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INTRODUCTION

Islam and Muslim–Buddhist and Muslim–Christian Relations in Southeast Asia

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Studies of Muslim society and Islamic thought tend to focus on region-specific case studies and, where there is a comparison across regions, the comparison is generally between the centre and the periphery. Although the majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims live in Asia, the vast bulk of scholarly writing focuses on Islam in the Middle East. In recent years, however, a growing body of scholarship has emerged that considers Islam and modern society in Asia in its own right. Much of this focuses on South Asia, which is understandable given that more than half a billion Muslims live there, but increasing attention is being given to the one-quarter of a billion Muslims living in Southeast Asia. Even so, there are relatively few comparative studies of Muslims living on the Asian periphery.

This special issue of *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* contributes to this emerging pool of scholarship by offering an insight into the Muslim periphery of Southeast Asia. It focuses on Islam and Muslim communities in four Southeast Asian nations: two in predominantly Buddhist mainland Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand), and two in archipelago Southeast Asia (in majority Muslim Indonesia and in majority Christian Philippines). In addition, the first of the five articles in this special issue makes a comparison between two Islamic movements in Indonesia and a prominent Islamic movement in Turkey. Whereas the other four articles focus on issues that complicate relations between Muslim minority communities and Buddhist and Christian majorities, this first article, by Greg Barton, makes a case for the three movements in question being understood as progressive Islamic movements that are very similar in many of their attributes, and much of their vision and activities, to Jewish and Christian religious philanthropic movements in the West that are concerned with providing modern secular education.

Barton's article compares broadly similar Islamic movements in Indonesia and Turkey. He looks at the Turkish social movement inspired by the writings of Fethullah Gülen, commonly referred to as the Gülen movement but known amongst the more than one million people associated with it in Turkey and around the world as the *hizmet*, which means "service." Those working in the movement see their activity as being very much one of serving society in general – not just Muslim society. The movement began in the late 1970s in the overwhelmingly Muslim majority republic of Turkey, but in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it spread rapidly into Turkic Central Asian states, whilst at the same

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time following the Turkish diaspora in capital cities across Europe, America and Australia. One of the core activities of this movement is providing high-quality modern education. Although the movement is free in many of the countries where it now operates to style its schools as Islamic schools, it resolutely chooses not to do so. This is partly because of a deep philosophical commitment to supporting the principles of secularism and partly because it prefers to exercise influence through example – *temsil* – rather than through direct preaching – *tabligh*.

It might seem strange to compare a global movement that originated in Turkey with two movements that are confined to Indonesia, but the fact that the *hizmet* has a number of schools in Indonesia and is increasingly well known there provides some basis for comparison. A more important justification, however, is that the Indonesian Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) movements are similarly committed to providing modern secular education. The independently secular character of this education is often overlooked because of its use of Islamic terminology and packaging. Muhammadiyah schools have, since their founding a century ago, been referred to as *madrasas*. The Arabic word *madrasa*, of course, simply means “school,” but its use by Muhammadiyah might cause some to misunderstand the nature of its schools. Like the schools run by the *hizmet*, Muhammadiyah *madrasas* are modern secular day schools in which any sort of religious content occurs around the edges and is most strongly communicated through the personal example of teachers and activists rather than through curricula content. In the case of the *madrasas* run by NU, the situation is understandably more confusing as these *madrasas* are located within communal residential complexes referred to as *pesantrens*. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the vast majority of these *pesantrens* have been profoundly modernized over the past four decades to the point where they now offer completely secular day schools within their compounds. These secular day schools are referred to as *madrasa aliyah* to distinguish them from *madrasa diniyah*, or religious instruction programmes, which are generally run in the evenings. The result of the reforms within the NU *pesantrens* is such that the vast majority of students studying there – and by some estimates this accounts for fully one-quarter of all Indonesian primary school pupils – are able to go on and complete primary and secondary state curricula and qualify for entry into secular tertiary institutions. Barton argues that the schools run by all three of these movements and the social networks behind them are very analogous to schools run by Jewish and Christian religious philanthropic groups in the West. Consequently, the “essential” differences so often highlighted in discussion of Islam and Islamic education are challenged by similarities in vision, character and outlook.

Turkey’s *hizmet* and Indonesia’s Muhammadiyah and NU not only represent striking examples of progressive Islamic movements but are also three of the world’s largest Islamic movements. Within Turkey, the *hizmet* is much smaller than Muhammadiyah and NU, but its influence is extensive, if difficult to measure; around the world it has hundreds of thousands of people directly associated with it and it influences many more. In Indonesia, it is generally claimed that Muhammadiyah has around 30 million affiliates and NU around 40 million, making these two movements the largest Islamic movements in the world, albeit lacking the transnational character of the *hizmet*. For this reason, it might be expected that there would be rather more scholarship on these movements than currently exists.

One of the reasons that Islam in Indonesia remains comparatively little studied – although a strong body of scholarship is now emerging – is that Islam in Indonesia and Islam across Southeast Asia are often disparaged, even by scholars, as being syncretic and lacking in the authenticity of the Islam of the Middle East. Part of the reason for this commonly held fallacy is confusion over what is meant by syncretism. There is no doubt that Islam in Southeast Asia generally finds broad expression in vernacular forms, using local languages

and cultural elements to express itself, and that this often gives the mistaken impression that Islam in Southeast Asia is nothing but a thin veneer overlaying a deeper Indic-Hindu-Buddhist substrate.

Christopher Joll tackles this misunderstanding with a specific focus on the term “merit-making,” or *tham bun*, and the way in which it is described by Thai-speaking Muslims. As Joll points out, whilst the use of the term *tham bun* to describe many common aspects of Islamic worship and culture suggests that Thai Muslims have somehow adopted a Buddhist understanding of merit-making, what is going on is in fact probably best summarized as a simple linguistic borrowing. He points out that elsewhere in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, for example, the Arabic word *amal* is often coupled with the Malay/Indonesian word *membuat* (*membuat amal*) when speaking of performing good works, but that the concept of *amal* and of doing good works goes to the heart of Islamic belief and practice. When Thai Muslims speak of *tham bun*, he argues, they are simply using a local idiom to express a concept that is largely understood in traditional Islamic, rather than specifically Thai Buddhist, terms.

If inter-communal relations in Indonesia can be described on the whole as being good, with a generally healthy mutual respect between the Muslim majority and Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other minorities, the same cannot be said for majority-minority inter-communal relations across Southeast Asia. In Buddhist majority Myanmar and Thailand, there exist deeper levels of antipathy towards Islam and Muslims, although the situation is vastly better in Thailand than it is in Myanmar. It might be expected that in Myanmar, being a deeply plural, multiethnic, society, Muslim minorities would experience no greater problems than other minorities. The underlying reasons why this is not the case are examined by Ronan Lee. He uses a particularly striking example, asking why Aung San Suu Kyi, who is known for her tireless dedication to promoting democracy, reform and the advancement of human rights, has such an apparently glaring blind spot when it comes to the Rohingya Muslim minority community in the frontline state of Rakhine in west Myanmar.

The fact that Aung San Suu Kyi has a long and consistent track record of taking a principled stand for democratic reform in Myanmar, and has a generally good record of standing up for the rights of ethnic minority communities, makes her silence on the Rohingya issue particularly enigmatic. Lee argues that, for this reason, it represents a good prism through which to understand mainstream attitudes in Myanmar to the Rohingya in particular and towards Muslims in general. He argues that Suu Kyi has powerful pragmatic political reasons for remaining silent on the Rohingya issue: her party, the National League for Democracy, is captive to negative attitudes towards the Rohingya that reflect the general view of the Myanmar elite towards this long-suffering community. The Rohingya are seen as interlopers – economic migrants who moved into Myanmar from neighbouring Bangladesh, and the fact that they are denied recognition as a legitimate Myanmar ethnic community is consistent with the view that they are outsiders. This leaves the community of approximately 800,000 Muslims – the vast majority of whom have family histories going back multiple generations in Rakhine state – without any legal rights or recognition of their place in society. In practice, this means that the Myanmar elite and society in general have no strong sense of obligation to give serious consideration to the rights of this community. And because almost all Muslims in Myanmar are Rohingya, this in turn colours Buddhist–Muslim relations. By seeing the community as an aberration, an exception to the rule, they become somebody else’s problem. But, as Lee points out, this bodes ill for the future of Myanmar, not least because it leaves open the likelihood of alienation, leading to the radicalization of some of the Rohingya youth, and at the same time forms of Buddhist fundamentalism or ultra-nationalism are being fuelled and justified by community resentment of the Rohingya.

The contemporary demonizing of Muslims in Sri Lanka by some Sinhalese ultra-nationalists parallels in many respects what is occurring in Myanmar and finds some similarities in Myanmar's Buddhist majority neighbour, Thailand. To be fair, however, Buddhist-Muslim relations in Thailand are altogether better than they are in Myanmar. Around 6% of the population in Thailand are thought to be Muslims, although some writers argue that the proportion is considerably higher. For the most part, Thai-speaking Muslims are accepted within Thai society and are allowed to practise their faith freely. Thai television is awash with Islamic television programmes and in general relations between Buddhists and Muslims appear healthy. The glaring exception to this is the case of the so-called Deep South – the three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, which lie adjacent to the Malaysian border. The incorporation of what was formally the Sultanate of Patani was formalized by the Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1909. The majority of the people living in these provinces are Muslim and ethnically Malay and speak a dialect of Malay known as Yawee. They also speak Thai, although not all of them equally well and many strongly prefer to use Malay. Although Malay Muslims represent the majority of the population in the Deep South, Muslims there represent less than one-fifth of Thailand's total Muslim population.

In these provinces Buddhist-Muslim relations have been marred by a decades-old conflict driven, in the first instance, not by religion but by ethno-nationalist sentiment. A section of the Patani Malay community are agitated by the perception that their language and culture are not valued and recognized by the Thai authorities. Over the past decade, however, a significant shift has occurred in this conflict. With a sharp rise in the level of violence, accompanied by harsh responses from the Thai police and military, a new generation of Patani separatists has emerged. In her article, Virginie Andre describes this transformed movement as a globalized jihad in which radical Islamist ideas have become instrumental. Andre describes the process of globalization in which the global narrative of neojihadism is localized into the Patani struggle. At the same time, some of these Patani activists, who, unlike the previous generation of activists, remain clandestinely and ostensibly leaderless, have taken to Internet-mediated communications, including the use of social media and YouTube, to build local and international support for their cause, leading to a new type of warfare, i.e. Patani 2.0.

Some of this activity has taken the form of posting graphically violent video clips and productions. The video content is drawn not just from incidents in the Deep South of Thailand itself but also from around the world, while the voice-over narration draws these visual elements into a particularly Patani articulation of the call to jihad. Andre argues that, whilst this has evidently been effective in building support for Patani 2.0, it is also deeply polarizing. Not only are many Muslims offended by this online content, although those in the Deep South tend to keep quiet about their misgivings, but many Thai Buddhists also see in them evidence of the nature of Islam and Muslims more generally. Patani neojihadist YouTube clips have become a magnet for reactionary, and often deeply vitriolic responses from Thai nationalists. Analysing not only these clips but also discussion forum responses, Andre argues that this material is directly feeding Islamophobia within Thai Buddhist society. To the extent that this provokes a harsh reaction to the Patani cause, it may well advance the interests of militant extremists, but it also represents a broader threat to Buddhist-Muslim relations and contributes to an impasse in which the problems of the Deep South grow steadily worse. So far, these troubles have been confined to the Patani region, but concerns are growing that as the issues continue to remain unresolved they may generate responses outside of the region that could prove gravely detrimental to Buddhist-Muslim relations across Thai society.

Matteo Vergani sees evidence of a similar dynamic occurring in the southern Philippines, on the island of Mindanao. Like Andre, Vergani had made a careful study of online propaganda used by separatist elements and has found signs of increasing neojihadist content. His article focuses on

findings from research on three Facebook pages that claim to be linked to Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and the Moro National Liberation Front. Vergani examines the way in which this English-language material describes and seeks to influence Christian–Muslim relations in general, arguing that it has the potential to fuel radicalization and polarization. He further shows the potential impact of neojihadist ideology on the narration of the resistance movement, highlighting the consequences for the negotiation of Christian and Muslim identities. The article focuses on the narratives circulating on Facebook, which is one of the most important virtual and global public spheres where people share (and shape) collective identities and religious symbols. The narratives circulating in social media contribute to frame audiences' understanding of the conflict and their attitudes towards the threatening "others," which in the Philippines are constructed along the lines of Christian and Muslim identities.

Whilst relations between Buddhists, Christians and Muslims are generally good across Southeast Asia, with evidence of considerable cultural interaction and productive borrowing, the emergence of conflict in certain regions has the potential to undermine this. Tapping into a global jihadi narrative, the glocalized propaganda of militant Islamists contributes to reactive co-radicalization in Thailand and the Philippines, undermining trust and threatening inter-communal relations. The dynamic in Myanmar is very different, but a similar threat of reactive co-radicalization exists. What all of these case studies teach us is that local factors remain important but the local and the global now interact in complex ways for good and for ill.