between peoples of different religions, the MCCBCHS is committed to resolving inter-religious problems and making representations on religious matters. Whilst there are obvious fundamental religious differences between the members which render interreligious dialogue in the sense of doctrinal exchanges a difficult proposition, the MCCBCHS serves as an important symbol of resistance to Islamic domination and a forum for collaboration in the defence of non-Muslim rights.

For the most part, the MCCBCHS has channeled its efforts into making unified representations to the government, organizing seminars and releasing press statements. Its main concern lies in raising awareness of Malaysians to insidious attempts by powerful forces to trample on the fundamental liberties of politically disadvantaged religious groups. To this end the MCCBCHS has persistently highlighted the problems faced by non-Muslims in freely

professing and practising their respective religions and publicly expressed concerns over freedom of religion. In 1988 the MCCBCHS issued a "Declaration On Freedom Of Religion Or Belief And On The Elimination Of Intolerance And Of Discrimination Based On Religion Or Belief" in response to the growing tendency to enact state laws which were deemed to be in contravention of the freedom of religion clause in the Federal Constitution.

Thirteen years later the MCCBCHS takes the pessimistic view that the situation has become worse. In 2000 a *Restoration of Faith* Bill was proposed which empowered the *Syariah* or Islamic court to detain a Muslim attempting to change his or her faith for a period not exceeding one year at a rehabilitation center for "counselling" purposes. This prompted the MCCBCHS to raise the matter with the Prime Minister. In a memorandum dated 30 December 2000 to the Prime Minister, the MCCBCHS urged that the proposed Bill be withdrawn on the ground that it has the effect of preventing a person from professing a religion of his or her choice. Another area touched upon in the same memorandum pertained to the problems faced by certain non-Muslims being treated as Muslims on account of the unduly wide definitions of "Muslims" in State and Federal Syariah laws.

Fears over religious freedom were even more acute when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared at a political gathering in 2001 that Malaysia is in fact already an Islamic state. Amidst the ensuing national debate over whether Malaysia is a secular or Islamic state, the MCCBCHS countered by re-launching its 1988 Declaration. By way of a press release on 31 January 2002, the same Declaration was reiterated to urge the federal and all state governments to respect the rights of every person to freedom of religion and recognise that Malaysia is constitutionally a secular state.

For Christians in the Borneo state of Sabah the issue of Islamisation and its implications for religious freedom is of particular concern in view of their

experiences under the Mustapha government. It was then that an open attempt was made to assimilate the various ethnic communities into one ethnic group, one religion and one culture. There were bitter allegations of religious discrimination, even persecution and a consequent intensification of regional sentiments. The Sabah situation is an extreme example of the extent peaceful co-existence in the Malaysian plural society could be seriously jeopardised by powerful forces with an aggressive agenda for racial and religious hegemony. Even more pertinent is the reality that, as a marginal minority, Christians are the most affected and vulnerable to pressures exerted by a powerful government (Ng, 1992, pp.36, 70). Before examining the responses of the Christian community in Sabah to their predicament an account of the events that unfolded during this period is in order.

SABAH UNDER MUSTAPHA

In 1967 a new state government under the chief ministership of Tun Mustapha bin Datu Harun was sworn in. Islamic revivalism and a fervent proselytizing of the religion quickly became the distinguishing characteristics of the Mustapha government in Sabah.

Various reasons have been advanced for Mustapha's unrelenting push for the "Islamisation" of Sabah almost from the day he took office. Some are of the opinion that Mustapha was committed to the idea of uniting the many indigenous tribes and possibly all the peoples of Sabah through the Malay language and Islam so that there would eventually be one ethnic group, one culture and one religion. To this end he actively pursued a policy of mass conversion to Islam of the non-Muslims in the state as a means of creating a single "national" identity. He sought to emulate the Christian missionaries of the colonial era but there was an essential difference between his approach and the Christians. In his view, the Christian missionaries could win converts to Christianity but they were not able to make these converts conform to a single racial outlook. His mission was, therefore, to use Islam to break

through the barriers of race and colour so that they could all become Malays (Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, 1977, p. 266). To some of his detractors, however, Mustapha was plainly motivated by political considerations, a fact he was supposed to have readily admitted (Luping, 1994, p. 534, footnote 52). Perhaps he hoped to ingratiate himself to his political "superiors" in the federal capital by projecting Sabah as a "shining example for the whole of Malaysia" in being well ahead in the national quest for a Malay-based national culture (Luping, p. 535). Politics or the goal of national unity through the creation of one ethnic group or both factors may well have motivated Mustapha. But there has never been much made out for arguing that Mustapha acted the way he did solely because he was a devout Muslim.

Whatever his real motives, Mustapha soon embarked on a zealous path of Islamisation that culminated in the establishment of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) funded by the government with the specific task of gaining converts to Islam. Mass conversions particularly in the interior districts and villages became the norm and the USIA claimed to have converted 45,000 people in the first two years of its existence (Roff, 1974, p.112). A highly successful method employed to win new converts to Islam was to target the traditional tribal leaders of the indigenous peoples. The general impression was that the Kadazans, the most numerous amongst the many tribes, were "by and large very unsophisticated and could easily be persuaded by example and manipulation". Proceeding on this assumption, the strategy was to obtain the "cooperation of their top leadership first and then slowly work down to the second and third echelons of the leadership, until the masses were reached" (Luping, p. 561). A substantial number of prominent Kadazan Christian leaders did in fact embrace Islam early on in the conversion campaign amidst rumours and allegations that the Mustapha government was applying pressure and resorting to bribery and other unorthodox methods to win converts (Rooney, 1981, p. 213). It was a personal victory for Mustapha when the *Huguan Siou* or paramount leader of the

Kadazans, Donald Stephens, later known as Tun Mohamad Fuad Stephens, embraced Islam at the height of the Islamisation campaign on 5 January 1971. At the conversion ceremony held at Mustapha's house, Stephens declared that he embraced Islam as he believed that the religion was a factor that could help bring unity, prosperity and happiness in general and in Sabah in particular for generations to come. Mustapha echoed the same sentiments saying that the people could be united only through one religion, one language and one culture (Luping, p. 550). Stephens went on to become an "instrument" of the USIA in its drive to win yet more converts to Islam. In the process he poured scorn upon Christianity, the religion he once professed, and denounced the Christian society as permissive and, "if allowed to go unchallenged, would drag mankind down to its lowest level, to that of animals or worse" (Luping, p. 551). Shortly after Stephens' conversion, many Christian Kadazan chiefs and village headmen too became Muslims.

Perhaps the most controversial measure employed by Mustapha soon after he embarked on his Islamisation campaign was his unchallenged use of emergency powers to summarily issue "removal orders" against expatriate Christian missionaries in Sabah. Mustapha's actions in this direction were in blatant disregard of an earlier immigration ruling that allowed all foreign missionary workers holding employment passes, visit passes and professional or work permits to stay for a period of ten years effective from 1 January 1967. However from March 1970 to November 1970, a total of 26 foreign missionaries had either their passes terminated or not renewed and their permanent stay status cancelled (Luping, p. 541). Mustapha had ostensibly acted on "police information" that these missionaries were carrying out activities not conducive to racial harmony and national unity (Luping, pp. 544, 545). In this regard he had the open support of Stephens who denied that there was any persecution of Christians in Sabah and endorsed the actions of the state government in expelling foreign missionaries who were found to be interfering in the internal politics of Sabah or who had become "security

risks" (Luping, p. 550). Apart from the security angle, an equally compelling reason apparently for the removal of foreign missionaries was that there was no need for the people of Sabah to seek assistance and guidance from an outside source when such guidance could be obtained from within the state. The imperialist mentality and outlook should not be allowed to continue, whether in relation to politics or religion (Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, p.266). But Mustapha did not only confine his efforts to curbing the presence of foreign missionaries in Sabah. He went so far as to refuse a Sabah residence permit to the new Roman Catholic Bishop of Sabah, Peter Chung, a Malaysian citizen from the diocese of Miri in the neighboring state of Sarawak. Throughout his episcopate in Sabah from 1970 to 1975, Bishop Chung had to visit his diocese on a series of three-month visitor permits. Finally in 1975 Rome decided to transfer Bishop Chung to Kuching and consecrated a new Bishop, Mgr Simon Fung, who was a Sabah-born Malaysian.

Such circumstances have led to the inevitable conclusion that Mustapha's actions were tantamount to persecution with a view to destroying the Catholic Church in Sabah (Rooney, p. 217). But while it was generally agreed that the future of the Church in Sabah was in question, the situation has evoked different responses from the local indigenous Christians and the church hierarchy. The crisis the Church was unexpectedly plunged into *compelled* it to confront important missionary issues that in the past tended to be neglected. At the same time new issues were raised. It is the different responses to underlying issues that the experiences under the Mustapha government brought to the fore which shall be examined next.

CHURCH IN CRISIS: CONCERNS AND RESPONSES.

The overarching Islamic policies of the Mustapha government changed existing political, racial and religious realities in Sabah bringing the course of Christian mission to the crossroads once more. As far as the Christian community was concerned, the situation gave rise to certain critical issues

which needed to be addressed: the vacuum brought about by the sudden removal of foreign missionaries; failure to build up the local church in Sabah; and the frequent allegations of conversion to Islam under duress with serious implications for religious freedom and racial harmony in a plural society.

For a Church that had not even seriously begun the task of transition from expatriate to local church leadership, the removal and deportation of foreign missionaries hit a particularly vulnerable point. But this was by no means an issue that surfaced only with the ascent of Mustapha in the political realm. Earlier on the federal government had, in fact, already initiated moves to restrict the presence of foreign missionaries in Malaysia. In 1966, Kuala Lumpur revoked existing entry permits which allowed for permanent stay. Henceforth all priests and religious workers were permitted to enter and work in Malaysia on three tours only, with each tour of duty not to go beyond four years and the total number of years not to exceed ten years. A fresh application for a new visit or work permit would have to be lodged after the completion of each tour.

The heads of the various churches in Sabah reacted with "sadness and dismay" to the new immigration ruling. In a joint letter of appeal to Mustapha's predecessor, Peter Lo, the leaders of the Anglican Church, the Basel Christian Church and the Roman Catholic Church put to the chief minister their "gravest concern for the Christian churches" in Sabah. They took the view that the ruling was nothing less than an infringement of the fundamental right of freedom of religion in that it not only restricted the right to propagate but more so the right to practise since the otherwise ready availability of priests and religious workers would be interrupted. Voicing their fears that the "organization of the churches will be utterly crippled and disrupted" they appealed for the restoration of the right "to recruit missionaries for as long as such missionaries can be useful for the work among them" (letter dated 20 October 1966 and produced in Luping, pp. 538-

540). Chief Minister Lo acceded to their request and was in fact instrumental in prevailing upon the Federal Minister of Home Affairs "to amend the policy to permit all missionary workers who were already in the country to stay on for a further period of ten years" with effect from 1 January 1967 (letter dated 24 April 1967 from the State Secretary to Bishop James Buis and quoted by Luping at pp 540, 541, footnote 56). An assurance having been obtained from the authorities for at least the next ten years till 1977, the Church was totally unprepared for the next turn in events.

In March 1970 the new Director of Immigration in Sabah, acting under the instructions of "the State Authority" informed John Rooney, a Roman Catholic priest who was on a valid work permit, that he was deemed an undesirable immigrant and that he would be given one month to leave the state of Sabah. Rooney was the first of twenty-six foreign missionaries ordered to leave within the next few months. Unlike in 1966, representations made this time to the relevant authorities including one to the Minister of Home Affairs in Kuala Lumpur were to no avail. The Mustapha government remained adamant that missionaries with extremely adverse records from the security angle would have their work passes terminated upon the expiry of one month's notice. Others with presumably less adverse security records would be given three months' prior notice before the termination of their work passes came into effect.

By 1971, the number of expelled foreign missionaries had reached forty-one. Most were from the Roman Catholic Church, which was the largest Christian denomination in Sabah. Even an eighty-two year old ailing nun of the Carmelite order having led a cloistered life in the convent for forty years was not spared and was ordered to leave on the same ground that she was an undesirable immigrant. Good sense only prevailed and the order to deport her revoked when the authorities realized that she would have to be carried off on her sick bed and they would have to assume responsibility for her state of

health and well being. It was episodes such as this that rendered the allegations of missionary threat to security rather ludicrous. In a letter dated 1 December 1970 to colleagues and friends outside Sabah, Bishop James Buis likened the situation in Sabah then to "living in a police state and under dictatorship". The church had suffered "heavy losses in personnel" on account of the deportation of missionaries and there was nothing short of a "real persecution of Christianity". He lamented that "appeals and protests are answered by more violent actions against the Christian churches". The immigration policy aside, Buis also decried " a powerful campaign of bribery and intimidation to convert the Christians" (letter quoted in Luping, p. 547).

The issue of deportation of foreign missionaries highlights an important aspect of church life in Sabah. It is obvious that the postindependence Church had not attended sufficiently to the "Malaysianisation" of its clergy in the first place. This was precisely the argument that Stephens advanced to justify the deportation.[6] Initially the Church reacted negatively for fear that it would not be able to fill the vacuum left by the foreign missionaries. This is evident from the contents of the joint letter of appeal by the heads of the various churches to Chief Minister Peter Lo which conveyed intense anxiety over lack of a ready availability of priests and religious workers. Nothing but the organisation of the churches being rendered utterly crippled and disrupted was predicted. Such fears apparently infected the local indigenous Christians in the rural districts and led to a show of strong resistance when the Mustapha government issued orders to deport expatriate priests.

In 1972 several attempts by the police to serve "removal orders" on three priests issued by the Immigration Department were foiled by strong

[6] In a letter to Mustapha in August 1972, Stephens wrote that while "still a Christian" he had advised the Bishop to "Malayanise all the priests but evidently all my advice has been ignored" (Luping, p. 551).

opposition from Catholics in the Toboh parish in the Tambunan district, the Papar parish and in Bundu. It was only after armed police and army personnel arrived in the early hours of the morning that the three priests were finally arrested and detained in the top security wing of the Kepayan Prison in the state capital. Even then the arrest of Rev Fr Freichs in Bundu took almost nine long hours. Arriving at 3 a.m. on Saturday morning, 12 December 1972, the police found the church compound occupied by several hundred people angrily demanding that the police leave and calling for freedom of religion. The police beat a hasty retreat but a few hours later at 11a.m. armed forces with the aid of tear gas stormed the church compound and finally arrested Freichs. A priest was to later report to the Bishop that "it had taken the field force, the mobile force, the riot squad and the police with 15 landrovers, two trucks and helicopters to arrest one unarmed priest" (Luping, pp. 557, 558).

When the dust finally settled it became clear that the departure of foreign priests was inevitable given Mustapha's uncompromising stand on the issue. It was then that the Church began in earnest to attend to the task of "Malaysianising" its clergy. Responding to Mustapha's charge that dependence on foreign missionaries reflected an imperialist mentality and outlook, the Church turned its attention to the larger enterprise of shedding its Western colonial image and building up a local church. In the face of extreme aggravation the Church soon found the resources from within to turn a "weakness" into a formidable strength. Thousands of "lapsed Catholics" rallied back to the fold and many young Kadazans sought enrolment in the various seminaries throughout the country (Luping, p. 581, footnote 14).

For the local indigenous Christians in Sabah the struggle to build up a local church sensitive to their needs formed part of a bigger struggle: resistance to Mustapha's brazen attempt to assimilate the various indigenous tribes into one ethnic group and one culture through a common religion, Islam, and the simultaneous engagement in preserving their ethnic identity. Their response to

a difficult situation that posed a threat to racial and religious pluralism was to turn to the Church for support and solidarity. In particular they looked to the Church to speak out and act in instances of alleged conversion to Islam either through inducement or threat. It was in this respect that they encountered a different response from the church hierarchy. The position taken by the official church was one of passive resignation and the studious avoidance of confrontation with the state. Such a stance is amply illustrated when Peter Mojuntin, a Kadazan Christian member of the Sabah State Legislature and the chairman of the Penampang Central Church Parish Council became one of Mustapha's most vocal critics.

In a letter dated 14 November 1970 to the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mojuntin accused Mustapha's government of persecuting the Christians through intimidation and threats. He singled out the threat of an intensive propaganda campaign targeting "the poor Christians" launched by the paid workers of the United Sabah Islamic Association or USIA (Luping, p. 548). Ominously, Mojuntin received no response to his letter but that did not deter him from subsequently launching forth onto a further condemnation of the government's actions when he spoke at the consecration of Bishop Peter Chung. In a speech delivered in the presence of the papal representative and a huge gathering of clergy and laity, he spoke of the sadness and anger of Christians in Sabah because the "the Christian religion is currently suffering from ruthlessly subtle persecution by persons, our fellow human beings currently holding influential positions in the state of Sabah". Denouncing the actions taken to expel the Christian missionaries as being against the letter and spirit of the Constitution and the principles of the *Rukunnegara* (National Ideology) and *muhibbah* (the spirit of goodwill between neighbours), he made a passionate plea to "multi-racial Malaysians" to "honestly respect each other's religious beliefs". In seeking to rise above the exclusive claims to salvation which any one particular religion may be tempted to make, Mojuntin displayed a remarkable grasp of the theology of religions far beyond his time

and situation when he called for an inclusive perspective on religions. For him, no one religion "professing allegiance to the only one true God Almighty, should claim to have the good fortune of possessing the only key to Heaven because the gates to *Syurga* are countless". He believed that this "Heavenly Paradise of *Syurga* that we all aspire to reach after this worldly existence has many doors leading to the presence of the Creator and eternal existence" (Text of speech quoted in Luping at page 549).

There was no response from the official church to Mojuntin's condemnation of the actions of the Mustapha government. Rather Mojuntin was to find himself standing increasingly alone especially since many prominent Christians from his own ethnic community had renounced the faith and converted to Islam. Mustapha took full advantage of the situation and quickly moved in to amend the State Constitution and declare Islam as the official religion of Sabah. Mojuntin himself was warned of possible "repercussions" if he were to vote against the proposed amendment. Of the thirty-eight members in the State Legislative Assembly there were only five Christian Kadazans and four of these including Mojuntin abstained from voting for the motion on Islam (Luping, p. 582). In spite of considerable pressure and setbacks it would appear that Mojuntin and a handful of former members of the then defunct Kadazan political party, UPKO, who remained Christians maintained their stand and constantly sought to engage the Church in the Kadazan "struggle". They participated actively in the Pastoral Council of Sabah (PAX) formed through their own efforts in early 1970 to counteract the Islamic revival movement. Membership of PAX comprised of all Parish Councils throughout Sabah with the Bishop as Chairman. A Goodwill and Liaison Commission was formed under PAX with the main aim of liaising and working closely with the state authorities and the federal government on matters of religion. Five of the seven members of the Commission were lay Christians. Even though the Commission was set up under the auspices of the Bishop's office with a view to working towards diffusing any direct confrontation between the

Catholic Church and the Mustapha government, Rooney reports that during this period "the Sabah Church has seldom been in a position when there was not at least one row with the government simmering or on the boil"(Rooney, p. 219). When Mustapha enlisted the assistance of the members of the Commission to persuade the Christian community in the rural villages to understand that his actions were only aimed at uniting the people into one, he was rebuffed. Instead the members of the Commission recommended a "cooling off period" in the implementation of the government's decision to remove foreign missionaries so that popular opinion on the matter may be heeded (Luping, p. 555).

Subsequent events further attest to the contrasting approaches taken by the church hierarchy and the local indigenous Christians at "ground level" to the issue of alleged widespread incidences of coerced conversion to Islam. Responding to a young priest's urgent protestations on the subject, the Bishop urged him not to precipitate the issue and in a letter dated 30 January 1975 counseled:

> "That we are called, sent and fortified by Jesus Christ to do a job not of ours but His, both smoothness or hindrance and success or failure in this work are His concern rather than ours. "Lord Thy will be done".
> In due time I will ask the parish councils to send an appeal with complaint to the proper authority of the government ----."

Elsewhere the Bishop was to respond to a letter from beleaguered Christians from the Murut tribe in Nabawan and Biah by assuring them of sympathy, support and prayers from "your fellow Catholics" and for a "quick solution to your difficulty" (Luping, p. 582). The letter fell short of indicating any form of action to be taken by the Church towards arriving at the anticipated "quick

solution" except perhaps to place an undue reliance upon the parish councils which were already under a grievous burden to save the situation.

Unlike the USIA, the Islamic missionary body which received political and financial patronage from the Mustapha government, the various parish councils under the umbrella of the Pastoral Council of Sabah were politically voiceless with few resources at their disposal. As such, these councils were to prove largely ineffective in obtaining any respite for the Christians against the pervasive and powerful Islamic revivalist movement. Given this situation, the Bishop's response must have brought little solace. Indeed leaving everything to the Almighty appeared to be the line mostly adopted by the church leadership during this critical period. There was "no contingency plan drawn up to stem the tide of Muslim religious campaigners going into Christian territories" (Luping, p. 565).

Even after the departure of Mustapha from the political scene, the policies of Islamisation initiated and pursued so zealously by him have remained in full force and effect though the manner of execution was somewhat less brazen. Other Islamic missionary organizations besides the locally based USIA have now entered the fray. Again the official church position has been one of almost steadfast non-involvement.

In 1982, the Christian community in the rural district of Tambunan managed to obtain about thirty signatories to a petition addressed to the Prime Minister to seek his intervention on the ground, *inter alia*, that government officials and certain officials from *DAKWAH*, an Islamic missionary body from outside Sabah, had "defamed the Christian religion and also forced the people to embrace the Muslim religion" thus putting to risk freedom of religion. The Bishop was not in the state and his representative did not lend his support to the petition either. This has prompted the rather bitter observation that sending

the petition was a matter of urgency for the Kadazan Christians in Tambunan "but their leaders in the Church remained quiet" (Luping, p. 567).

Whilst the local church hierarchy tended to distance itself from attempts such as those by Mojuntin and the Christians in Tambunan to speak out against conversion to Islam under duress, the urgency of the situation in Sabah was not lost on Christian bodies elsewhere in the country. As early as 1971, at its meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the General Council of Churches expressed grave concern over the matter of work permits for missionaries. After much discussion it was resolved that "this Council mandate a delegation to seek an audience with the Prime Minister to obtain clarification and assurance with regard to religious freedom in the various states of Malaysia" (Luping, p.553). In particular, the delegation was authorized to present the facts and express concern over difficulties faced by the Christians in Sabah (Luping, p. 554). A delegation comprised of the Anglican bishop of Sabah, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, a lay representative from the Sabah Church and two others eventually met the Prime Minister to present the resolution. In 1972, the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, accompanied this time by Mojuntin, again met with the Prime Minister in a further attempt to solicit the federal government's intervention to alleviate the worsening crisis caused by the continuing cancellation of permanent stay permits and work passes for foreign priests. However, the Prime Minister's stand was that immigration was a state matter and not within the purview of the federal government. The plight of the Christians in Sabah must have so moved Archbishop Vendargon of Kuala Lumpur that he offered to return to the federal government a prestigious award which carried the title *Tan Sri* he had earlier received from the Malaysian monarch "if the government thought that the church and its priests had done anything wrong politically or interfered with the national security of the nation" (Luping, p. 554). The offer was declined on the ground that it was not necessary to do so. But, the irony is that the symbolic gesture to assume responsibility for the actions of the "church and its priests" and the expression

of solidarity came from the archbishop of Kuala Lumpur rather than from within the church hierarchy in Sabah.

By 1976 winds of change swept through Sabah. Many Sabahans were once again speaking the language of inclusion and civility. Mustapha's political party was defeated in the state elections that year. Instead a new political party, Berjaya, which held itself out as a multiracial party came to power amidst fresh promises of restoring religious freedom and harmony. It has been estimated that ninety-five percent of Christian Kadazans voted Berjaya to power (Luping, p. 301). Less than a decade later disenchantment with Berjaya's politics appeared. The party was voted out of power in the state elections of 1985 which were won by the newly formed Kadazan party, *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) led by Joseph Pairin Kitingan, the recently-installed paramount chief and a devout Catholic. All these developments have caused some to allege that "the churches played a very big part" in the eventual "downfall" of Mustapha (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1977, p. 270). This allegation clearly holds no substance as far as the church hierarchy was concerned. But it may possibly be directed against Mojuntin and other local indigenous Christians who held their own in a difficult and hostile environment to build up a Church responsive to local needs.

CONCLUSION

Of all the socio-political forces that bear upon the Church in Malaysia, Islamisation has emerged as the most powerful and pervasive in recent years. Fears of Islamic domination emphasise the need to preserve religious freedom and to work towards making common life possible in Malaysia's plural society. These pressing concerns have prompted efforts at forging Christian unity and promoting interreligious dialogue and collaboration. The Mustapha government's persistent push in the 1970s to accomplish the "Islamisation of Sabah" through mass conversion of non-Muslims to Islam is obviously a situation that the contemporary Church is anxious to prevent from ever

happening again. Whether or not the Church succeeds in this new mission remains to be seen. At the same time much good emerged from the Sabah experience. The tension within the Church as it resolved to come to terms with its changing environment was perhaps inevitable and even necessary. Sabahan Christians particularly from the indigenous communities rose splendidly to the challenge of shaping a new missionary agenda that goes beyond introverted goals to seeking a rightful place for every ethnic group in Malaysian society regardless of cultural and religious differences. Such responses to concerns that have arisen in the light of the situation the Church finds itself in today indicate that Malaysian Christians are beginning to conceive of Christian mission in a manner that differs from the missionary understanding of the past. The chapter that follows is a reflection on the various aspects to this emerging missionary understanding and the possibilities they allow for doing mission in the future.

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~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ CHAPTER FOUR ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

REFLECTIONS ON THE EMERGING MISSIONARY UNDERSTANDING

INTRODUCTION

As a marginal minority in an increasingly Islamic context, the Malaysian Christian community faces some formidable challenges. It can choose to take one of two paths: retreat to the realm of private religion or stand up and work towards a distinct Christian presence in public life. In the past the Church was content to dwell primarily on winning converts to the faith. This does not mean that the Church was not mindful then of its "duty" to society. Some of the finest schools in the country were set up by the Church and mission schools took the lead in the field of education. The missions were also pioneers in providing medical services to many in the remote districts and villages. But such exemplary works of charity have not survived the passage of time and change. Once more at the crossroads, the Church now needs to rethink its mission if it is to retain its rightful place in Malaysian society. A new missionary understanding is emerging containing elements consonant with changing times: mission as dialogue; mission as reconciliation; and mission as inculturation. This chapter reflects upon the emerging aspects to contemporary mission and ponders the path ahead.

MISSION AS DIALOGUE

A cursory reading of current literature on mission indicates that the age of dialogue has dawned.

In his construction of the new missionary paradigm, David Bosch highlights the interrelationship between dialogue and mission and speaks of Christianity rediscovering "its integrally dialogical nature" (Bosch, 1991, pp. 483, 487).

Donal Dorr takes as his starting point the study of mission as dialogue rather than evangelisaton to provide "a corrective for the very one-sided notion of mission which people took for granted in the past" (Dorr, 2000, p. 16). Both the Vatican and the World Council of Churches (WCC) have in turn endorsed the necessity to conceive of mission as dialogue given the present context of religious plurality.

The Second Vatican Council marks a modest beginning for the notion of mission as dialogue with its call for dialogue between the Catholic Church and the other churches and ecclesial communities (*Decree on Ecumenism*, nn.4, 11; *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern world*, n. 92). Two decades later, *The Secretariat for Non-Christians* 1984 document develops the theme of dialogue further. The main purport of this document entitled "The Attitude of the Church toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission" (hereafter referred to as DM) is to clarify the relationship which exists between dialogue and mission (DM, 5). All the elements of mission, be it simple presence and witness, service or direct proclamation must be "permeated by a dialogical spirit" (DM 29). In June, 1990, the Secretariat, now known as *The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, collaborated with *The Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples* to issue a joint publication called "Dialogue and Proclamation" (henceforth referred to as DP). Whilst this document states categorically that dialogue has no priority over proclamation (DP 3), there is little doubt about the Church's commitment to dialogue which it declares to be "firm and irreversible" (DP 54). Dialogue and proclamation are both declared as legitimate and necessary. DP echoes DM in describing both activities as component and authentic elements of the Church's one evangelizing mission (DP 3 & 77). It goes on to specify four forms of interreligious dialogue: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and dialogue of religious experience (DP 9). Yet, for all the value attached to dialogue and the acknowledgment of dialogue's growing importance in the

pluralistic world of today, the Roman dicasteries ultimately maintain that dialogue "cannot simply replace proclamation but remains oriented towards proclamation" (DP 82). As Bosch sees it, the situation is indicative of a tension between being both missionary and dialogical (Bosch, p. 488).

The same tension may be detected in the statements issued by the WCC. In the "Guidelines on Dialogue" (Kingston, WCC, 1979) the Council affirmed that dialogue has a distinctive and rightful place within Christian life, in a manner directly comparable to other forms of service. It is a way of living out Christian faith in relationship with neighbours. But it in no way replaces or limits the Christian obligation to witness. The fourth WCC-sponsored *World Conference on Mission and Evangelism* which met in San Antonio in 1989 reiterates that dialogue has its own place and integrity and is neither opposed to nor incomparable with witness or proclamation. At the same time the Conference concedes that its convictions as regards dialogue stand in tension with the ministry of witness: a tension it will not attempt to resolve.

Whilst the Church in Rome is reluctant to put dialogue on the same level as proclamation within the ambit of the Church's evangelizing mission (DP 77), the Church in Asia perceives of dialogue as the goal and mode of mission. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the simmering tension between proclamation and dialogue now erupts into an open oft intense debate (Tan in Phan, comp. & ed., 2002, p. 66). At the heart of the debate is the contentious issue of evangelisation. John Paul II states bluntly that there can be no authentic evangelisation without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord (*Ecclesia In Asia* (EA), 19). The Asian response to this is amply set forth in the words of Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, the President Delegate of the Synod for Asia: "Yes, it is true that there is no authentic evangelisation without announcing Jesus Christ, Savior to the whole human race. But for Asia, there will be no complete evangelisation unless there is dialogue with other religions and

cultures. There is no full evangelisation if there is no answer to the deep yearnings of the peoples of Asia" (Darmaatmadja in Chia, 2000, p.248).

Given such divergence in viewpoint, the Vatican remains wary of the documents emanating from the Asian bishops. Rome fears that the Asians are substituting dialogue for explicit proclamation of Jesus (Tagle in Phan, comp. & ed., 2002, p. 218). Yet as Edmund Chia from the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC) rightly points out, the seeming differences between the Asian bishops and the Pope are but "a matter of emphases, on account of one's starting point and one's theological methodology" (East Asian Pastoral Review 37 (2000) 3, p. 254). Indeed it has been observed that, as far as the Asian Bishops' Conferences were concerned, the uniqueness and universality of Jesus as the Savior was never placed in question. The problem for the Asian Churches, is *how* to proclaim this truth about Jesus credibly in the midst of crushing poverty, competing religious systems, and cultural diversity (Phan, 2002, p. 17). For the bishops of Asia, their response is a call to engage in a triple dialogue with Asian cultures, Asian religions and Asian peoples, particularly the poor. It is this dialogical approach to mission and evangelisation that constitutes a new way of being church in Asia. In taking such a stance, the bishops clearly choose to identify with the realities of the Asian situation. For it is in Asia that many of the world's ancient religions and spiritual traditions have been formed and nurtured, some long before the advent of Christianity. Asians are beneficiaries to a rich and varied cultural heritage which the Church in the past has largely overlooked in its endeavor to "proclaim the saving truths of the Gospel". In no small measure, this accounts for the reality that Christians are but an insignificant minority in the world's largest continent that is amazing just for the sheer "variety of its peoples" (EA, 6).[7]

[7] The English text of the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* by Pope John Paul II in New Delhi, India on 6 November 1999 that is relied on for the purposes of this dissertation is the copy that has been reproduced for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei (November 1999).

At last harmony is sought with the Asian way of thinking that "truth does not impose itself, but rather attracts everyone and everything to itself by its beauty, splendour and fascination" which is what dialogue is all about (Tan, 2001, p. 116).

The responses of the Indonesian Bishops to the *Lineamenta* for the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Asia best exemplify the position adopted by *The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC). The Church in Indonesia views its pluri-religious situation in a positive and constructive manner. It realistically accepts the fact that Christians live in urban and rural communities with people of other faiths. Rather than taking on a posture of exclusivism, they regard the adherents of these other faiths as bearers of "the seeds of the Word" trying to live up to authentic religious values which lead them to God's reign.[8] They acknowledge the other believers as "our fellow seafarers to the same Reign of God to whom we all have access in the Spirit through Jesus Christ". Thus they are able to assert that "without in any way derogating the mission of preaching Jesus Christ, for the FABC as well as for us, interreligious dialogue is the primary mode of evangelisation". At the same time they seek to allay the fears of those concerned over "too much emphasis on dialogue" resulting in a situation in which "proclamation is not highlighted enough". As the Indonesian bishops see it:

> Interreligious dialogue is distinct from proclamation, but may not be opposed to it, since in dialogue Christians give witness to their faith, and in proclamation Christians respectfully encounter in the hearers of the Word the Truth and Goodness that comes from the God of salvation and leads to him. "Conversion" occurs not only

[8] By the "reign of God" Jesus refers to the definitive coming of God to rule in the near future, to bring the present to an end and establish God's full and victorious rule over the world in general and Israel in particular (Phan, East Asia Pastoral Review 39 (2002), 114).

> as fruit of proclamation. It is the Spirit of God who alone works "conversion to God" in Jesus Christ through proclamation as well as through interreligious dialogue.[9]

A theology of religions that attributes "authentic religious values" to other faiths leading all to God's reign is the Indonesian Church's valuable contribution to interreligious dialogue in Asia. Such an open attitude to the positive elements in other religions allows for dialogue and collaboration in the name of the common good.

Like the Church in Indonesia, the Malaysian Church is a tiny flock in a country with a strong Islamic presence. While Indonesian Christians readily accept their neighbours of other faiths as "our fellow wayfarers to the same Reign of God", the Malaysian perspective is one that seeks dialogue and collaboration with other non-Christian believers mainly because of the threat posed by increasing Islamic domination. Indonesian Muslims are generally considered more practical or less fundamentalist in interpreting their religion and have firmly opposed efforts to amend the Constitution to incorporate *syariah* (Islamic) laws (Shamsul Akmar, 2000, p. 29). On the other hand, a common view of Islam in Malaysia is that it tends to fundamentalism (Barton, 2002, p. 91). Islam is enshrined as the religion of the federation and non-Muslims who attempt to proselytize Muslims would be penalised.[10] From the early 1980s the government's Islamisation policy, coupled with Islamic fervor of independent religious groups and an opposition party committed to the creation of an Islamic state, has led to a society that is more religiously conservative and intolerant than ever before (Zainah Anwar, 2001, p. 243). Consequent upon these developments in Malaysian Islam is the increasing

[9] These quotations from the responses of the Indonesian bishops to the *Lineamenta* are taken from selected excerpts as they appear in Peter C. Phan (ed.), *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Orbis, Maryknoll, 2002), pp 24f).

[10] Article 3 (1) of the Federal Constitution reads: Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation. State

encroachment of Islam on the lives of non-Muslims (Lee,1988, p. 418). It was against this background that Christians and Malaysians of other faiths came together to form *The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism* (MCCBCHS) in 1983. Regrettably, there are no Muslim members in the MCCBCHS. Several Muslim organizations were invited to join when the MCCBCHS was at its formative stage, but none apparently evinced any desire to do so "for reasons of their own" (Chew, 2000, p. 287).

Perturbed over the growing tendency towards religious polarization in Malaysian society, the MCCBCHS has called for the setting up of interreligious councils. In a memorandum to *The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia* (SUHAKAM) dated 8 April 2002, the MCCBCHS urged SUHAKAM to recommend to the government that interreligious councils be set up by statute. The MCCBCHS believes that such councils are needed urgently

> . . . to provide a forum to discuss and to provide solutions to inter-religious controversies which may have a negative impact upon ethnic relations such as religious conversions, religious proselytisation, the allocating of and building of places of worship, the holding of religious processions and the observance of religious ceremonies which may impinge upon the sensitivities of other religious communities.

Such councils shall also be assigned the crucial task of ensuring that the dissemination of information on any religion via any medium does not in any way prejudice multi-religious peace and harmony. But it is a venue for the much needed interaction among religions and religious communities that the MCCBCHS is anxious to provide.

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laws have also been enacted defining the religious obligations of Muslims as well as controlling the activities of non-Muslims (Ackerman & Lee, 1990, p 40).

On 18 May 2003, the Bar Council with the support of the MCCBCHS and other religious bodies organized a workshop with the theme “Towards the Formation of an Inter-Religious Council”. Confronted with accusations of harboring a hidden agenda and meddling with religious affairs the workshop had to be postponed twice since October 2000 when the idea was first mooted at a seminar with the theme "Freedom of Religion" (The Star, 18 May 2003). About 110 persons from various non-governmental organizations eventually attended the workshop though certain groups withdrew because of the non-involvement of mainstream Islamic groups. Indeed on the eve of the workshop the President of “Teras Pengupayaan Melayu”, Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid, made a press statement in which he urged the Bar Council “not to question Islamic matters as it did not have any jurisdiction over religion” (The Sunday Tribune, 18 May, 2003). The entire episode reflects the common belief among Muslims that only the religious scholars, the *ulama*, have the right to talk and decide on matters of religion. Zainah Anwar finds that very few Muslims not traditionally educated in religion have the courage to question or even discuss Islam in public. They have been socialized to accept that those in religious authority know best what is Islamic and what is not (Zainah Anwar, p. 240).

Not only is the MCCBCHS faced with the challenge of having to convince Muslims that it has no hidden agenda but that it is solely concerned with making common life possible. There is also the issue of conversion that has become a bone of contention between component members of the MCCBCHS and detracts from the goal of interreligious dialogue. Conversion is a sensitive issue in Malaysia. Tension between Christians and Hindus has arisen over allegations of mass conversions of Hindus to Christianity, particularly among Indians in rural plantations (Lee, p. 414). The fear apparently is that both Christianisation and Islamisation may reduce the Hindu population and in the long run affect the political strength of the Indians as well as the political fortunes of the Malaysian Indian Congress, the only major Indian political

party in the country. Not surprisingly, the Hindus have appealed to all missionary religions to abandon evangelism as a policy in the context of Malaysia. There are, therefore, religious, social, political and ethnic factors that appear to militate against conversion from one religion to another in the Malaysian context (Batumalai, 1991, pp. 119,123). In addition, legal restrictions have effectively prohibited evangelism among Muslims. When certain Christian groups responded to a call to evangelise Muslims in 1987, the government was sufficiently alarmed to go to the extent of invoking the Internal Security Act in a bid to stop this new "evangelistic zeal" (Batumalai, p. 127). As the participants at the Fourth National Christian Conference were reminded: "In such circumstances, greater sensitivity and patience are required of Christians to demonstrate a tolerance which they would expect of others and yet remain faithful in the witnessing of the Gospel" (K H Lee & K E Chan, 1992, p. 40).

The critical and sometimes hostile response to explicit verbal proclamation of the Gospel only serves to emphasise the need for proclamation that does not offend the sensitivities of Malaysians of other faiths. Just as Christians, through the MCCBCHS, have resisted publicly the implementation of the *Syariah* (Islamic) law on non-Muslims, they must in turn avoid aggressive proclamation that treats "our neighbours of other faiths as objects of evangelism" (Batumalai, p. 357). These prevailing realities call for a new perspective on conversion and the determination of its place in the understanding of mission as dialogue.

In his insightful study of conversion and discipleship as goals of the Church's mission, Peter Phan makes the pertinent point that "conversion" was, in fact, central to Jesus' preaching. Yet when Jesus proclaimed the dawning of God's kingdom or rule and called his audience to repentance, "there was no question of abjuring one religion and joining another" (Phan, 2002, p. 113). Something utterly new did happen though that "burst the bounds of Judaism" with the

coming of the kingdom of God which Jesus himself ushered in. The signs of the coming of this kingdom were, however, recognized not by the religious authorities but by the "lost sheep of Israel" and even the pagans and these flocked to Jesus. Their "turning" to Jesus was their "conversion" (Phan, pp. 114,115). It follows that there are two aspects to conversion: a radical turning to Jesus in a personal and absolute commitment to him; and a continuation of Jesus' mission for the kingdom or reign of God (Phan, p. 117).

If Christians understand conversion not primarily in the traditional terms of renouncing one's religion and joining the Church but, rather, as becoming a disciple of Jesus and taking up his mission, then they open themselves to new missionary possibilities. In the process, a new way of being church unfolds. As the seed of the kingdom of God, the Church is challenged to work towards the conversion of Malaysian society and the structures of state to the "kingdom values". Obviously this is a task that Christians cannot do alone but through dialogue in the spirit of *muhibbah* and in collaboration with their neighbours of other faiths.[11]

It is clear that, in spite of very serious hindrances to interreligious dialogue, the Church in Malaysia has increasingly come to understand mission as dialogue. There is no denying that, as far as the leaders of the various Christian churches are concerned, interfaith collaboration offers the "best" chance for the minority Church to sustain itself under an Islamic polity. The challenge now and in the future is for Christians to engage positively in a "dialogue of life" with their neighbours of other faiths. This allows for sharing of mutual concerns over religious freedom whilst genuinely striving, at the same time, to live in the spirit of the government's declared vision to make Malaysia a caring, liberal and just society. More than ever before it is imperative to participate in the "dialogue of action" in which Christians and

[11] *Muhibbah* is the Malaysian term for goodwill between neighbours of different races and creeds living in the same vicinity.

others collaborate not just for the sake of resolving religious conflicts but "for the integral development and liberation of people" (DP 42). However, the Malaysian theologian, Batumalai Sadayande, observes that Christians in Malaysia often feel a sense of "powerlessness" and "helplessness" about the difficulties they encounter and "the lack of opportunity for further progress". As such, they "seem to think that God is calling us to migrate to greener pastures elsewhere". He asks instead: "Can we consider living with limitations and constraints for the good of the Gospel?" The challenge is to treat "our neighbours of other faiths . . . as people with whom we need to live with" in "solidarity" and to live "with them and for them" (Batumalai, 1991, p. 357). Dorr abides by the same understanding of dialogue as simply being with people when he states as follows:

> Furthermore the notion of dialogue conveys the impression that mission is not just a matter of *doing things for* people. It is first of all a matter of *being with* people, of *listening* and *sharing* with them (Dorr, 2000, p. 16).

Indeed, Christian mission in the past was very much a matter of doing things for people. To begin with, the Portuguese conquerors of the Malaccan sultanate sought to "impose" the faith on the Malay "infidels" thereby sowing the seeds for Christian-Muslim rivalry in the Malay Peninsula. In nineteenth century Sarawak, the attempt by the ruling Brooke dynasty to rein in the "uncivilized" natives by "enlightening" them with "the knowledge of the saving truths of the gospel" lent Christianity an air of superiority (Varney, 1968, p. 378). During the colonial era, a great deal of effort was expended in the building and running of schools and hospitals. Well-intentioned missionaries took it for granted that Western medicine and schooling were fundamental to the welfare of the people among whom they were working – and this was a view shared by the great majority of their people. There are now various objections raised to the choice of schools and hospitals as the

prime "vehicles of evangelisation": Europe and America have imposed a cultural imperialism through western schools and western health systems; schools and hospitals have not been properly integrated into the local way of life; and western-style education and health systems tend to widen the gap between the rich and the poor (Dorr, pp. 223, 226). The reality is that in Malaysia the government has effectively taken over mission schools and the Church today cannot compete with the state in providing education and health services. Such a situation has, in the words of one local church cleric, "created new challenges for the Church to seek and find new ways for its evangelisation with the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit".[12]

The search for "new ways" indicates that the Church is aware of the need to discard past missionary approaches that seek to impose the faith or to keep doing things for people. It now seeks to dialogue with Malaysians of other faiths and cultures, especially with the marginalized and powerless, in order to build up not just the institutional church but a harmonious multiracial and multireligious society. The first steps towards this goal have been taken through its participation in the MCCBCHS, the only interreligious gathering in the country. But the fact remains that the MCCBCHS brings only non-Muslims to the table of dialogue and fraternity. Walls of segregation and estrangement erected from the past and fortified in the present, alienating especially Muslims from non-Muslims, must first be broken down so that bridge-building may begin. For Malaysian Christians, the situation is a call to take on the reconciling mission of Jesus in Malaysian society

MISSION AS RECONCILIATION

One of the legacies of European colonialism in Malaysia is a plural society divided along racial and religious lines. Even before the British departed from these shores, the various ethnic communities were embroiled in intense

[12] Pastoral letter of the Archbishop of Kuching on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the Archdiocese 2001, pp 46-47.

debates over questions of preserving Malay special rights and safeguarding the legitimate interests of the immigrant communities. This moved the colonial administration to insist there would be no transfer of power until unity was forged among the ethnic groups. The leaders of the independence movement therefore came together to form the Alliance Party comprised of political parties representing the Malays (UMNO), the Chinese (MCA) and the Indians (MIC). Even though the Alliance presented itself as a united front, it was in reality formed along racial lines to protect racial interests. One of the "achievements" of the Alliance was to strike up a communal bargain on the contentious issues of citizenship and the special position of the Malays. In the years after independence, the façade of a united front has been shattered by the bloody racial conflicts of May 13th 1969 and the Islamic resurgence which have exacerbated divisions within and between ethnic communities. The situation has deteriorated to the extent of invoking a public admission from the political leadership that Malay extremists are gaining ground in their community and their tolerance of others diminishing (Lim, 2003, p. 17). Four decades after independence, the road to racial integration and national unity remains strewn with obstacles.

Such daunting prospects for the future notwithstanding, the government seems determined to press on with its Vision 2020 concept to create one *Bangsa Malaysia* or Malaysian Race. Its vision of the Malaysian nation in 2020 is that of "a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny….a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one '*Bangsa Malaysia'*…". This vision encompasses "a mature liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colours and creeds are free to practise and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feel that they belong to one nation".[13] Several ways to make Vision 2020 a reality have been drawn up

[13] These were among the nine challenges listed out by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed in a Working Paper entitled "*Malaysia; The Way Forward*" presented at the inaugural meeting of

such as the "*Kampungku*" or "My village" concept to instill a sense of community. Of late, the government has proposed a "Vision Schools" project to foster unity and racial integration among the young. Under the proposal, Chinese primary schools would share common facilities such as playing fields and canteens with Tamil schools and national schools. However the *Dong Jiao Zong* (DJZ), the influential organization that represents all Chinese schools in Malaysia, vehemently voiced its objections. The government has assured that Chinese schools would continue to be allowed to use Mandarin as a medium of instruction, a matter the DJZ "considers sacred". But the organization apparently remains distrustful of the government because "historically, it can be shown that the government's ultimate objective is to have only one medium of instruction for all schools and that is Malay". Yet at the same time the DJZ declares that "we are not against national integration and unity but there are other ways to achieve it". The government, on its part, is determined to carry out a pilot project to form twelve "vision schools" with or without the participation of the Chinese schools.[14] It is ironical that the proposal to set up " Vision Schools" as a way of fostering better ethnic relations has instead opened old "historical" wounds and set ablaze deep-seated communal fears and suspicion.

Like the government and the DJZ, the Church too seeks national integration and unity and offers the path of Christian reconciliation as the way to attaining this goal. Dorr defines reconciliation as a process in which there is restoration of good relationships between individuals, groups or nations. Christian reconciliation involves not only the re-establishment of justice but the challenge of forgiveness to heal old wounds and wipe out past offences (Dorr, pp. 128, 129). According to Dorr, reconciliation with God and with people lies at the heart of the biblical view: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to

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the Malaysian Business Council on 28th February 1991 and popularly referred to thereafter as "Vision 2020".

[14] Article by Leslie Lau entitled *Lack of trust key obstacle to 'vision schools'* in the Singapore daily, The Straits Times : Saturday, November 4, 2000.

God…and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation"(2 Cor 5:19). The message that is carried through from the Old Testament to the New Testament is "to go first to be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23-4). Equally important is the New Testament vision of God as "the One who enables us to be reconciled to others" (Dorr, p. 133).

Reconciliation is the theme that Robert Schrieter, a leading missiologist, takes up at length as the way of conducting Christian mission. Schreiter presents the Christian understanding of reconciliation as first and foremost the work of God to which we are invited (Schreiter, 1992, p. 59). The reconciliation process begins with the healing of victims by God's reconciling grace. They in turn work healing on the oppressors, offering the forgiveness that sparks repentance (Schreiter, p. 68). But Schreiter is careful to draw a distinction between individual and social reconciliation. Individual reconciliation occurs when God restores the humanity, the human dignity, that has been wrested from a person in an act of wrongdoing. Borrowing from Jose Zalaquette, who chaired the Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Schreiter goes on to define social reconciliation as the moral reconstruction of society so that the wrongdoing of the past can never happen again. Whilst he is clear that the two notions are different he believes, at the same time, that social reconciliation does not have much chance of succeeding if not led by a cadre of persons who have experienced the healing of individual reconciliation in their lives. (Schreiter, 2003).

The Church in Malaysia is faced with the painful situation of a society inflicted with the wound of ethnic segregation in the past and now burdened with problems of racial extremism and religious fundamentalism. It must initiate the process of national reconciliation by acknowledging the sin of condoning ethnic segregation and its failure to speak up against the divisive policies of the Christian colonial administration in the past. Specifically, this means accepting responsibility and seeking forgiveness for its part in colonial

society in creating barriers leading to distrust, division and alienation between the ethnic groups. The fact that the Church abided by a policy of "selective evangelisation" in deference to the wishes of the colonial powers was tantamount to leaving the Malays alone since they were not "objects of evangelism". This gives the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the Church has never shown much interest in the welfare of the Malays. The opposite is now true of contemporary Malaysian society with affirmative policies in favour of the Malays firmly in place (Batumalai, 1990, p. 492). All this calls for Malaysians of every ethnic community and creed to forgive and to seek forgiveness from each other for past and present offences in the spirit of Christian reconciliation so that racial barriers may be broken down and ethnic relations restored. But, as Dorr cautions, it is wrong and unrealistic to take interpersonal reconciliation as a model for political reconciliation. He reasons as follows:

> Reconciliation between two individuals may involve an unconditional apology by the former aggressor and a submission in complete trust to the injured party. But this may be neither possible nor necessary in a political situation (Dorr, p. 140).

He then ventures to add that the "right" solution will be that "which is freely accepted by a consensus of the people on both sides, in the light of all the concrete circumstances of the situation" (Dorr, p. 141).

Flowing from his definitions of individual and social reconciliation as outlined above, Schreiter too makes some concrete suggestions for bringing together groups once divided and far off into a single household as envisioned in Ephesians 2:12-19. As Schreiter sees it there are two dimensions to the conduct of Christian mission as reconciliation. The first is healing the traumas of the past through engagement in the process of truth-telling, pursuit of justice, and healing and forgiveness. The second aspect is the moral

reconstruction of a shattered society by helping to rebuild a society so that the evils of the past cannot be repeated. Only through attendance to both tasks is the reconciling work of God proclaimed and enacted in communities (Schreiter, 2003).

The first step in this direction is to collectively confront the evil that is the cause of pain and suffering in Malaysian society. Historically, ethnicity has been turned into a community-destroying force. Instead of all ethnic groups living together as one Malaysian community, there is ethnic segregation and unequal treatment of persons. Such segregation and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity breed distrust and resentment. It has led to other evils of racial extremism and religious fundamentalism in the contemporary context. Once this evil is recognized and confronted, the next step should be a commitment among all Malaysians to work together towards eliminating its grip over every ethnic group. When ethnicity comes to be seen as a valuable gift of God, any form of racial and religious discrimination is unacceptable and must be firmly rejected. Obviously, decades of thinking and living along ethnic lines cannot be undone immediately. It is only through a gradual process leading to genuine and lasting reconciliation among the ethnic communities that the one ethnically-integrated Malaysian community of "Vision 2020" can become a reality in the future.

There is another old wound that needs to be lanced in order to release the poison (Dorr, p. 139). This pertains to the vision of a new nation that is territorially integrated. The fact that Malaysians come from different regions, and tend to think and act along regional lines, seriously stands in the way of transforming this vision into a reality.

Occurrences of "regional rift" which surface from time to time between the Borneo states, on the one hand, and Peninsular Malaysia, on the other, are essentially a manifestation of local resistance at state level to both central and

Muslim dominance (Ratnam, 1986, p. 43). This is amply illustrated in the events that occurred in Sabah during the Mustapha years. The apparent unwillingness of Malay-Muslim leaders in the central government to act firmly and decisively against proven allegations of discrimination has created the feeling among Sabah Christians that the central government is unfair and biased. The "hostilities" the center later directed at the Kadazan-dominated Christian government of Joseph Pairin Kitingan convinced non-Muslim Sabahans that Kuala Lumpur could not accept an indigenous Muslim exercising political power in Sabah (Chandra Muzaffar, 1986, pp. 31, 32). This gives rise to a feeling of deep hurt since the indigenous non-Muslim communities consider themselves the definitive communities in Sabah and Sarawak in the same way the Malays do in the peninsula (Mahathir Mohamad, 1970, p. 217). Hurt and resentment aside, there are even greater concerns that Malaysia should not be seen as a "a neo-colonial design" leading to *"Semenanjung* assimilation", a social process that Sabahans and Sarawakians fear is aimed at transforming the two states into a carbon copy of the *Semenanjung*. The regional rift is particularly evident from the manner in which "*Semenanjung"* conjures harmful and detrimental images and the fact that some in the *Semenanjung* regard the Borneo states as far from being comparable to any of the states in their part of the country (Mohd Dahlan, 1986, pp. 53, 54).[15]

A realistic approach to regional reconciliation as the restoration of good relationship necessarily begins with an awareness of the reality of oppression and inequalities in *Semenanjung*-Sabah/Sarawak relations. It may well be that national leaders are unaware of the oppressive nature of their actions since they have not always shown that they have understood how different the two states are from the rest of Malaysia. However, it would be unrealistic for the leaders of Sabah and Sarawak to expect that the uniqueness and greater powers of their states give them licence to ignore national priorities (Ratnam,

[15] *Semenanjung* means Peninsular Malaysia in the Malay language.

pp. 39, 46). The 'right' solution for regional reconciliation lies in some modifications to the traditional notion of Malay political dominance so that, in the two states, the interests of the indigenous communities would be taken into account rather than those of Malays or Muslims alone (Ratnam, p. 42). National leaders need to be seen as fair and even-handed in their actions. For their part, the leaders of Sabah and Sarawak must ensure they do not deliberately stimulate local 'nationalist' sentiments such that their commitment to national unity and integration is put in doubt. Basically, both parties must accept that in a federation there should be some measure of 'give and take' for the sake of harmonious relations provided the rights of the weaker are not trampled by the powerful. Again such a radical change in attitude about the other takes time and more than just human initiative since reconciliation, from the Christian viewpoint, is ultimately a gift of God's grace (Dorr, p. 134).

As Christians build bridges between ethnic communities to restore harmony in the spirit of Christian reconciliation, they realise they must first attend to forging communion among themselves. It is precisely because they have experienced God's gift of reconciliation with their brothers and sisters in the Church that Christians come to understand their mission as one of witnessing to that same Spirit of Reconciliation in Malaysian society. Perhaps the most valuable contribution, therefore, that the Church in Malaysia can make towards building a new nation "at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one *Bangsa Malaysia* "[16] comes from within.

The apostolic exhortation, EA, realistically acknowledges that within and among Christian churches in Asia there are sometimes unfortunate divisions often connected with ritual, linguistic, ethnic, caste and ideological

[16] Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed in a Working Paper entitled "*Malaysia; The Way Forward*" presented at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council on 28th February 1991 and popularly referred to thereafter as "Vision 2020"

differences. Whilst some wounds have been partially healed "there is not yet full healing" (EA 26). This is amply borne out in the Malaysian situation vividly described by Archbishop Peter Chung at *The Fourth National Christian Conference* as follows:

> Division among us in past years have led to much unpleasant rivalry with abusive languages to the great detriment to our Christian faith. I would like to apologize on behalf of our Church for all antagonistic attitudes towards your Churches and ask you to forgo the past and to work sincerely towards unity in the Lord. Unity among us may still be a long way off and doctrinal differences may continue to pain us for a long time. But nothing should stop us from working for true reconciliation and mutual recognition and love in the Lord.[17]

The commitment to work for true reconciliation is reflected in the proposal to organize "regular neighbourhood fellowships like the Catholic Church's 'Basic Christian Community' groups, to promote goodwill, understanding and mutual respect through dialogue and prayer".[14] Basic Christian Communities that include all Christians in the country regardless of denomination will be the surest sign of "true reconciliation and mutual recognition and love in the Lord".

Alongside Basic Christian Communities, Christians need to attend to the equally important task of forming "basic human communities" comprised of Christian and non-Christian membership in a common struggle to bring about true reconciliation in Malaysian society. *The Theological Advisory Commission* of *The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* sees basic

[17] Closing Address by Archbishop Peter Chung Hoan Ting at the Fourth National Christian Conference in April,1991 at Port Dickson, Malaysia.

human communities as "special places for experiencing and witnessing to the presence of the Spirit in the midst of persons of goodwill". Furthermore in their interaction with peoples of other faiths in these basic human communities, "Christians can act as leaven for human and societal transformations".[18] Seen in this light basic human communities are special places for the local churches to deepen its understanding of mission as inculturation.

MISSION AS INCULTURATION

From the beginning the Church in Malaysia is perceived as generally foreign and specifically western with close links to the upper middle educated classes. Since the advent of the local church, there has been much preoccupation with the issue of inculturating the Christian faith. For the most part, efforts at inculturation consist of liturgical celebrations in the different vernacular languages and the observance of cultural occasions such as the *Gawai Dayak* Harvest Festival and the Chinese Lunar New Year (Ha, 1993, p. 28). Yet inculturation is taking place in new and unexpected ways. The formation of the MCCBCHS, which may be seen as a basic human community, represents one such new way. Through the MCCBCHS, the Christian faith is challenged to provide answers to Malaysian problems and it must do so as a Malaysian Church. The future points to immense possibilities for enlarging the scope of inculturation provided the Church is prepared to take up the challenge in an open and positive manner.

One of the questions frequently raised by inculturalists is how to inculturate the local Church. For Aloysius Pieris, this is a totally irrelevant question. His is a refreshing look at the whole issue of inculturation starting with the blunt reminder that it is something that happens naturally and cannot be induced

[18] The proposal was made in a paper entitled "The Mission Of The Malaysian Church" presented by Yoong Swee Yin at the 1991 Conference with its focus on unity as a goal that should be accomplished both among Christians and within the nation.

artificially. Through an immersion in the lives and struggles of the people around it, a Christian community acquires a culture. Accordingly, inculturation is the by-product of an involvement with a people rather than the conscious target of a program of action. In Pieris' considered opinion, the relevant question to ask should be: To what degree has the Church immersed and involved itself in the lives and struggles of Malaysians? (Pieris, 1988, p.38). *The Theological Advisory Commission* of *The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference* (FABC) puts it another way: the process of inculturation does not come about only through the adoption of appropriate theological or liturgical language and symbols, but also through the interaction of the Church with the historical forces operative in a given culture, chief among which are political forces.[19]

Pieris also refers to the on-going inculturation debate which he views as being rooted in the " erroneous presupposition that churches in Asia are not inculturated". He states simply that every local church is essentially an inculturated church. The question that one should therefore be concerned with is: Whose culture does the official church reflect? Clearly Pieris is for incorporating the culture of the impoverished masses as the ecclesiastical culture of the ministerial church in Asia. He denounces clerical culture, that represents the dominant sector of the believing community, as a sin against the body of the Lord (Pieris, pp. 39,40). *The Theological Advisory Commission* of the FABC also takes up the same theme when they declare:

> Inculturation should not be the identified with the culture of the dominant and powerful groups but must become a process through which the local Church lives in solidarity with the poor, their

[19] Theological Advisory Commission, FABC, *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context,* FABC Papers No. 60 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1990), 6

> traditions, customs, ways of life, patterns of thought, . . . (Scherer & Bevans, 1999, p. 99)[20].

It seems inevitable, given the Church's elitist origins especially in colonial society, that the local Church in Malaysia is "not seen to be the Church of the poor". Maureen Chew quotes from a publication of *The National Office for Human Development* in Malaysia that describes the Malaysian Church as "basically an urban middle-class Church, with small numbers in the rubber estates and New Villages, except for Sabah and Sarawak which has a large rural following" (Chew, p. 189). The indigenous peoples make up this large rural following and are the most vulnerable of the ethnic minorities. Many of them practise shifting cultivation and depend upon the resources of the forests and the earth for sustenance. In their search for new farming lands and resources, they have been thwarted and robbed of their birthright by peoples from other cultures who have encroached into their homelands (Chew, p. 192). Their plight is matched only by that of the aboriginal peoples known as *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia. Eighty percent of the *Orang Asli* have been identified as living below the poverty line. They are oppressed by every level of society, from government to corporate bodies to statutory bodies to individuals including Christians. Together with the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, they are the poorest of the poor and cannot speak up for their own rights.[21] Yet the Church can hardly be described as a Church that stands with the indigenous peoples.

There was a valiant attempt by Sabah Christians to involve the official Church in their struggle during the Mustapha years. This marks the beginnings of

[20] These quotations are taken from J. Scherer and S. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 3*, (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, p. 103).

[21] These views were expressed by Lim Heng Seng speaking at a panel discussion during the Fourth National Christian Conference. They are contained in a compedium of the addresses, homilies and papers of the Conference entitled, *The Malaysian Church in the 90s,* edited by Goh Keat Peng and published in 1992 by the Christian Federation of Malaysia.

mission as inculturation. The present and the future indicate a deepening and further development of this missionary understanding of inculturation.

In order to be a Church for and of the indigenous peoples, the Church must engage in a triple dialogue with the indigenous peoples themselves, their diverse cultures and primal religions. Mission as triple dialogue is one of several missiological models developed by Jojo M. Fung, a Malaysian theologian who works among the indigenous peoples, to enable the Church to respond to the "cries of the indigenous peoples". It is only through dialogue that the indigenous peoples would be disposed to invest in a trusting relationship with the Church. Intercultural dialogue with indigenous peoples of diverse cultures will deepen the Church's understanding and appreciation of their aspirations, hopes, struggles, their traditional values, worldviews, beliefs, rites, myths and cultural symbols. Dialogue with the primal religions enables the Church to realize that the mystery of God is beyond the Church and that God is also operative in the primal religions of the indigenous peoples (Fung, 2002, pp. 23,24). The Church realizes that, in the past, the religious traditions and practices of indigenous peoples were "treated unjustly and their adherents marginalized within the Church" (*The Spirit At Work In Asia Today,* FABC Papers No. 81, p. 26). Mission as triple dialogue will thus lead to reconciliation and a new and richer relationship between the Church and the indigenous peoples. Only then will the Church be able to stand together with the indigenous peoples and to act in solidarity with them in their struggle for justice and self-determination.

As the Church seeks to become a Church of and for indigenous peoples, it finds that it is not only called to evangelise indigenous peoples but to be evangelized by them and learn from them new insights in areas such as ecology, community life and the celebration of life's joys and tragedies (*The Spirit At Work In Asia Today*, p. 26). Fung calls this "mission in reverse" when the Church allows indigenous peoples to help it unlearn its many cultural and theological biases about them. Once emptied of its biases and

self-importance, the Church will be better equipped to respond to the needs of indigenous peoples for the basic necessities of life; and, later on, for justice, peace and human rights (Fung, pp. 24, 25). Such engagement in the human and social concerns of indigenous peoples plainly points to mission as a counter-cultural activity for the Church. Fung falls back on the Church's rich tradition of contemplative silence and the value placed on solitude by indigenous peoples to propose that the Church carries out this mission through contemplative actions. Ultimately, a patient contemplative silence witnesses to the integrity of the missionary Church in carrying out its counter-cultural mission (Fung, p. 26).

By becoming a Church of the indigenous peoples, the Church in Malaysia will at last be able to develop a Malaysian theology of church and mission. This theology is grounded in the actual life experiences and struggles of all Malaysians rendered poor through circumstances beyond their control. Such a theology will bring about dialogue and reconciliation among all the poor in Malaysia and thereby empower them to work together and thus bring about a more equitable Malaysian society.

CONCLUSION

Socio-political realities of Malaysian society today largely account for the significance of interfaith dialogue, reconciliation and inculturation in Christian missionary understanding. Of all these realities, religions are the most powerful. This is evident with regards to Islamic resurgence which has led to the increasing Islamisation of public life. Given this political scenario, the emphasis in the future will be on interreligious dialogue as an integral part of Christian mission.

The challenge for the minority Church is to engage in interfaith dialogue. The aim is not merely to resolve religious conflicts. It will also aim to construct an underlying Malaysian theology of religions that will allow for a more positive

approach to interfaith dialogue. In this respect, the Church in Malaysia may have much to learn from the position taken by the Asian bishops as regards the plurality of religions in Asia: "We accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation". Indeed, "the religious traditions of Asia are expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of God's Spirit in them". The Asian bishops, therefore, acknowledge the revelatory and salvific character of Asian religions. In this way they pick up the vision of Vatican II and go beyond the theological framework of traditional theology which shies away from accepting believers of other religions as "equal partners" (Painadath, 2001, p. 102).[22]

Such a position will pave the way for a more positive and mutually enriching encounter between Christians and the adherents of other religions in the basic human community of the MCCBCHS. Even Malaysian Muslims abiding by a "progressive vision of Islam" and striving for an enlightened and plural interpretation of the Qur'an will be drawn to participate in this new human community (Zainah Anwar, pp. 245,250). Through interreligious dialogue, therefore, ethnic relations will be restored in the Spirit of Christian reconciliation and justice obtained for the poorest of the poor. This then will constitute the dawning of a new reality in the multiethnic and multireligious Malaysian society of the future.

Christian mission in Malaysia has thus traversed a remarkable path that began as part of a European military agenda almost five hundred years ago. From an overwhelming concern with the goal of gaining more converts to join the Church, it now increasingly abides by the new and emerging theology of mission that is orientated towards the reign of God. It seeks to build up an inculturated church that is involved in the struggles and aspirations of all the poor and marginalised in Malaysia regardless of creed and culture. There is an

[22] "Equality" here is to be taken only as a matter of human dignity and the appreciation that God's Word is present in other religious traditions. It by no means implies that all Saviour figures are equal or that Jesus Christ is merely one of more-or-less equal saving figures.

earnest desire to engage in interfaith dialogue that will lead to the reconciliation of all communities divided along racial, religious and regional lines. Most of all it is imbued with a dialogical spirit that listens to and learns from others even as it attests patiently through contemplative action to Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life.

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