FIVE CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS OF INDONESIA
IN SEARCH FOR AN INTERNATIONAL OR LOCAL
IDENTITY

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As an academic discipline, the study of theology must pursue and claim
universal validity and legitimacy. As the coherent elaboration of the
doctrine of a global religion, Christian theology is also a quest for the
consistent and intelligible expression, uniting its believers in different
countries, age groups and cultures. But there is also a local and temporary
character of Christian theology, which during the last decades is not only
recognized as factual, but also as genuine and even necessary.

In a theoretical schedule the local (contextualized, inculturated) theol-
ogy can be seen as the legitimate adaptation of the universal discourse. In
reality, however, we often can discern several styles of theology, existing
one besides the other. This occurs not only within a certain period,
denomination and country, but even within one person. The following
pages attempt to draw a theological portrait of five contemporary Catholic
Indonesian theologians, who all show this ambiguity. In some writings
they follow the international discourse, sometimes exclusively dominated
by the documents of the Council of Vatican II, in other cases by the
European academic theology which they read as graduate students. In
other writings they deliberately try to use an Indonesian (or in the cases
studied below an outspoken Javanese) cultural idiom. Is this ambivalence,
this 'speaking in two tongues' a symptom of a 'split personality'? Is it
unavoidable for a first or even for several generations, that they must be
looking for a distinct formulation of Christianity? Is it the normal and
common practice of theologians? After a portrait of five theologians, we
will try to formulate some more general conclusions.

1. Joannes Baptista Banawiratma SJ (1942-)

One of the most prominent Roman Catholic theologians in modern Indo-
esia is the Jesuit priest J.B. Banawiratma, who in 1977 published his
master's thesis as 'Jesus the Guru. The Encounter of Javanism and the
Gospel'. He compared the idea of Jesus as teacher from the Gospel of
John with the intimate father-child relation, depicted as a teacher-pupil
relation in the Wulangreh by the Javanese ruler Pakubuwana IV (ca 1800)

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and the story of Dewa Ruci of the wayang tradition, where the giant Bima is instructed by the small spirit of Dewa Ruci. He comes to the conclusion that the Javanese concept of guru is so elaborated and rich, that it is suited to be used as a key concept for the description of the personality of Jesus. He also states, that it is necessary to formulate a new doctrine about Jesus in Javanese culture:

Javanese or Christian, this is not a question of an alternative. To become a Christian does not mean alienating oneself but rather finding oneself and one’s life. This shows how important it is to realize that the religious experience of the Scriptures are at the same time the religious experiences of a particular culture. (Banawiratma 1977:119; cf. Bastiaens e.a. 1984)

The compatibility and mutual enrichment of Christianity and Javanese heritage is not the outcome of a historical and literary study: it is already the more or less dogmatic starting point for Banawiratma and therefore he pushes his conclusions into this direction.

In his dissertation of 1981, however, this local perspective has disappeared altogether. This is a study on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as developed within modern European theology without any reference to the Indonesian culture. It concentrated on the writings of a major proponent of charismatic theology in the Catholic church of Germany, Heribert Mühlén (b. 1927). There is no reference in this book to Banawiratma’s earlier writing on Jesus and the two therefore seem to not to be connected.

Back in Indonesia, after his study in Innsbruck, Banawiratma became a lecturer in systematic theology at the theological faculty of the Catholic Sanata Dharma University of Yogyakarta. He became not only one of the most prolific writers for Catholic theology in Indonesia, but also an editor for the series Pustaka Teologi, a ‘Theological Library’ for educated lay people. After a concentration on Jesus and the Holy Spirit in his first two books, the role of the church became more and more important. In a contribution of 1986 he combined the doctrines of Jesus and of the church in an analysis of the empirical changes from the colonial period (Jesus as ‘guest’, inter-religious perceptions heavily influenced by colonial politics, the church did not criticize colonialism) until the present time, where Jesus is seen as a ‘developer’, a messenger from the Father to found the Kingdom of God, while other religions also are seen as contributing their own values (Banawiratma 1986:122). Theology of liberation becomes important in his theoretical framework through references to J. Sobrino, Aloysius Pieris and Gustavo Gutiérrez.

Since then Banawiratma has produced a great number of studies, stressing the social role of the (Catholic) church in the plural society of Indonesia. The more direct dialogue of religions is not neglected (see Banawiratma 1993 and 1998), but mostly embedded in a discourse of