It is as a matter of fact impossible to understand the spread of Islam in the archipelago unless one takes into account the antagonism between the Moslem traders and the Portuguese.1

There is little doubt that the Schrieke theory of the race between Islam and Christianity is one of the most hotly debated theories concerning the spread of Islam and Christianity in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. Since the time Schrieke proposed his theory some other scholars have questioned its validity. One of the ardent critics of Schrieke’s theory is Naguib al-Attas. He refuses to accept the argument put forward by this Dutch scholar that competition among Muslims and Christians had accelerated the spread of Islam, particularly between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries. Al-Attas is of the opinion that there is no continuation of the crusade between Islam and Christianity in the archipelago, since Islam did not regard Christianity as a serious contender. Furthermore, according to al-Attas, it is well known that it was only from the nineteenth century onwards that Christianity made any impact at all in the archipelago.2

Al-Attas could be right, since he is one of the scholars who propose that Islam had spread in the archipelago, albeit in limited numbers, since the first century of Islam (or the seventh century CE). The Portuguese had not arrived in the region during this period. But al-Attas seems to have misread Schrieke’s theory, since the Dutch scholar proposes that the race between Islam and Christianity took place mostly in the sixteenth century, during which period the Portuguese attempted very seriously to gain the upper hand in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.

Taking into consideration recent studies on the spread of Islam and Christianity, one may be tempted to accept Schrieke’s theory. One of such recent studies is Reid.3 Implicitly accepting the basic argument of Schrieke, Reid proposes that what was taking place during the same period, as put forward by Schrieke, was the polarisation between global religions and the rise of religious boundaries, particularly between Islam and Christianity. The increasingly sharper polarisation between the two religions basically resulted from the ‘race

1 Schrieke 1957-II:233.
3 Reid 1993:143–145.
between them’ to win new converts. As Reid argues, in the sixteenth century large numbers of people, both rural and urban, were clearly converting to Islam, and identifying themselves as part of an international Islamic community. This explicit identification, according to Reid, can be attributed primarily to two factors: the direct and intense shipping links between Southeast Asia and the Red Sea area, and the sharper polarisation between the Dar al-Islam [Abode of Islam] and its enemies: Dar al-Harb or Abode of War.

Reflecting on the history of Islamisation in the archipelago, the Schrieke theory has a lot of truth, though as Meilink-Roelofsz reminds us, the crusading motive on the part of the Portuguese must not be overemphasised. The theory, combined with other theories, in fact, can give us a better grasp of not only the history of Islamisation but also of Christianity in the archipelago. Not only that, the Schrieke theory remains relevant to subsequent and recent history of the two religions in Indonesia in particular. In fact, the contemporary period is witnessing the ever-heated competition between Islamic dakwah (preaching) and Christian missions in order to win new converts.

The Race Theory: An Overview

To begin with, according to Schrieke, the Portuguese expansion in the archipelago must be viewed as a sequel to the Crusades in Europe and the Middle East. In his opinion, it was actually the lust for adventure and the ambition for nobility, combined with religious zeal, which were the driving forces setting the expansion of the Portuguese in motion. Following the expulsion of the Moors (Muslims) from the Iberian Peninsula, the Portuguese, after having gained a foothold in Ceuta on the north coast of Muslim Africa, proceeded to make further conquests along the west coast and finally rounded the Cape of Good Hope on their way to India and the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.

Schrieke emphasises, more than any other factor, the crusading spirit in the following way:

Religious zeal, nourished in the tradition of the Crusades and the remembrance of the bitter struggle with the Moors in the Iberian Peninsula, certainly continued to be an essential motivation… The religious element remained a factor of significance in Spanish politics in later times as well. For the inhabitants of the [Iberian] peninsula a Mohammedan was a ‘Moor’, an object of abhorrence.

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5 Hefner 1993.
7 Schrieke 1955-I:38.