

Islam and Christianity in South-East Asia 1600-1700

Barbara Watson Andaya

Introduction

The current population of Southeast Asia is around 618 million, spread across 11 countries. An estimated 40% are Muslim, and 21% Christian. Although there are Muslim and Christian minorities in mainland Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam), it is in the island areas (Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei and Timor Loro Sae) where Christianity and Islam are most strongly established. The 17th century was decisive in these developments, for it was during this period that Islam consolidated its hold over most of modern Malaysia, Brunei, the southern Philippines and Indonesia (the world's most populous Muslim country). At the same time, Christianity established an impregnable position in the Philippines, where today 93% of the population is Christian (notably Roman Catholic), with tiny Timor Loro Sae a distant second.

The arrival of the Protestant Dutch (and to a far lesser extent, the English) in a region where missionising had been solely a Roman Catholic concern injected new tensions into European dealings with local societies. While a theme of accommodation can certainly be traced, economic rivalries meant that conversion to Catholicism signalled association with Spanish or Portuguese interests, while local Protestants were linked to the Dutch and followers of Islam to some Muslim ruler. Because religious commitment was often used to rally support in conflicts that were actually rooted in commercial competition, the 17th century saw a hardening of religious boundaries. By 1700, toleration for religious difference was still a feature of Southeast Asian cultures, but this had been substantially undermined by European efforts to assert political and economic dominance.

The background

At the end of the 16th century, Islam was well established in the coastal areas of the western Malay-Indonesian archipelago, fostered by maritime trading networks that extended to India and the Middle East. In 1511, the Portuguese conquered the renowned *entrepôt* of Melaka, on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, resulting in the dispersal of Muslim traders to alternative ports in Sumatra, Java and Borneo. Given the Portuguese goal of dominating the lucrative spice trade, conflicts with local rulers were almost inevitable, exacerbated by the legacy of Muslim-Christian hostility in the Iberian Peninsula and Ottoman Turkey's advance into Europe. With Ottoman support, the northern Sumatran port of Aceh assumed a leading role in Muslim attacks on 'infidel' Melaka, which had become a centre for Catholic missionary activity.¹ The resulting Christian-Muslim competition was particularly marked in eastern Indonesia. Although the rulers of the fabled spice islands, Ternate and Tidore, had adopted Islam, many communities still followed indigenous belief systems. The Portuguese therefore saw Christian evangelism as a way of strengthening their position against opposition from the increasing number of 'Moor' adherents. By the same token, Muslim determination to recruit ever more followers meant that doctrinal understanding was shallow. The Dutch minister François Valentijn (1666-1727), who published a long history of Islam's arrival in Ambon, Makassar and Java, asserted that even Muslim 'priests' had little knowledge of the Qur'an and 'were barely capable of reading a chapter correctly'.² Many communities declared allegiance to a new faith simply according to their perception of who was the most powerful patron.

Despite some high status conversions, opposition to the Portuguese steadily intensified, primarily because of their treatment of Muslim rulers (including imprisonment and even assassination). Islamic teachers called for a holy war and, in 1575, the sultan of Ternate, once regarded as a potential convert, was able to drive out the unbelievers. Many fled to

¹ M. Teixeira, *The Portuguese missions in Malacca and Singapore*, Lisbon, 1961; L.A. Noonan, *The first Jesuit mission in Malacca. A study of the use of the Portuguese trading centre as a base for Christian missionary expansion during the years 1545 to 1552*, Lisbon, 1974.

² K.A. Steenbrink, *Dutch colonialism and Indonesian Islam. Contacts and conflicts 1596-1950*, Amsterdam, 2006, pp. 38-9. Compare this with Nicholas Gervaise, *An historical description of the kingdom of Macasar in the East-Indies*, London, 1701, pp. 133-4.