

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

**Religion, Nationalism, and Politics in Southeast Asia:
The Ambivalence of the Sacred in an Uncertain World**

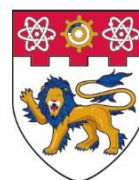
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INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

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**Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Southeast Asia:
The Ambivalence of the Sacred in an Uncertain World**

Joseph Chinyong Liow

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Abstract

In contemporary Southeast Asia, the focus on religion has been on its role in interstate conflicts across the region in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines. At first glance, these conflicts appear religious because of the use of religious symbols and narratives to describe them by popular media, in academia, and among conflict actors themselves. However, to conclude that they are intuitively religious in nature by virtue of their religious manifestation is erroneous. Religion is, and has for a long time, been a salient marker of personal and collective identity for many Southeast Asian societies, while its manifestation in SEA is often quite distinct from the way it is typically conceptualised under a Western lens. In this sense, religious narratives, when employed in conflicts, speak to broader concerns relating to questions of identity, nationhood, legitimacy and belonging, and not so much on religious issues such as confessional beliefs or doctrines. This paper explores the nexus between religion and nationalism and how this is crucial in understanding the role of religion in interstate conflicts in Southeast Asia today.

Introduction¹

In 2004, I was sitting in a coffee shop in Pattani province, Thailand, discussing the surge of violence in that troubled region with a good friend who has since passed on. My friend was a respected local civil society activist who had been helping me understand the subaltern history of the southernmost provinces, or the Deep South as some have taken to calling it. At that coffee shop, we were chatting about the events of 28 April 2004, when 32 militants armed with machetes and a pistol were killed by the Thai military, in the famous Krue Se Mosque, or Krusek Mosque. I posed the question to him: why was the local Malay community so adamant and persistent in their resistance against central authority through both armed and unarmed means? After all, since the early 1990s the provinces had been recipients of heavy developmental assistance from the Thai state and especially the royal palace. My friend explained that the question was not one of modernisation, progress, or development, but of fundamental issues of identity, belonging, and “being Islam”. This disconnect weighed heavily on my mind in the course of my many meetings with officers from the Thai military and officials from the intelligence and security services charged with ensuring security in the South, who all shared their bewilderment at how the Malays of the South were “ungrateful” for the goodwill that Bangkok had and was bestowing on them.

A year later, drawn by what appeared to me at first glance to be obvious parallels to Thailand’s Deep South, I managed with the help of another good friend, the American anthropologist Tom McKenna, to make contacts in Cotabato, southern Philippines. That year, I made the first of several visits to Cotabato City, where I had the privilege to meet Tom’s interlocutors who had helped him during his own research for a book titled *Muslim Rulers and Rebels*. It was not difficult to appreciate rather quickly how similar perceptions and misperceptions obtained between what was happening in Thailand and the Philippines among the principal protagonists. This set me on a path to attempt to understand the deep and complex historical dynamics that inform some of the intrastate conflicts – which I define as virulent and vehement disagreements that are expressed either discursively or physically – that still persist in Southeast Asia.

Now, we should recognise that Southeast Asia has come a long way. What was once notoriously known as “a Region in Revolt” is today one of the most dynamic economic regions in the world. Yet, it is, at the same time, also home to some of the most enduring post-colonial intrastate conflicts that continue to bedevil modern society. A brief look at the headlines of major broadsheets and social media over the last decade and a half is a good indicator of how this has cast a shadow over the region. In Myanmar, violence has broken out between Buddhists and Muslims even as the country inches down the path of democratisation.

In Thailand and the Philippines, Muslim minority groups in their respective southern provinces are purportedly waging “*jihad*” or “holy war” against what we are told are majoritarian prejudices of predominantly Buddhist and Catholic states and societies respectively.² While Malaysia has thus far avoided the outbreak of violence, the country nevertheless has witnessed an alarming escalation of tension as a Muslim dominated government has allowed the expression of acutely exclusivist majoritarian views on religion in the name of “defending” the Islamic faith to go unchecked, the deleterious effect of which has been the constriction of the religio-cultural space afforded to non-Muslims by a range of means including, not least, re-interpretations of the Malaysian Constitution itself. In Indonesia, post-Suharto political transformation allowed a hundred flowers to bloom. But democratisation and political liberalisation also possessed a dark side that found expression in the rise of sectarianism and religious intolerance, one of the latest incidents being the pressure exerted on the Indonesian government to convict the beleaguered non-Muslim ethnic Chinese governor of Jakarta, Basuki Djahaja Purnama, or Ahok, for the crime of blasphemy. In fact, in Indonesia, these tensions have also boiled over to violence not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but within Indonesia’s kaleidoscopic Muslim community as well, as the plights of the Shi’a and Ahmadiyah communities would attest.³

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 3rd SRP Distinguished Lecture and Symposium, organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, on 2 February 2017. This paper draws heavily from Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

² See Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Muslim Resistance in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines: Religion, Ideology, and Politics*, Policy Studies 24, Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington, 2006.

³ The argument that contemporary intolerance of religious minorities is merely the most recent manifestation of a longstanding effort to promote godly nationalism while dislodging secular or Islamic alternatives is made in Jeremy

What is readily evident, at least at first glance, is that there is a common thematic thread that appears to weave its way through many of these conflicts – the role of religion. In brief, many of these conflicts appear intuitively religious in nature by virtue of the frequent use of religious symbols, metaphors, and narratives to describe them. We see this in the popular media, in academia, and most significantly, among conflict actors themselves. Furthermore, if media reports and political statements are any indication, religious conflicts in Southeast Asia are nothing short of the incendiary acts of extremist religious groups waged against followers of other religions and faith, perhaps even against others professing the same creed. Or, it represents the wholesale rejection of modernity by such groups. These perspectives also proliferate in populist literature, where elegant explanations are predicated on clichés and catch-phrases such as “anti-modernity,” “cosmic wars,” or “clash of civilizations”. Underpinning such views is the perspective that religion is predisposed to violence. This is a view that has gained considerable currency in many quarters. I do not wish to defend religion, or to debunk the arguments of those who posit and defend this correlation. But I do wish to point out that such explanations (or more appropriately, statements) do little more than obscure and caricature what are very complex issues. Indeed, given the popularity and appeal of such views in the current milieu, a proper understanding of the role of religion in these conflicts is both necessary and urgent, lest one makes the same mistake one accuses religious extremists of making, namely, to subscribe to very tidy and simplistic, but ultimately baseless and misinformed, ideas.

Bearing these issues in mind, this paper will attempt to shed some light on the following question: how should one endeavour to understand the role of religion in some of the intrastate conflicts in Southeast Asia? I will begin by making a case for why religion and nationalism are important elements to the study of many intrastate conflicts in Southeast Asia today. The second part of the paper will consider the nexus between religion and nationalism. The third and final part will look specifically at how the imperatives of faith and flag manifest in several examples of conflict and contestation across Southeast Asia.

When scholars try to deduce what causes conflict, there is often a tendency to confuse the matter with the apparent cognate question of why groups and movements engage in conflict. Though seemingly cognate, these are, in fact two different issues, and the danger is to confuse which is the product and which, the presupposition of an argument. My point is that while religion may cause contestations, and conflicts may be waged in defence of God and creed, more often than not religion may not necessarily be what the fight is about, and to cast them as merely cases of religious or sectarian strife threatens to miss the proverbial forest for the trees. Put differently, it is erroneous to assume that conflicts are religious in nature simply because they appear religious in manifestation.

To be sure, to suggest that religion plays a prominent role in politics hardly counts as a novel or path-breaking claim in the fields of political science or conflict studies. The current literature is attended by rich coverage on debates that meander across themes such as the global resurgence of religion, jihadi violence and “new” (that is to say, religiously motivated) terrorism, clash of civilizations, and inter-religious conflict (not necessarily limited to, but certainly dominated by, the monotheistic religions), all of which explore one facet or another of the nexus between religion, conflict, and politics.⁴ To my mind, the point of departure is over whether religious belief lies at the core of the problem of political conflict. In this paper, I posit that should one make the argument that religion is the main cause or driver of at least some of the many intrastate struggles in Southeast Asia claiming authenticity in deity and piety, one would be fundamentally missing the point. For such a perspective betrays a misunderstanding of both the role and place of religion in Southeast Asian societies, and the fundamental drivers of many intrastate conflicts in the region.

My argument turns on the premise that far from the efforts of some scholars to draw what is ultimately a false distinction between the religious and the secular, religion has always been a key component of identity in many Southeast Asian societies. And because religion is a key component of individual and collective identity, it stands to reason that religion can play, and indeed has played, an important role in providing a framework for

Menchik, “Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56.3 (2014): 591-621.

⁴ The point about the nexus between religion and violence have been elaborated in the following: Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005; Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008; Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence*, New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

interpreting political events and a normative language for articulating purpose in response to these events. In Southeast Asian society, whether pre-modern or contemporary, religion is not just superstition or a set of doctrines but a lived historical experience that cannot be separated from politics and the secular. For instance, is it possible to divorce notions of kingship and political authority from the Hindu-Buddhist cosmos, and later, the Islamic faith, in pre-modern maritime Southeast Asia? Fast forward to the anti-colonial nationalist movements. How many of them, whether in Burma, the Dutch East Indies, or British Malaya, had their origins in religious orders or movements, and were led by local religious elite? Consider too, the rich and diverse religio-political narratives of the Indo-Malay world captured in concepts such as Pancasila, Islam Nusantara, Piagam Jakarta, Masyarakat Madani, and Islam Hadhari, or in Thailand, Chat, Sasana, Pramahakaset (Nation, Religion, King). These concepts speak not only about confessional creeds and deity, but also present ideas on how society – modern society - should be organised, and how politics should be conducted.

Hence religion and religious narratives, in this sense, speak to broader concerns that relate not so much to confessional beliefs or doctrine, important as these matters are, but to questions of identity, nationhood, legitimacy, and belonging. In keeping with this train of thought, the process of national identity and consciousness framing and construction, is therefore imperative for efforts to better understand the religious character of some political conflicts and contestations in the region. In this regard, I am particularly interested in the nexus between religion and nationalism.

Why Religion and Nationalism?

Religion and nationalism are two of the most potent and enduring socio-political forces that have shaped our modern world. Indeed, few ideas have commanded as much loyalty. For faith and flag, countless men and women have over the course of modern history willingly spilt blood and sacrificed, as well as taken, lives. Yet, for those working on Southeast Asia, a region where religious identities have proven as strong and as resilient as nationalist impulses, there remains little systematic study of how these two forces have interacted and combined to provide powerful impetus for mobilisation and action.

While modernisation and secularisation theory confidently predicted an erosion of religion in the civil sphere, a cursory glance at the world today readily prove such predictions premature, if not fundamentally misguided.⁵ In fact, religion has proven that it is not the archaic cultural artefact existing as an anachronism in modern society as some might contend, but rather, is very much part of a community's negotiation of its identity in the context of modernity. To this, I would add further that the emergence of "secular" and "modern" nationalism did not come about as a result of the demise of religion, but rather the renegotiation and refashioning of the relationship between religion, nationalism, and the state, for which the secularisation of society was not a cause, but a consequence of the rise of nationalist movements.

The most obvious evidence of this can be found in the process of European state formation and the struggle for power between the church and civil authority between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, where scholars have made the case that even as religion was re-invented as a private sphere separate from the secular world of politics, it was the church that paved the way for the emergence of "modern" and "secular" nationalism in how it provided (national) symbols and delineated the boundaries of (national) identity. The historian Simon Walker's observation of how successive kings promoted national and dynastic unity through the medium of a revitalised public religion, is hence instructive in this regard.⁶ And it is this contingent separation of church and state that gets exported worldwide, as the story goes, through the enterprise of empire and colonialism.

Yet upon reaching Southeast Asian shores, the artificiality of this notion that church (or mosque, or temple) and state can be separated into different and independent realms very quickly became evident. I had already mentioned earlier how in Southeast Asia, what we understand as religion has always been a crucial component of Southeast Asian society. I say "what we understand as religion" because the definition of religion is itself a hotly debated subject that remains unresolved, and I would submit to you that the concept of religion

⁵ Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Towards Desacralizing Secularization Theory," *Social Forces* 65.3 (1987): 587-611; Daniel Philpott, "The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations," *World Politics* 52.2 (2000): 206-45.

⁶ Simon Walker, "Between Church and Crown: Master Richard Andrew, King's Clerk," *Speculum* 74.4 (1999): 956-91.

was in fact quite alien to indigenous Southeast Asian thinking prior to the advent of empire and colonialism for reasons already mentioned.

One can immediately discern some resonance with state formation in Southeast Asia, where religion and politics has overlapped in some way, shape, or form. Myanmar and Thailand comes to mind, where the Buddhist Sangha underpinned the foundations of the modern state. Or Malaysia, where constitutional tension between religious (Islamic) authority and the non-Muslim right to freedom of worship coloured to a considerable extent the narrative of Malay nationalism, the consequences of which are being felt to this day. Indeed, as Sudipta Kaviraj explained in her work on “thick” and “thin” religion: “When faced with the challenges of modernity, traditional forms do not drop their weapons and die. Some of these groups ignore their historical duty to decline and find unreasonable ways of adapting and even flourishing in the new cultural ecology.”⁷

I would like to put to you that religion animates three key elements of nationalism: first, the idea of the state as a politico-legal entity; second, the nation which is or is taken to be a community of people sharing in some important way a common culture; and third, the nation-state which is a nation, or possibly a collection of nations, organized and governed as a (territorial) state. Another way of putting it, these three constituent elements of nationalism speak to, and correspond with: legitimacy and governance, collective identity, and nation-statehood (who is included and excluded).

The second part of my paper dwells on each of these three forms and how they resonate across Southeast Asia.

Legitimacy is a critical component of nationalism because it essentially poses the imperative question: by whom should one be ruled, and on what terms? In answering this question, it can be hypothesised that one reason why some states struggle to create a sense of “we-ness” can be attributed to a deficit in legitimacy, or an absence of legitimacy altogether. This happens when the authors of the predominant conception of nationhood fail to obtain buy-in and acceptance of the view that their “official” construction of national identity should supersede other identity signifiers that their populations may possess.

Equally pertinent to nationalism is the matter of the existence of a resilient and resonant collective identity. By drawing attention to nationalism, and more specifically the terms and process through which national identities are conceived and constructed – a process which we can term the “conception of nationhood” – one needs consider competing conceptions of nationhood not only as they relate to physical space in several Southeast Asian cases – separatism and irredentism and all many of movements for autonomy, but ideational and ideological space as well, in order to bring into sharper focus the role of religion and how it relates to contestations that occur within the contours of national identity and state building.

Finally, implicit in this is a suggestion that in most cases the politico-cultural entity called “the nation” is not, and has never been, consonant with the politico-juridical entity of “the state.” Even the most homogeneous nation-states today have significant minorities who may not share in the majority’s all-encompassing conception of nationhood. Indeed, it is this fact that compels one to give heed to alternative conceptions of nationhood in one’s analysis, in addition to the “official” nationalisms and their underlying narratives through which independent Southeast Asian states came into being.

Having sketched out the conceptual and analytical contours, how do these patterns manifest in Southeast Asia?

In Southeast Asia, religiously-inspired narratives that frame conceptions of nationhood have found expression in various forms. Some are part of “national” histories sanctioned by the state, while others express “subaltern” histories. Some are articulated explicitly while others, implicitly. Narratives have changed and been reframed, whether to legitimise resistance or discredit it. But I have found that they all point to one thing – the use of religion in the narrative itself to trigger collective memory and experiences. In both Mindanao and the southern provinces of Thailand for instance, contrary to the unfounded speculations of alarmist pundits, what is being liberated by the Bangsamoro and Malay “jihadists” is not some abstract transnational caliphate but a historical territorially and culturally bounded entity, imagined or otherwise. Furthermore, the reason for the move to liberate these kingdoms lies in the perceived illegitimacy of the central state, measured by their inability or reluctance to accept the Bangsamoro and the Malay-Muslims as separate nations within the territorial state, and by their treatment as inferior members of the respective politico-social entities. Put differently, conflict has

⁷ Sudipta Kaviraj, “On Thick and Thin Religion” in *Religion and the Political Imagination*, eds Ira Katzelson and Gareth Stedman Jones, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 340.

been a response to the difficulty or reluctance of “official” Thai and Philippine nationalism to accommodate local conceptions of nationhood, or even to countenance a “nation without (a) state.”⁸

In Mindanao, religious discourse has been used to frame grievances over land loss and marginalisation (resolving this intractable problem proved the sternest test for those tasked with drawing up the crucial annexes to the Bangsamoro Basic Law).⁹ Yet at the same time, references to confessional faith and creed have also been reframed by the leadership of the MILF to rationalise and explain the decision to bring hostilities against the Philippine state to an end despite falling short of the objective of the creation of an Islamic state in the dogmatic sense of the term, an objective for which a Moro *jihad* was purportedly waged for decades, if not longer.¹⁰ An analogous phenomenon, albeit within a different context and with its own twist, can be discerned in the Malay-Muslim narratives that frame conflict in Thailand’s southern provinces. According to these narratives, conflict with the Thai state flows from historical narratives of conquest and subjugation at the hands of a hegemonic central state portrayed as a Buddhist colonial power, cue the presence of the *Phaya Tani* canon (Seri Patani in Malay), the largest of 42 cannons on display outside the Ministry of Defence building, that according to the Malay-Muslim narrative was captured by the Siamese army during the 1786 conflict that led to the subjugation of the kingdom of Patani Darussalam, and resistance has essentially been framed with reference to cultural identity and ethnic distinctiveness which religion serves to amplify.¹¹ It appears then, that the struggle is cut from the same cloth of anti-colonial resistance movements prevalent during the Cold War, only this time it is using religion as an idiom of nationhood.

At any rate, because religious identity – specifically, Islamic identity in both Mindanao and southern Thailand – weigh so heavily in their histories as well as the ethnic and cultural self-conceptions and collective memories of the respective communities, it should hardly be surprising to find that religion has been employed to animate historical narratives. Yet equally evident is the fact that, despite the universalistic appeal of the Islamic faith, in Mindanao and the southern Thai provinces the scope of religious conflict has been decidedly limited, and remarkably parochial in the latter case. Not only that, the fact that there are at times also degrees of variation within the collective’s own narratives of religious nationalism further indicates that the phenomenon itself is far more complex than simple recourse to piety. In other words, Bangsamoro and Patani mythopoeia belies the absence of a singular Bangsamoro or Malay-Muslim narrative.

The preceding point highlights the reality that the construction of identity along religious lines is also contested within the in-group, as is evident in the dissonances within the religious nationalist movements and narratives. Heretofore, nationalists will claim to speak for the communities they represent, and oftentimes present the identities and narratives that frame them as coherent and consistent. In truth, the situation is often far more ambiguous, and even resistance frames may – and oftentimes are – contested from several quarters within the communities they purport to represent. The point to stress here, again, is the interactive and dynamic nature of conceptions of nationhood, where this dynamic and contingent feature of religion belies modernist attempts to dismiss its purported antediluvian and primordial nature.

One can further illustrate contextualisation with reference to Malaysia and Indonesia. In Indonesia with regards to the dynamics between *Islamisasi* and *Kristenisasi*, the process traced to the 1970s when Christians were seen to be on the political ascent with Suharto’s endorsement, resistance was triggered by the perception that indigenous rights of a Muslim-dominant society were being undermined with the conjunction of interests between the New Order state and its Christian (and nominal Muslim) allies up to the late 1980s, whereas political

⁸ For the notion of “nations without states”, see Roger Friedland, “Religions nationalism and the problem of collective representation,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 125-52.

⁹ Eric Gutierrez and Saturnino Borrás Jr., *The Moro Conflict: Landlessness and Misdirected State Policies*, Policy Studies Series 8, Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington, 2005.

¹⁰ Datuan Solaiman Panolimba, “Armed Struggle of the Bangsamoro Muslims in the Philippines,” *Barangay RP* (25 June 2009), available at: <https://barangayrp.wordpress.com/2009/06/25/armed-struggle-of-the-bangsamoro-muslims-in-the-philippines/>

¹¹ Legend has it that the Phaya Tani cannon was commissioned by the Patani kingdom to bolster its defence against Siamese invaders. It was believed to have been casted sometime between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The significance of this cannon and what it represents is expressed in stories of how the cannon ended up in Bangkok. It is believed that the cannon was one of two massive weapons captured by invading Siamese forces during the 1786 conflict that resulted in the subjugation of the Patani kingdom. The cannons were purportedly drawn back to Bangkok as part of the commander of the Siamese forces Prince Sura Singhanat’s strategy to demoralise the Malay-Muslim defenders. To many denizens of Patani, the cannon remains a symbolism of the humiliation of their historical kingdom at the hands of Siamese invaders.

transition was seen to offer up opportunities to rectify this imbalance; indeed, to re-negotiate the place of religion in Indonesian conceptions of nationhood in terms of its primacy. Indeed, the case against Ahok was merely one of the latest iterations of this longdrawn dynamic. In Malaysia on the other hand, Malay-Muslim ethnonationalists have essentially commandeered the levers of state power and sought to use them as a vehicle to impose their conception of nationhood and legitimacy onto (non-Malay-Muslim) minorities on grounds that Malay-Muslim dominance is the cornerstone of the “Malay”(sian) nation and state. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, majoritarian Muslim impulses to re-negotiate and recast the fundamental premises of nationhood have in turn prompted counter-mobilisation in defence of minority rights as equal citizens and members of the nation, amplifying tensions in the process.

The task of constructing national identity in Malaysia has proven to be especially onerous despite the fact that tensions between competing conceptions of nationhood have yet to break out into open hostilities.¹² In Malaysia, the fundamental premise of state (which in Malaysia basically means political parties aligned along ethnic lines such that identity differences are actually formally institutionalised and perpetuated) and society (namely, policies of ethnic compartmentalisation going as far back as the colonial era) renders the task almost insurmountable given how legitimacy is built on the assertion of a majoritarian identity to the point of outright marginalisation. Indeed, these obstacles have rendered it all the more difficult to talk of a “national identity” in Malaysia.

An added element that further complicates the already complex exercise of national identity formation in Malaysia is the fusion of ethnic and religious identity that has deepened over the past two decades in a country where ethnic boundaries are already heavily politicised, and where the dominant Malay community continues to grapple with the bipolar paradox of a sense of supremacy born of a presumed right to dominate on one hand and an acute (if somewhat misguided) perception of vulnerability and insecurity on the other. The challenge that this poses has been compounded by the existence of a monological, as opposed to dialogical, ideal of nationhood which increasingly denies the claims of those who are not members of the Malay-Muslim nation, the *penumpang*, to equal status within the Malaysian state. Although not as explicit or as “official,” a somewhat similar script is playing out in Thailand, where the terminology of “*Khaek*” continues to be used by Thais to refer to Malay-Muslims from the southern provinces, and in Indonesia, where the place (and rights) of followers of the Muslim *Ahmadiyah* sect as members of the Indonesian Muslim nation are being contested on grounds of their “unorthodox” understandings of the faith. Conversely, one is encouraged by how the concept of *Bangsamoro*, once used to define difference in the southern Philippines, is now being used to bridge, at least in theory, Muslim, Christian, and Lumad identities.

In essence then, religious nationalists have recognised the value of religious identity and history and seek to harness their emotive power on the basis that their conception of nationhood needs to be defended and perpetuated. One should be careful not to simply dismiss this as mere instrumentalism or opportunism, for the emotive power upon which rests the mobilising potential of religious nationalism was not conjured by them, but rather triggered in the collective memory of the people. And because narratives are socially constructed and marginally bound by fact, the mythopoetic faculty of nationalists allow them to make vertiginuous leaps in order to create, sustain, and reshape the sense of self and others, thereby creating the notorious “othering” effect. That is why nationalists and political leaders invest much attention and energy to constantly invent and reinvent the past even as they frame (and reframe) the future in order to accomplish their presumed manifest destiny.

Conclusion

In Southeast Asia, religion shares a complicated and intricate relationship with both the nation and the state. Religion has played a considerable – indeed, vital – and dynamic role in the process of the imagination and construction of the nation, as well as in motivating conflict that results from competing conceptions of nationhood. The basis of this has been the consequential role that religion plays in the cultural and historical

¹² For more on the tensions and ambiguities surrounding the concept of “Malay-Muslim”, see Timothy Barnard, *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2014; Yamamoto Hiroyuki, Anthony Milner, Kawashima Midori, and Arai Kazuhiro eds, *Bangsa and Umma: Development of People-Grouping Concepts in Islamized Southeast Asia*, Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2011; Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied eds, *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics, and Paradoxes of Malayness*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2011.

narratives through which identity is interpreted and mobilised. That religion has proven imperative in the formation and sustenance of the nation through its shaping of national identity, often serving as a bedrock for nation-building, is evident in the cases of Thai, Malaysian, and Indonesian “official” nationalism, with the Philippines being a possible exception. The early nationalists of the *Dunia Melayu*, the *Malay World*, or from the *Caodai* movement in Vietnam at the turn of the 20th century, or the Buddhist clergy in Burma during British colonial rule from 1824-1948, were mostly religious leaders. In the Dutch East Indies and colonial Malaya, the early nationalist movements were religious movements that drank from the wellsprings of Islamic reform taking place in the Middle East at the turn of the last century.

At the same time, religious identities have also emerged to challenge and undermine “the nation” as defined by the post-independence state. This has been shown in how intrastate conflicts framed in religious language have played out, and the strains they have created. This dynamic has taken diverse forms, from of the Malay-Muslim armed struggle in Thailand’s deep to the peaceful but no less substantial “pulpit mobilisation” that has been taking place across churches in Malaysia since 2008 in defence of the constitutional right to freedom of worship.¹³ Intriguingly, the logic can even work at cross-purposes for minority communities depending on context and circumstance – juxtapose, for example, the inconvenience of loyalty to the Thai flag for the Malay-Muslim residing in Thailand’s southern province with the convenience of Indonesian citizenship for a member of the *Ahmadiyah* in Indonesia, which allows them to claim the legal status of “being Muslim” despite the denial of that identity marker to them by many Indonesian Muslim groups, including several fatwa that were issued against them.

The manner in which confessional identity negotiates, competes with, and coheres to conceptions of nationhood in the modernist project of imagining the nation within the territorial state points to the fact that religion is hardly the antithesis of modernity that secularist scholars would make it out to be. Instead, non-Western societies such as those in Southeast Asia have melded their cultural cores (ergo, religious identities) with Western modernity in the process of imagining identity as a nation, however imperfect or incomplete. Nor should it be inferred that by adapting, these societies have arrived at “the end of history” any more than Western societies themselves. Far from it, for religious nationalism can be as divisive as modernity itself. But the more important point to stress is that religious conflict is not a visceral primordial reaction to modernity. Rather, it is the very outcome of the process of adaptation, where attempts to conceive of and reconcile nationhood and statehood are defined, negotiated, and contested in the language of religion.

¹³ For more on “pulpit mobilisation” in Malaysia, see Joseph Chinyong Liow and Choong Pui Yee, “Negotiating Religious Freedom: Christianity in Muslim Majority Malaysia,” in *Protecting the Sacred, Creating Peace in Asia Pacific*, Peace and Policy 17, eds Chaiwat Satha-Anand and Olivier Urbain, Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013.

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