

## **“Faith without borders” Themes and issues in the historiography of Southeast Asian Christianity.**

Henry Martyn Centre, Westminster College, Cambridge, 9 November 2006.

John Roxborough

In 1828 Samuel Dyer (1804-1843), formerly student at Trinity College Cambridge, and later to be remembered as the inventor of Chinese metallic fonts and as the father of Hudson Taylor’s first wife, Maria, sailed for the island of Penang to join the Ultra Ganges Mission started by Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society two decades earlier as a mission to China.

The phrase “Southeast Asia” appears first of all to have been used that same year by the American Baptist Howard Malcolm,<sup>1</sup> but it is interesting that way in which the region was defined by its relation to India (“beyond the Ganges”) and the vision of a mission to China, and this has continued as a feature of Southeast Asia identity. Missionaries frequently went there when China was their real goal. Catholic Jesuits and American Methodists were among those who came to the Malay Peninsular and other areas from bases in India. Migrant Christian communities came to the region from South China and from India.

When Roy Whitehorn, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of England and formerly minister of St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Kuala Lumpur, visited Singapore and Malaya in his capacity as RAF Chaplain, in 1952, the sense of beyond India, and connection with China, and the significance of both for Christian mission still loomed. By then the term “Southeast Asia,” barely existent in earlier literature, had established itself as the name of a particular theatre of the war with Japan.

India had gained independence. The window of opportunity of foreign Christian access to China opened by the opium war of 1842 had been closed by the success of the Communist Party. The London Missionary Society operation in Hong Kong coordinated the withdrawal of staff from China as it became clear that the defeat of Japan was not about to lead to a new missionary era in the Far East.

In November 1952 the China Inland Mission met in Bournemouth to depose its General Director, rename itself the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and embark on a remarkable transition of mission focus from China to Southeast Asia. The British government anxious to achieve a stable settlement for independence in Malaya and Singapore sought to engage ex-China missionaries in the battle for the hearts and minds of Chinese families resettled in New Villages to starve out the Communist guerrillas in the jungles. The London Missionary Society and the Presbyterian Church of England were among those who relocated staff in Malaya and Singapore, though on their own terms, not those of the government. The Church of Scotland missionary, John Fleming, participated in the development of Trinity College

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Travels in South-Eastern Asia*, Boston, 1839. Frank N Trager, "Recent Southeast Asian Historiography," *Pacific Affairs* 30, no. 4 (1957). p.358.

Singapore as a regional centre, and the coordination of mainline Protestant missionary activity in Malaya. For some time he edited the *Southeast Asian Journal of Theology*, its sense of location only slightly compromised by the designation of the four issues of a periodical seriously dedicated to quality local studies by the names of the Northern Hemisphere seasons, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter.

The issue of geographical definition and the theme of cultural and religious flow continue to be of interest in the historiography of Christianity and are worth some reflection.

It was region whose history included centuries of overlays of Indian religious and political ideas from the West and Chinese from the North. Islam had spread through trade and been further dispersed by Christian conquest. Nestorian and other Eastern Christians had long been among the Asian traders to Melaka and other centres before the Portuguese conquest in 1511.

Penang was one of the "Straits Settlements" acquired by Britain between 1786 and 1819. Along with Singapore and Melaka, Penang provided a base for the LMS in the region until it removed its mission to Hong Kong after 1842. The Straits Settlements provided political stability, British governance, excellent communications, a stable and moderate (by tropical standards) climate, and missionary opportunities with Chinese of different dialects, Muslims of several races but particularly Malay, and limited contact with sea-faring 'Orang Laut' and indigenous inland peoples from the peninsular.

They were not the only Christians in the Settlements and far from being the only Christians in the region. Portuguese and French Catholics competed for jurisdiction over Eurasian Christian communities, a Catholic major seminary had been in Penang since 1808 having moved from Thailand.

Like other religions, despite constraints in particular periods, over time Christianity in the region appeared as a faith without borders, able to spread across the porous boundaries of local and colonial jurisdiction with relative ease.

Samuel Dyer and others of the Ultra Ganges LMS mission in the Straits Settlements well illustrate the connectedness of the region to India and China.

April 27 1836.

"Whatever Dr Morrison's faults as a translator of the Scriptures might have been, sure we are that the charge of want of 'fidelity' ought never to have been made by the authors of the 'Revision' if ever there existed a translation professing to be faithful and most unfaithful it is the new Chinese translation of our Brethren on the borders of China"

"We ought to notice that Leang Afa objected to the revision that it was a collection of phrases from different classic authors, thrown together to express the meaning of S.S. This was entirely spontaneous."

"If the Society patronize this; it may patronize a paraphrase; but then, let not the paraphrase be called a translation."<sup>2</sup>

Southeast Asian studies developed rapidly in the 1960s, its religious parallel being the interest of the OMF in its new mission areas, and the American Methodists in situations like the tribal peoples of Sarawak. In a survey article in 1962 Harry Benda, pioneer of Southeast Asian studies in Yale, lamented that the discipline was being launched without either monograph studies or integrative texts. Western interest, Christian and secular was probably stimulated by conflicts with Communism in Vietnam, Korea and Malaya, a pervasive domino theory, the "loss" of China, and the situation of Indonesia highlighted by a failed coup in September 1965. Britain had demonstrated its inability to defend Singapore during the War, and Australia and New Zealand realised that their own political interests lay in constructive relationships with a part of the world about which they knew little.

Debate over the meaning of the term might struggle to find evidence of pre-European commonalities across the region, or argue over the inclusion of the Philippines and the exclusion of Sri Lanka, but the development of relationships between newly independent nation-states, including the formation of ASEAN, meant that anachronistic or not, and independent of whether the vicissitudes of Western interest following the American defeat in Vietnam meant loss of interest, the entity of Southeast Asia now appeared secure.

Historiography of Christianity in Southeast Asia

Writing about the history of Christianity in the region followed patterns common elsewhere. Missionary societies needing support for their work generated literature which tended to stress the seriousness of spiritual and social need, the commitment if not heroism and sacrifice of the missionaries, and which provided evidence of the success of the missionary enterprise. At times there was the realisation that there were issues of strategy to be worked through, but the general picture was of confidence, and the major contributions sought from home were prayer, finance, and future workers.

This much was understandable, and was true for Catholics as for Protestants. The mission and the expatriate were at the centre of the reporting exercise. That reporting could be critical and lead to change, as Hendrik Kraemer's *Mission Field to Independent Church*<sup>3</sup> written while a Bible Society Secretary in Indonesia. As Helen Trager noted with respect to Burma,<sup>4</sup> it was rather easy for missionaries to give the

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Dyer and John Evans to Rev Joseph Jowett, British and Foreign Bible Society, London, 27 April 1836, Bible Society Archives, Cambridge University Library, BSA/FC/1836/3 – 64.

<sup>3</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *From Missionfield to Independent Church; Report on a Decisive Decade in the Growth of Indigenous Churches in Indonesia* (London: SCM Press, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Trager, "Recent Southeast Asian Historiography."

picture which home supporters wanted or needed to here if they were to continue support. That that was unduly negative is perhaps not surprising, but the English Presbyterians might be taken as a model of a different way. George Hood<sup>5</sup> provided some serious missiological analysis, but its quality is either a testament to the depth of understanding of missionary issues within the Presbyterian Church of England or evidence of an unusual degree of willingness to say what needed to be said regardless of the desire of supporters to hear what they wanted to hear. It was in reports and correspondence, and just occasionally in personal prayer letters that critical reflection took place. The extent to which these received publicity varied. Those looking back later in life, could provide valuable analysis of what had happened in their time, as George Hood did with respect to the English Presbyterian mission in Taiwan, China, and Malaya, but the key feature of this body of literature was that what it was, it was written by expatriates and the primary audience was itself expatriate. The January issue of the International Missionary Council journal, the *International Review of Mission* provided a survey of each region including Southeast Asia, and of the countries within it. At times there was a local writer such as Rajah B Manikam or D T Niles who captured the imagination of Western audiences, but they were very much the exception.

### **Dimensions and agendas for the future.**

Whether or not historians of Christianity now or in the future will wish to engage with the issue of the validity of the concept of Southeast Asia, and whether it itself is seen as a form of Orientalism, there are a number of dimensions and agendas which need to be considered.

1. For the countries near the centre of SEA, SEA studies will continue to provide a context above the national which helps explain the national in terms of regional culture and history which has impacted and continues to impact on the churches and what it means to be Christian. This includes the interplay of Chinese and Indian cultures and religions, the experiences of colonialism, and the presence of Islam and of primal religion. There are also commonalities in national responses to global economic forces.
2. Regional Christian bodies, some of them Asia wide rather than Southeast Asian often tend to have a South Asian or East Asian weighting. Either way Southeast Asians can relate to these groups.
3. There are other external groupings which are also relevant in different parts of Southeast Asia. Although the major boundary issues of any region are acknowledged in this case by the Chinese, Japanese and Indian influence being stated as part of the Southeast Asian story, there are also cross boundary issues in relation to Melanesia to the East and Australia and New Zealand to the South. The immediate cross-border countries are always of special relevance: India, China and Thailand to Myanmar; Thailand, Kampuchea and Vietnam to Laos; Indonesian Borneo and the Philippines to

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<sup>5</sup> George Hood, *Malaya : The Challenge* (London: Presbyterian Church of England, 1956).

East Malaysia; China, Kampuchea and Thailand to Vietnam; Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia to Indonesia.

4. Regional studies may be criticised by the apparent arbitrariness or colonial origin of their areas, yet people within as well as outside these regions find it necessary to make use of such designations. Like the existential bias of any historian or commentator, such perspectives of location need to be acknowledged. The reminders of the role of imagination and the accidents of history of course apply not only to contemporary political identities, they apply equally to geographical groupings in general. Awareness that concern has shifted from the national to the global in terms of cultural sensitivity, does not negate the importance of regional studies.
5. The historiographical tools may sometimes be regional rather than national. In situations of variable religious freedom it can be an advantage to have a regional neighbour provide tools of historical analysis, biography and other resources. If the alternative is to be lost in global narratives which are dominated by other concerns, the risk of loss of identity is reduced, though not eliminated, by scholarship which is nearer to hand.
6. Some international themes, perhaps those particularly connected with gender, land, sensitive political and ethical issues, and with ethnic or sexual minorities may need the special care of concerned international groups which may not be well represented locally. Of course there is the risk of fresh imperialism, but that may be the nature of the case. Women's studies are an urgent issue, though some work is beginning to come to light.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Frances S. Adeney, *Christian Women in Indonesia : A Narrative Study of Gender and Religion, Women and Religion* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003)., Jessie MacKinnon Hartzell and Joan Acocella, *Mission to Siam : The Memoirs of Jessie Mackinnon Hartzell* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001)., Maina Chawla Singh, *Gender, Religion, and the "Heathen Lands" : American Missionary Women in South Asia, 1860s-1940s, Gender, Culture, and Global Politics ; V. 4* (New York: Garland Pub., 2000)., Unit Christian Conference of Asia Women's Concerns, *Reading the Bible as Asian Women : Twelve Bible Studies on Mobilizing Women in Struggles for Food, Justice and Freedom: Poems, Prayers, Songs* (Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1986)., Alison O'Grady, *Voices of Women : An Anthology of Writings by Asian Women Beased on the Theme "Called to Change - Committed to Serve"* (Singapore: Asian Christian Women's Conference, 1978)., Virginia Fabella et al., *We Dare to Dream : Doing Theology as Asian Women*, U.S. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990)., Judith Ngata, "World Religions as a Source of Power among Chinese Women in Malaysia," in *Chinese Populations in Contemporary Southeast Asian Societies : Identities, Interdependence and International Influence*, ed. M. Jocelyn Armstrong, R. Warwick Armstrong, and K. Mulliner (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).

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