

# LOVE OF RELIGION, LOVE OF NATION:

## Catholic Mission and the Idea of Indonesian Nationalism

**Albertus Bagus Laksana**  
Sanata Dharma University  
Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
[bagus.laksana@usd.ac.id](mailto:bagus.laksana@usd.ac.id)

### Abstract

The relationship between nationalism and religion is very complicated. In the context of colonialism, Christianity has surely been perceived as a foreign religion that poses a menace to native nationalism. This essay presents a different picture, taking the case of colonial Java (the Netherlands East Indies) to illustrate the complex historical relationship between Catholicism and Indonesian nationalism. Perhaps it is rather ironic that it was chiefly through their connection with the Dutch Church and their mission enterprise that the Javanese Catholic intelligentsia were made deeply aware of their own dignity as a particular people and the limitations of European colonialism. In this case, Catholic Christianity as a world religion with supranational connection and identity has been able to help the birth of an intense nationalism that was prevented from being too narrow, chauvinistic, or simply “racialist,” precisely because it is connected with its larger ecumenism or network. More specifically, this ecumenism is also founded on the idea of “catholicity,” that is, universalism, that lies at the heart of Catholic Christianity. In the post-colonial Indonesia, however, this Catholic view needs to be translated into common platforms with the views and concerns of Indonesian Muslims, who face the same new challenges as they play their role in the formation of an authentic Indonesian nationalism.

### Keywords

Catholicism, colonialism, Indonesia, Java, nationalism, the Netherlands East Indies, religion, universalism

### About the Author

Albertus Bagus Laksana, S.J., teaches at Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He also previously taught at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. He received his PhD in comparative theology from Boston College (2011) with a focus on Muslim-Christian encounters. His most recent publications include *Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations through Java* (Ashgate, 2014). He also contributed essays in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue* (Ed. Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof; Bloomsbury, 2015); *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (Ed. Felix Wilfred; Oxford, 2014) and in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (Ed. Francis Clooney; Continuum, 2010).

## I. RELIGION AND NATIONALISM

*Soegija* (2012) is certainly a curious movie, for it tells a story of a Catholic bishop, Mgr. Albertus Soegijapranata, S.J. (1896–1963), who was actually the first native Indonesian bishop. This Jesuit bishop has also been officially declared a national hero by the Indonesian government. The movie covers his role in the struggle of Indonesian people during the few crucial years starting with the Japanese Occupation (1942) and leading up to the Declaration of Indonesian Independence (August 1945) and its aftermath—that is, the military confrontation with the returning Dutch troops (1947–1948). The movie presents his vision of the unity of the human race in the pluralistic nature of the Indonesian people, a vision whose power can only be made apparent in light of the racial tensions in colonial Indonesia. The beautiful blend of his ardent Catholic identity and authentic love for his homeland was illustrated by his compassion toward the suffering people during the war and his timely decision to support the Indonesian Republic, among others through soft diplomacy with the Vatican to secure recognition of the Indonesian Independence (declared in 1945).

In an obvious way, this movie is very peculiar, for it features the role of a Catholic bishop in the national struggle of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. Why is it the case that the Catholic Church and figures are allowed to occupy such a space in the narrative of Indonesian nationalism, given the fact that this Catholic community was actually founded by the Dutch? Thus, one suspects a dramatic negotiation behind such a historical development.

Surely, for the most part, the movie reflects the imagination of the contemporary Catholic community about the persona of this bishop. It is a reflection of a general sentiment among the Indonesian Catholic community as Indonesian, that is, their sense of being rooted and at home in the reality of Indonesia. This sentiment is expressed in one of the most memorable quotations in the movie: “To be thoroughly Indonesian, and perfectly Catholic at the same time” (*100% Indonesia, 100% Katolik*). However, the public's reaction to the movie was quite warm, with only some contestations coming from certain ideologically Islamic-oriented circles. This means that the modest role and place of the Catholic community in the national narrative is generally acknowledged.

In my view, this case should not be taken for granted. My argument in this essay is that this hybrid nationalism came into being through a long and complex historical process of engagement that goes back to the earliest and most formative period of the Javanese Catholic community in the 1920s and 1930s. This rightful place of the Church and the Catholic community in Indonesian society was not

born instantly, but rather through creative and complex religio-cultural negotiation, theological and religious interpretation, and so forth. This is the genius of the earliest generation of the Jesuit missionaries and their students, the first Javanese (Indonesian) intellectuals.

The historic significance of this accomplishment can only be more fully recognized in comparison with other historical cases where Christian mission had to grapple with the question of nationalism. For example, in some African countries, certain Protestant mission churches, instead of supporting African nationalist aspirations, adopted the colonial view with dire consequences: "By allying themselves, even implicitly, with official colonial policy, however, British missionaries were unwittingly denying themselves the likelihood of future African support in the settler colonies" (Stuart 185).

These different historical cases illustrate the complexity of nationalism as an ambiguous, confusing, and complex historical phenomenon. In this regard, the complex historical encounters between the Church and various nationalist movements had probably led Christian theology to refrain from treating nationalism systematically. In the absence of a Catholic theory of nationalism, the Church's stance on nationalism has been marked by both criticism and recognition. While nationalism is not seen as the highest good and the nation is not a sacred nimbus, there has been a genuine Christian recognition of the people's right to political sovereignty.

In this regard, the phenomenon of nationalism in the mission territory in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was indeed complex. The role of European colonialism in the formation of local nationalism in this territory has been very crucial, including the bad example and chaos created by diverse European nationalistic sentiments during the tumultuous period. The same complex colonial reality, however, has at times allowed religion, including Christianity, to play a decisive and creative role, empowering the natives and constraining the impacts of colonialism.

By taking the case of colonial Java (the Netherlands East Indies), this essay aims to provide a historical illustration of the complex relationship between Christianity (Catholicism), Dutch colonialism, and the idea of Indonesian nationalism. Perhaps it is rather ironic that it was chiefly through their connection with the Dutch Church and their mission enterprise that the Javanese Catholic intelligentsia, including Mgr. Soegijapranata, were made deeply aware of their own dignity as a particular people and the limitations of European colonialism. In this case, Catholic Christianity as a world religion with supranational connection and identity has been able to help the birth of an intense nationalism that was prevented from being too narrow, chauvinistic, or simply "racialist," precisely because it is connected with its larger

ecumenism or networks. More specifically, this ecumenism is also founded on the idea of “catholicity,” that is, universalism.

This essay deals with the relationship between the Dutch Catholic mission and the birth of Indonesian nationalism, by focusing on the interactions of the Dutch mission and missionaries with the first Javanese Catholic intelligentsia, more particularly how encounters with these Catholic mission and missionaries helped these intelligentsia forge a particular idea of nationalism that led them to participate more fully in the idea of Indonesian nationhood. It has to be noted however that the main historical period covered by this essay is roughly the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, for the most part, it does not deal with the question of post-colonial Indonesia nor does it delve into a more theoretical venture on how Indonesian nationalism came into being. Some general notes on the ramifications of the topic for post-colonial Indonesia will be offered toward the end of the essay. At this point, it is important to point out that with regard to the concept of nationalism, nationalism, in the 1920s and 1930s, was at times conceived by Dutch missionaries and their Javanese students, as well as certain Javanese thinkers, as “Javanese nationalism.” However, this particular ethnic nationalism morphed quite easily into the larger and more inclusive “Indonesian” nationalism, since these intellectuals were becoming increasingly aware of a sense of unity and common struggle between different ethnic groups within the Dutch East Indies. Thus, in talking about nationalism in this essay, I use the terms “Javanese” and “Indonesian” rather fluidly.

## II. MISSIONARY, COLONIALISM, AND THE JAVANESE NATIVES

Any discussion of the nationalist sentiment among native Christians in a colonial context has to start with a “question,” since it poses itself from the very beginning as a problem. As we know, the birth of nationalism in the colonial territory, especially in Asia and Africa, was largely a response to the presence of the Western colonial power; and the whole Christian mission was intertwined with this power. So, we naturally suspect that the topic was complicated to begin with. One expects to see tensions here. If the conversion of these natives to Christianity was understood as an act of joining a foreign religio-cultural community with their own citizenship, then how is it possible for these natives to keep their native “nationalism?” In reality, however, conversion is a very complex religio-cultural phenomenon. So is the idea of “Christianity,” or any religion for that matter. Creative and ongoing negotiation, on the level of the personal and the collective (the affective and the rational) is

crucial in the process. It is this dynamic of negotiation that I seek to illustrate in this section.

The first Javanese Catholic intellectuals (that is, the generation of Mgr. Soegijapranata) came into being from the cradle of the Jesuit mission school in Muntilan, a small town in south central Java, just outside the Javanese Muslim sultanate of Yogyakarta. The first batch of Dutch Jesuit missionaries came to Java in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The mission station in Muntilan was founded by Father Franciscus van Lith in 1897. After some years with no significant sign of progress, the Jesuit mission made a breakthrough in the field of education with the foundation of a school in 1904 (cf. Rosariyanto, *Father Franciscus*).

This breakthrough was made possible by the volatility and deep changes that penetrated the Javanese society roughly in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Java and the Netherlands East Indies, that period was marked by a change in the colonial policy toward the natives, marked by more attention to the development and welfare of the colonial subjects with the enactment of the so-called “Ethical Policy” starting in 1901. It has to be noted that, as a result of this policy, the vast field of modern education as a civilizing tool was opened for missionaries. Largely through education, this policy brought the Netherlands East Indies into more direct encounters with modernity. In terms of identity politics, this era was “the age in motion,” to borrow Shiraishi’s term, marked by identity formation projects among diverse groups of natives and non-natives, such as the Arabs, Chinese, and Eurasians. Encounters with diverse groups of people and exposure to modernity had led to the search for the self. People were becoming more aware of their distinctiveness as an ethnic group, something that led to cultural revivalism through educational programs as well. In the case of the Javanese intellectuals who founded the Budi Utomo (1908), for example, as much as they were enamored with modernity, they fostered a deep longing for the revival of Javanese culture. Soewardi Suryaningrat, one of the founders of the Budi Utomo, would later organize his school system, the Taman Siswa, around these two pillars, namely modern science and Javanese traditional culture. In the particular case of the Chinese, their sense of belonging to a separate ethnic nation went hand in hand with a period of rather intense Confucian revivalism, marked by emphasis on the knowledge of the Chinese language and the practice of Confucian tradition and the creation of modern educational institutions and methods. The 1911 Chinese Revolution further bolstered this formation of a distinct self-identity (Suryadinata 83–94). At the same time, the Arab immigrant community also went through a dramatic negotiation of identity, emphasizing the importance of racial identity and the need to modernize themselves through modern organizations and education such as the *Jāmi āt al-Khair* (Charitable Association) in 1905 and *al-Irshād* (the

Arab Society for Reform and Guidance) in 1914 (Mandal; Mobini-Kesheh 35; Shiraishi 35).

The same period saw deeper divisions in the Javanese traditional society. The traditional synthesis between Islam and Javanese culture advocated and practiced for centuries by Javano-Muslim dynasties was questioned by the Islamic Reformist ideas brought about by a higher number of *hajj* pilgrims to Mecca and the experimental blending of communism and Islam. Furthermore, the Javanese were exposed as well to diverse forms of Western Christianity (Protestantism and Catholicism), while some of them expressed the longing for the pre-Islamic religious practices or native spirituality. The progressive ideas of communism and socialism started to make some inroad as well (cf. Ricklefs).

In my view, this societal constellation of the late colonial period in Java opened up a cultural space for the Catholic mission to play a religio-cultural role. It explains why Christianity appealed to the Javanese, not only as a purely “spiritual force,” but rather as a tangibly empowering way of life that presented itself as an alternative avenue for forging a robust self-understanding and meaningful socio-cultural role in the specificity of a volatile historical situation. Christian mission, in turn, carved out a space that allowed the Javanese intelligentsia to emerge in their socio-cultural role. It was chiefly through modern education that this role was opened up for these intellectuals who would be otherwise marginalized.

In this historical dynamic, there stood a larger-than-life figure, Father Franciscus van Lith, S.J., a paradigmatic missionary mentioned earlier, who played a distinctive role in the cultural space provided by the colonial conditions of the time. And van Lith played this role very well, both in the narrower framework of the Catholic Church and mission, and the larger context of the Netherlands East Indies.

Frans van Lith has been rightly considered *the* founder of the Javanese Catholic community. In this regard, the specific accomplishment of van Lith as the community’s founder became clearer in light of what happened in his new community at Muntilan, namely the racial unity between the whites and the browns in the framework of Christian love. Affectionately calling Muntilan “The Bethlehem van Java,” the birthplace of Catholicism in Java, the aforementioned Soegijapranata—without doubt the most illustrious of all van Lith’s former students—remarked:

[...] the Bethlehem of Java, where the Javanese for the first time learned to know God, their Master and Savior, and to love and serve Him; the glorious Muntilan, where the hearts of the Whites and the Browns love each other as father and children. (“Santosa” 134; translation mine)



In my view, these remarks by Soegijapranata are deeply revealing, for they tell us about a rather profound transformation that van Lith brought about in his Javanese students, especially in light of the colonial dynamics of the time. In 1909 Soegijapranata entered the mission school at Muntilan as a young Muslim boy with a rather intense anti-colonial resentment. It was van Lith, he proudly acknowledged, who gave him a Catholic framework for transforming this resentment into self-confidence and empowerment. He wrote:

When he [van Lith] sat there among those boys with their open, free, joyous faces, he must have felt like a happy father in the midst of his happy children. By joking and teasing he often tried to evoke some opposition, some protest. When the boys began to defend themselves spiritedly, when in excitement they began to make telling remarks about the Europeans, that is when he experienced the greatest pleasure.... In those relaxed conversations with Father van Lith we unconsciously learned courage and the realization of our own powers. Did he sense in them the same resentment he had felt as a Catholic young man in politically marginalized Noord-Brabant? (qtd. in van Klinken 53)

For this reason, Soegijapranata called van Lith “our emancipator,” in the sense that he had provided him with this framework of religio-cultural identity. For him and many other young Javanese Catholic intellectuals, it was van Lith’s particular practice of Catholicism that brought about a real breakthrough in the complex inter-racial dynamics of colonial society in Java. They took up this accomplishment of racial unity as a weapon to defend the rightful place of Catholicism in Java.

There is also a noticeable universalizing motif in how van Lith’s role has been imagined and remembered by Javanese Catholics: for them, van Lith’s concerns were inclusive of all Javanese and the whole Indies. For his Javanese Catholic students, it was clear that van Lith’s foundational work was not only meant for them, but also for the entire Javanese society.<sup>1</sup> It was reported that on his deathbed, van Lith exclaimed: “I will wholeheartedly offer my soul and all my life to God for the well-being (salvation) of the Javanese” (*ST*, 19 Jan. 1926; translation mine). For those who knew him, his last words really sum up his lifelong and legendary love affair with the Javanese culture. Many of his former students were so impressed by the intensity of van Lith’s love for Javanese language and culture, a fascination and admiration probably exceeding that of the colonized Javanese themselves. More importantly, he revived the beauty and dignity of the language in the eyes of his Javanese students, its original proprietors (*ST*, 19 Feb. 1926). He is reported to have said: “Elegant is your clothing, beautiful and refined is your language, courteous is your manner, you the Javanese!” (Dutch: *Sierlijk is Uw kleeding, bloemrijk is Uw taal*,

*hoffelijk is Uw omgang, Gij Javanen*) (*ST*, 19 Feb. 1926; cf. *Berichten uit Java* 5 (1947): 108; translation mine). And, explaining his love affair with the Javanese language in the framework of the crucial role of language for communal dignity and identity, he argues: “No nation could become great without its own language. Respect for the language means respect for culture and tradition. For it is in the language that the soul of the people speaks out” (*ST*, 19 Feb. 1926; translation mine).

In the context of the identity formation of the local Javanese Catholic community, van Lith’s lifetime love affair with the Javanese language and culture was extremely crucial, despite its unabashedly colonial framework. By showing a genuine admiration for and personal identification with the Javanese culture and language, he instilled an immense sense of self-confidence, a profound pride among his students in their own Javanese identity. A Javanese aristocrat, apparently so impressed by the depth of van Lith’s immersion into all things Javanese, exclaimed: “The only thing that set Father van Lith apart from the Javanese is that he did not put on a traditional Javanese head-dress!” (*ST*, 2 Apr. 1926). This personal example of van Lith would later serve as a paradigm for his students in terms of cultivating their Javeneseness through the arts, language, and so forth.

Van Lith’s long sojourn in central Java—from 1896 to 1926 with just few years of absence—was indeed marked by a personal and professional immersion into the Javanese world. He was an active member of the *Java Instituut* (established in 1919) where he shared common concerns for reviving the Javanese culture of the classical age (understood as relatively devoid of Islam) with some prominent Javanese intellectuals and Dutch orientalists.<sup>2</sup> He also contributed few articles to the scholarly discourse on the Hindu-Buddhist element of Javanese culture. This cultural vision, as van Klinken remarks, was intertwined with van Lith’s educational vision:

In common with most “ethical” opinion, he envisaged a New Java’s past. His educational effort was aimed at capturing that *priyayi* elite [Javanese with aristocratic background], giving them pre-Catholic sense of right and wrong to “ennoble” the splendid culture they already possessed. (50)

In a positive sense, van Lith’s orientalist approach to Javanese culture belongs to, borrowing Frances Gouda’s bipolar framework, the so-called “hyper-ethical” language of motherly affection and respect for local culture, in contra distinction to the stentorian masculine voice calling for discipline, rigor and so forth (Gouda 12). Van Lith’s membership at the *Java Instituut* and his scholarly contribution might be arguably seen as evidence of his orientalist tendency, something that is perhaps an ambiguous aspect of his stature, but this tendency was not a hindrance to the development of authentic nationalism among his native students.



As has been mentioned, van Lith is also remembered as having made certain important contributions to the whole Indies. For our discussion in this essay, this aspect of his role is extremely crucial due to its place in the growth of nationalist sentiment and identity formation of the Javanese Catholic community. Obviously, by remembering van Lith as a “national” or non-sectarian figure, this community tries to place itself as a dignified member in this larger framework of Indonesian society. In this respect, there are indeed many reasons to be proud of van Lith’s achievements for the whole Indies. He was an outspoken member of The Review Commission (*Herzieningscommissie*), a constitutional committee set up by Governor General van Limburg-Stirum in 1918, which proposed many democratic legal reforms in the Indies (Feber 36; van Klinken 52, 56; van Lith 35). It is in this larger role that van Lith is portrayed as being in touch with other mostly Muslim nationalist figures, such as Haji Agus Salim, Suwardi Suryaningrat (also known as Ki Hadjar Dewantara) and Husein Jayadiningrat.

As has been mentioned, another realm in which van Lith performed his most outstanding public service was education. He opened the mission school, the Kweekschool, in 1904 in Muntilan. Starting off as a simple training school for native assistant teachers, it later developed into a variety of higher-level schools (van Klinken 47). He had initially planned to build a school for future native government officials due to his vision of molding a group of Javanese youth in character and for leadership, but the whole enterprise was eventually turned into an educational ground for future Church leaders and lay apostles.<sup>3</sup>

Along this line, van Lith was also an active participant in public discourse and theorizing on the question of education in the Indies, and he even embarked on a government-funded study tour to the Philippines (van Klinken 47). It was in this realm of public discourse on education that van Lith made a controversial proposal in 1924 during the Education Congress in Batavia (Jakarta). He proposed that the government establish a Javanese language institute that would accept the graduates of Kweekschool or Normaalschool whose Dutch was good enough; and that the Malay language—the precursor of modern “Indonesian”—be removed from lower Javanese school. This proposal provoked some uproar in the Muslim circles. He was accused of attempting to pit the Javanese language against the Malay language, which was more closely identified with Islamic identity in the Indies. In the eyes of many, this proposal was nothing other than a smart and tactical move on the part of the Catholic mission to sideline Islam and strengthen its own presence. For, by separating the Javanese from Malay, the Catholic mission would have an easier time converting the Javanese (*ST*, 19 Feb. 1926).

There seems to be no firm evidence in van Lith’s writings for this sort of ulterior motive. Instead, his proposal can certainly be explained in terms of his love and

admiration for, and personal immersion in, the local Javanese language and culture. Throughout his life in the Indies, van Lith had never been exposed to other non-Javanese cultures. Thus there was some quite natural element of (colonial) favoritism toward the Javanese in van Lith's thoughts about and concerns for Indonesia. In his speech at the aforementioned Congress, he made no secret of his high admiration and preference for the Javanese over other ethnic groups in Indonesia:

The people of the Netherlands East Indies (*Hindija*) must progress. But it would be very difficult to make progress together, given the differences in terms of capabilities and ethnicities. So, one group has to advance first, to serve as a model and leader. The Javanese who are already progressing now must be helped to make faster progress, through attention to their language and culture. The culture and language of the Javanese, the legacy of their forefathers from the period of King Hayam Wuruk and Gadjah Mada, has to be supported fully for their development. (*ST*, 19 Feb. 1926; translation mine)

There is a certain degree of "orientalism" at work here in van Lith's cultural vision. For one thing, it privileged the Javanese and further identified the "core" of the Javanese culture in the classical Hindu-Buddhist period of the Majapahit Kingdom, a common orientalist vision that failed to take into account the complex role of Islam as a force of civilization. For the Javanese Catholic intellectuals, this vision did not really help them engage with Islam and their fellow Muslims with nuance and sophistication. In the post-colonial Indonesia, this Orientalist view has created tensions with the Muslim community, as we will see later. For one thing, the Catholics have been accused of limiting the dialogue with the Javanese culture and elites, not with "Muslims." However, one should recall as well that in its own context, this vision was really a progressive and critical position. Van Lith is later called "a model colonialist" precisely due to his unswerving support for the Javanese or natives' cause, something that was perceived by most of his Dutch colleagues as an extreme political view (van Klinken 57). Probably due to his unwavering and radical support for the natives, van Lith was accused of trying to maintain racial differences in the Indies. He denied this accusation, arguing that he had always opposed racial discrimination in the public sphere, based on the Catholic principle of solidarity (*solidarisme*) and universal brotherhood that in turn were founded on the notion of Christian charity. He wanted to serve as a mediator between the Dutch and the natives, as his vocation as Catholic missionary demanded of him, but he made it very clear that if he had to make a choice, he would take the side of the natives (van Lith 21, 32, 41).<sup>4</sup>

In van Lith, this love for the natives was coupled with a vehemently critical attitude toward the lifestyle and mentality of the Dutch communities in the Indies who were, for the most part, racially arrogant, driven solely by material pursuit, and religiously indifferent. Echoing Francis Xavier's complaints about the detriments

that the decadent morality of the Portuguese brought into the mission territories, van Lith lamented the negative image of Christianity that resulted from this, given the fact that the natives thought that all the Dutch people were truly Christians (9).

As a sensitive missionary whose vision for the political independence of the natives was anchored in the spiritual progress of these people, van Lith came to emphasize the pedagogical role of religion in the new political reality that was about to be born in the Netherlands East Indies (what he called “*Nieuw Indische Rijk*”). He wrote:

Religion gives birth to a lofty ideal in us, that leads us to work as brothers for the freedom, progress and flourishing of Java and Indonesia [Indië]. Religion also gives us wisdom and power that will bring the Javanese people and the whole world to the moral level that is necessary for the creation of a truly good government, for initiating a golden era of this world, and for the establishment of heavenly kingdom on earth. (45; translation mine)

This view was taken later by the first generation of the Javanese Catholic intellectuals to justify the presence of Christianity and its right to exist and grow, not as a foreign entity but rather as a constructive part of the Javanese (Indonesian) society. Following van Lith’s foundational approach, they proposed the framework of religious liberty and religious pluralism. More specifically, they made a special appeal for the common welfare of the Javanese, unmistakably the most sensitive topic of the day, as the most acceptable reason for religious liberty. Thus, against the idea of enforcing adherence to just one religion for the sake of Javanese unity, and as a more effective means in the Javanese struggle for independence and progress, the *Swara-Tama*, the newspaper published by these Javanese Catholic intellectuals, made a case for mutual respect in the name of the common cause of “Javanese nationalism.” Upholding firmly the principle of religious liberty and the value of religious pluralism, and sharing the principle of religious neutrality with Javanese nationalist movements such as the Budi Utomo, the *Swara-Tama* argued: “The truth of the matter is that even though the Javanese adhere to different religions, there would be no problem if they restrain from demonizing each other and instead, embark on the common project for the uplifting of the whole nation” (*ST*, 15 Sept. 1921; translation mine).

In this regard, the *Swara-Tama* clearly followed van Lith’s vision of the role of religions in the growth of nationalism or nation building. However, while van Lith tended to be more idealistic, the *Swara-Tama* was more attentive to the reality of conflicts and tensions between religious communities in Java (Laksana 187–250).

### III. POLITICS AND THE SACRAMENT OF ORDINATION

Father van Lith has undoubtedly been a towering figure in terms of how the Catholic mission in central Java was practiced during the most formative years of Indonesian nationalism. He has become a paradigmatic figure with the genius to forge a deeply Catholic transforming presence. He presented a version of Catholicism that was truly “catholic” in the sense of the universal, breaking boundaries and embracing local realities, and critical of colonialism. To the Javanese Catholics, he has been an inspiration in navigating between authentic Catholicism and a local sense of identity and nationalism. In van Lith, one sees a great missionary who presented an authentic form of Catholicism as a supranational communion rooted in local reality. This story of the achievements of the Catholic mission, however, did not end with the demise of van Lith in 1926, for there were other crucial religio-cultural achievements of this mission that were deeply inspired by van Lith but moved beyond his persona as well.

In this regard, perhaps the first and most significant achievement of the Catholic mission was its genuine and even “revolutionary” recognition of the dignity of the natives. In a dramatic way, the most powerful and iconic proof of this respect for the Javanese natives were the sacerdotal ordinations of the first Javanese seminarians (in 1926 and 1928) and the ordination of the first native bishop, Albertus Soegijapranata (1940). Without a doubt, these ordinations belonged to the most emotionally charged events and the most meaning-laden symbols in the identity formation of the Javano-Catholic community. For the Javanese Catholic community, more than simply being religious “sacraments,” these ordinations were a remarkable manifestation of the dignity and achievement of the Javanese people and their culture. More importantly, politically, they were also taken as monumental proof of the universalism—that is, the very catholicity—of Roman Catholicism. By ordaining these natives, the Roman Catholic Church showed its commitment to respecting and uniting all peoples, something that was extraordinary under colonial conditions (cf. Hastings 15–33; Elphick 112–133).

In connection to this, it is very insightful to note that the hastening of the education and ordination of local clergy in the Catholic mission territories was partly motivated by the need to counter the growing nationalist sentiment among European missionaries. As Hastings has noted, the Vatican’s *Propaganda Fide* under the leadership of the Dutch Cardinal van Rossum saw nationalism of the missionaries (with a dose of white racialism) to be a threat to the whole Catholic missionary endeavor (20–21).

Perhaps mirroring this colonial situation, the ordination of the first Javanese Jesuit seminarian, Fr. Satiman, on the feast of the Assumption of Virgin Mary (August 15, 1926) was immediately hailed as an elevation of the dignity of the Javanese in both spiritual and material realms (*ST*, 13 Aug. 1926). The significance of this ordination readily went beyond the spiritual and religious realm. Couched in the language of a colonized people that betrayed a rather desperate longing for some sort of collective recognition, the *Swara-Tama* wrote on the meaning of the event:

For those who look down on the Javanese people, this ordination is a counter-proof! For, it shows that the Javanese community could produce its own priest; and we know that to become a priest, one has to have excellent intelligence, good personal qualities, strong determination, and lofty virtues. (*ST*, 24 Aug. 1928; translation mine)

Considered the greatest manifestation of God's grace to the Javanese Catholic community, priesthood was also perceived as a sign of the community's maturity, capability and resilience, since it involved long and arduous years of preparation (*ST*, 13 Aug. 1926). It brought the first Javanese to the rank of the Church's nobility (in Javanese, *priyayining Pasamuwan Suci*). Using the framework of a war-like struggle, the *Swara-Tama* depicted the first Javanese priest as "the commander-in-chief of Christ's troops" (Javanese: *senapatining wadyabala Dalem*) (*ST*, 13 Aug. 1926). Furthermore, interestingly, the *Swara-Tama* put this article next to a report on the growing nationalism among Asian people that went hand in hand with anti-Western sentiment as a result of the bloody image of the European civilization in the wake of World War I (*ST*, 13 Aug. 1926; cf. Hastings 19).

In short, the divine grace of priestly ordination was a hard-won accomplishment. Again, its significance went far beyond the narrow realm of the spiritual-ecclesial life of the community, for it definitely confirmed and strengthened their hybrid identity, both as Javanese and Catholic, in the context of the volatile last decades of colonial Java (*ST*, 27 Aug. 1926). Without a doubt, it was one of the most meaningful milestones in their remarkable journey of identity formation. It made them deeply aware of their indebtedness to and connection with the Catholic mission and the Dutch Church. One sees here how a "nationalist" sentiment was born, ironically, through a close connection with the other.

These dynamics are interesting for, on the one hand, the Javanese Catholics insisted that, by having a priest from their own people, mutual understanding in the realm of deeper feelings and ways of perceiving (Javanese: *raos-rumaos*) between the flock and their shepherd would be smoothed (*ST*, 24 Aug. 1928). Thus, it was perceived as a moment of the community's self-becoming—that is, when their identity formation came full circle—though not in an exclusive sense, but rather in a



“catholic” or universal sense. However, on the other hand, the role of the Dutch was also deeply recognized. In this regard, the spatial connection is insightful, for while the ordination occurred thousands of miles away in Maastricht, the Netherlands (Fr. Satiman would return to Java only two years later), the Javanese Catholic community was already celebrating in Yogyakarta as if this spatial distance did not exist or matter, or as if the Netherlands and Java were thought to be so intertwined spatially as well due to deeper connections between peoples (*ST*, 27 Aug. 1926). As reported in the *Swara-Tama*, there were intense prayers of thanksgiving, amid tears, amazement, and speechlessness at St. Joseph’s Church in Yogyakarta, as the Javanese Catholics celebrated the event (*ST*, 27 Aug. 1926). Obviously, the ordination was imagined to be much more than just a regular priestly ordination. Celebrated in a space of interconnection, it was understood as one of the most real and empowering events in the formation of the Javanese Catholic community as one founded on local roots and global connections.

Along this line of interpretation, this ordination was a proud event in the identity formation of the Javanese Catholics because it was a proof that a “*rasa Katholiek*,” a truly Catholic spirit and sensibility, had taken root more deeply among the Javanese (Van Lith-Stichting 13). However, as the *Swara-Tama* understood it, this event was not read primarily as the accomplishment of the Javanese Catholics, but rather as the fruit of van Lith’s foundational work. This ordination was a confirmation of the validity of van Lith’s missionary vision.

The *Swara-Tama* believed that Fr. van Lith and Fr. Mertens, the two legendary father-teachers of the Javanese students, would have been so proud if they had had the chance to witness this ordination of their former student (*ST*, 13 Nov. 1940). Soegijapranata himself, long before his historic ordination to the bishopric, wrote of van Lith’s dream and the significance of the ordination of native clergy thus:

“The white Host between brown fingers,” that is how the future Javanese people would remember the Divine bounty and love that has radiated in his faithful servant, Father van Lith. “Javanese priests on the altar,” that is the most beautiful monument that the Dutch Catholic Church will build in Java. (“Aan de Nagedachtenis” 108; translation mine)

In 1940 Soegijapranata, perhaps the most gifted and articulate among van Lith’s students, was appointed as the first native Javanese bishop.<sup>5</sup> As the editor-in-chief of the *Swara-Tama* before he went to the Netherlands for his Jesuit formation, his views were influential in shaping the Javanese Catholic identity in the early years of its development. Soegijapranata’s ordination to the bishopric was another milestone for the whole community because, with a Javanese bishop, the Javanese Catholic community would be able to maintain its distinctive identity as both



Javanese and Catholic, due to the central role of a bishop in the ecclesial structure of the Church (ST, 28 Aug. 1940).

Again, as previously happened around the ordination of the first Javanese priests, the tone of the *Swara-Tama*'s reading of the event betrayed the same intense need on the part of the community to shake off the specter of alterity, strengthen its identity, and forge unity. As the *Swara-Tama* argued, this appointment showed that "Catholicism is not the religion of the Dutch" (Javanese: *Agami Katoelik sanes agami Wlandi*) (ST, 21 Aug. 1940 and 28 Aug. 1940). Not only did this show that Catholicism was universal in the sense of that it did not privilege members of a certain race for leadership, but it was also a symbolically powerful manifestation of the dignity of the Javanese Catholic community (ST, 20 Nov. 1940). They took a special pride in the fact that within less than a generation, the Javanese Catholics already had a native bishop who was a convert from Islam (ST, 13 Nov. 1940; Subanar 20; Gonggong 8–10).

Very interestingly, this ordination of the native seminarians was also taken as a prophetic sign of the unity of all nations, a kind of religious cosmopolitanism. Thus, in this regard, the Javanese Catholics went further than just affirming and displaying the particular unity of the Javanese and the Dutch in their formation of hybrid identity. For them, the priestly ordination of the natives was proof that the Catholic Church had an extraordinary power in uniting all peoples and nations, without regarding them in terms of racial divides, in a way that no secular power could accomplish (ST, 24 Aug. 1928). Curiously, we also see here how the principle of catholicity was being utilized not only as a means to shed some universal light on the particular event of Javanese seminarians' ordination, but also as a reason for a collective pride in being Catholic. This again shows the symbolic role of ordination in the formation of identity of this community. In the context of a colonial society beset by problematic inter-racial relations, this argument for the superiority of Catholicism over the secular government gained a particular force, for it showed the potential ability of Catholicism to solve the racial question in the Indies. In particular, it revealed the fact that the Catholic mission was radically different from the colonial government.

This point had potential to shift the terms and dynamic of the debate on the question of the otherness of Catholicism in the colonial society: those who rejected the principles of communion, unity and equality—which would by definition include the possibility of forging friendships with the Dutch colonialists and which were at the heart of the Catholic practice—were in fact adopting a tacit racism, which was precisely the underlying principle of the colonial government. In short, to be anti-colonial was part of what it meant to be a Catholic, since to be anti-Catholic could imply an endorsement of the colonial mindset of discrimination.

In this way, the limits of race-based nationalism were exposed, and the Catholic position of solidarity and communion was strengthened.

In my view, this insight should not be overlooked in our discussion of nationalism and mission in the colonial context, for it illustrates the distinctive role of religion as an antidote to narrow nationalism and rampant colonialism. The particularity of nationalism poses a threat to the universalism of Christianity at times. As some contemporary observers have noted, nationalism and its interests even takes over the place of religion. However, the case of colonial Java indicates that the solution to this quandary is not making religion as “the master” and nationalism its attendant, or vice versa, but that it should involve a much more complex dialectic.

It should be noted as well that this genius practice was actually in line with the doctrinal thinking of the Church at the time. In his letter *Maximum Illud* (1919), Pope Benedict XV took the question of nationalism head-on and lamented the fact that some missionaries were attached to their own countries and advancing the “glory,” or the national interests, of their countries of origin in the mission territory. He wrote:

We have been greatly grieved by certain publications on the subject of Missions, which have appeared in the last few years, in which less desire is apparent for the increase of the Kingdom of God than for the influence of the writer’s own country; and we are amazed that these authors seem not to care how much these views alienate the minds of the heathen. (qtd. in Hastings 16)

Obviously there were tensions between the Church’s mission and the national-colonial interests of the European nations, and *Maximum Illud* was very critical of the nationalist sentiments of the missionaries. In the mission fields, conflicts between different European missionaries along national lines were rather common. In particular, missionaries from Portugal, Belgium, and France were known for their strong attachment to national sentiment to the detriment of the universal mission of the Church. The Catholic mission in the Portuguese territory, for example, was fatally understood as an instrument of national civilization and influence (Hastings 16). In the Netherlands East Indies, this tension was not totally absent either, although not as severe as the above-mentioned cases. Due to his support for Indies nationalism, as we have seen, Father van Lith had a rather rocky relationship with some of his fellow missionaries and Dutch lay politicians in the tumultuous period of the 1920s.

In this regard, it has to be noted that the issue of nationalism in the context of the Catholic Church’s mission was still a very sensitive one well into the 1950s, with many European missionaries finding it hard to understand the need for them

to support authentic nationalism among the natives—that is, a nationalism freed from racial exclusivism and driven by a spirit of internationalism (reflecting the true spirit of “catholicity”). On this point, Hastings observes: “Everywhere the tendency remained strong to identify the nationalist as communist or anti-Christian” (30–31).<sup>6</sup> In light of this historical background, the achievements of the Dutch Jesuit mission in central Java are quite remarkable, since their timely and positive support for Indies nationalist aspiration already existed in the 1920s. This stance helped the native Catholic community navigate the political dilemma in the 1940s marked by the anti-Dutch movement and the struggle toward Indonesian independence. As we have seen, Soegijapranata was ordained in the 1940s and played a role in this national struggle, helping to carve out a lasting place for the Catholic community in post-colonial Indonesia.

#### IV. LOCAL ROOTEDNESS, SUPRANATIONAL CONNECTIONS

In this essay, I have attempted to illustrate the complexity of the historical encounters between religion and nationalism, using the case of the Catholic mission in colonial Java. I did not have the space to explore the same negotiations on the Muslim side in this essay, but comparable patterns actually exist in terms of how the Muslim and Catholic communities in the Dutch East Indies have forged a sense of nationalism. In each of them, this sense of nationalism has been shaped by the dynamic of having supranational connections and local rootedness at the same time. An intense connection with the Middle Eastern networks has made Indonesian Muslim scholars and leaders more aware of the distinctiveness of themselves as a “people” or “nation,” and they have acquired the necessary conceptual tools to initiate discourse on nationalism under the conditions of European colonialism (Laffan). As Michael Laffan has argued, “Indonesian nationhood had deeper roots in an Islamic ecumenism within archipelagic Southeast Asia made more tangible through contact with both other Muslims beyond that world and non-Muslims within it” (3).

This parallel pattern, however, did not translate easily into collaborative interaction between these two communities. In the context of colonial Java, for the most part, collaboration with the Javanese aristocratic class was mediated by common concerns for the revival of Javanese culture. In the debate on culture in post-colonial Indonesia, the view of certain Catholic intellectuals on Javanese culture and nationalism was often regarded to be too secular or humanist by certain ideologically Islamic-oriented Muslim intellectuals (Mujiburrahman 207ff). In the early years of the New Order Regime (the late 1960s-1970s), alliances between Catholic intellectuals and the ruling military were strong due to their common

concern of safeguarding nationalism against the specter of political Islam. Perhaps this is partly the result of the earlier orientalist tendency of the Dutch missionaries' view of Javanese culture, a tendency that was heightened by their fear of political Islam, but this view is also in line with the Catholic understanding of nationalism and the role of religion in it. As we have seen, the Catholic view has always been critical of narrow nationalism, including that which is based on a particular religion. As an antidote, this view emphasizes the universal and cosmopolitan aspect of any genuine nationalism. Thus, as can be seen in van Lith's vision, it tends to be humanistic in its philosophical outlook precisely in order to avoid religious exclusivism in politics.

This comparable pattern and limited real cooperation are, in my view, instructive perspectives on the ways in which post-colonial Indonesia has to deal with the question of maintaining "Indonesianness" or national identity amidst the intensifying push for ethnic local identities, as well as the seduction of forging an aggressively anti-national religious identity based on religious connection, a tendency that recently circulates not only among certain Muslim groups such as the Hisbut Tahrir and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), but also among certain strands of new Christian movements with exclusive connections to foreign countries.<sup>7</sup> It has to be noted that this earlier pattern of identity formation has helped the Catholic community in post-colonial Indonesia to maintain its commitment to "Indonesianess," as can be seen in the indigenization of not only its clergy but also its theology, as well as its unwavering support for the state ideology of Pancasila from the tumultuous 1960s onward. Although this support may have been "political" and has since created tensions with certain Muslim groups, it is nevertheless a clear sign of a nationalist commitment, a love of religion that translates into a love of nation. This love of nation has required the Catholic Church to risk its mere survival by somehow being critical of Suharto in his final years.

Given the earlier minimal and ambiguous interaction between the Catholic and Muslim communities during the colonial period, it is now the time for a different engagement since both face a common challenge. Both communities are aware of the need to cultivate an authentic Indonesian nationalism as the most fecund arena for both to flourish as a world religion with strong supraregional connections, but also with deep roots in local reality. Past histories and current challenges, however, have necessitated the role of religion as a formative and critical force for the formation of authentic, not chauvinistic, nationalism.

## Notes

1. *Swara-Tama*, 19 Jan. 1926. The *Swara-Tama* (Javanese: Good News; henceforth *ST*) was a Javanese publication that was in circulation from the 1920s to 1940s. Started by the students of the Catholic mission school in Muntilan (Xavier College), the editorial board moved to Yogyakarta later and connected for a while with the Jesuit house of formation there. In this essay, I call the Javanese Catholic writers who contributed to these publications “the first Javanese Catholic intellectuals.”
2. The *Java Instituut* was established in 1919 following the Congress for Javanese Cultural Development in Surakarta in 1918, for the revival of Javanese classical (Hindu-Buddhist) culture. In this context, van Lith came to foster deep friendships, based on common cultural concerns, with Suwardi Suryaningrat, Suryopranoto, and Prince Sasraningrat, all proponents of Javanese culture from the Pakualaman royal house (the minor court) of Yogyakarta. This institution also listed some prominent Dutch orientalist of the day among its members, such as Dr. Bosch and Dr. B Schrieke (cf. van Klinken 50). The *Swara-Tama* was also proud of van Lith’s involvement in this Institute (see the issue dated 15 July 1921 etc.).
3. Within the span of few years (ca. 1911), some of van Lith’s students expressed their wish to become priests. Thus, quite quickly, this school also functioned as a training ground for future seminarians who would eventually join the Society of Jesus, due to the difficult circumstances of the mission, as only a major religious order such as the Jesuits had the infrastructure to provide an adequate priestly formation. Van Lith’s response to the formation of the native clergy clearly pre-dated Benedict XV’s exhortation on the formation of native clergy in mission territories, *Maximum Illud* (1919).
4. This case, where a European missionary was sympathetic to native nationalism, also happened in India with C.F. Andrews, a visionary missionary of the Anglican Church who supported Indian nationalism and became a good friend of Gandhi and Tagore (Hastings 24).
5. In the previous decades in other parts of the mission territories, European missionaries were opposed to the appointment of native bishops, as occurred in China in 1926 and Uganda in 1938 (Cf. Hastings 20).

6. Describing the sentiments among missionaries in Africa in the 1950s, Hastings wrote: "Many missionaries remained intensely alarmed by the advance of nationalist movements that they saw as communism in disguise and hoped that colonial regimes would last as long as possible" (31).
7. For an analysis of the post-New Order movement for ethnic identities, see Jamie S. Davidson, *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics: The Deployment of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism*.

## Works Cited

- Davidson, Jamie S. *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics: The Deployment of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism*. London: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Elphick, Richard. "Evangelical Missions and Racial 'Equalization' in South Africa, 1890—1914." *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706—1914*. Ed. Dana L. Robert. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008. 112-133. Print.
- Feber, L. J. M. "Pastoor van Lith, S. J." *St. Claverbond* 2 (1926): 35-39. Print.
- Gonggong, Anhar. *Mgr. Albertus Soegijapranata SJ: Antara Gereja dan Negara*. Jakarta: Grasindo, 1993. Print.
- Gouda, Frances. "The Gendered Rhetoric of Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism in Twentieth-Century Indonesia." *Indonesia* 55 (1993): 1-22. Print.
- Hastings, Adrian. "The Clash of Nationalism and Universalism within Twentieth-Century Missionary Christianity." *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire*. Ed. Brian Stanley. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003. 15-33. Print.
- Laksana, Albertus Bagus. *Journeying to God in Communion with the Other: A Comparative Theological Study of the Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Traditions in South Central Java and Their Contributions to the Catholic Theology of Communio Sanctorum*. Diss. Boston College, 2011. Print.
- Laffan, Michael. *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Mandal, Sumit K. *Finding Their Place: A History of Arabs in Java under Dutch Rule, 1800-1924*. Diss. Columbia University, 1994. Print.



- Mobini-Kesheh, Natalie. *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942*. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999. Print.
- Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2006. Print.
- Ricklefs, M. C. *Polarizing Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions (c. 1830–1930)*. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2007. Print.
- Rosariyanto, Hasto. *Father Franciscus van Lith, S. J.: Turning Point of the Catholic Church's Approach in the Pluralistic Indonesian Society*. Diss. Gregorian University, 1997. Print.
- Shiraishi, Takashi. *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java 1912–1926*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990. Print.
- Soegija*. Dir. Garin Nugroho. Perf. Nirwan Dewanto, Butet Kertaradjasa and Wouter Braaf. Studio Audio Visual Puscater, 2012. Film.
- Soegijapranata, Albertus. "Aan de Nagedachtenis van Onzen Vader Pater Franciscus van Lith." *St. Claverbond* (1926): 97–106. Print.
- . "Santosa. Historisch Verhaal." *St. Claverbond* (1926b): 4-11; 40-45; 66-72; 117-120; 129-134. Print.
- Stuart, John. "'Speaking for the Unvoiced?' British Missionaries and Aspects of African Nationalism, 1949–1950." *Mission, Nationalism, and the End of the Empire*. Ed.
- Brian Stanley. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003. 183-193. Print.
- Subanar, G. Budi. *Soegija: Si Anak Betlehem van Java: Biografi Mgr Albertus Soegijapranata, SJ*. Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003. Print.
- Suryadinata, Leo. "Pre-War Indonesian Nationalism and the Peranakan Chinese." *Indonesia* 11 (1971): 83–94. Print.
- Swara-Tama* [ST]. Muntilan and Yogyakarta: 1920-1942. Archive.
- Van Klinken, Gerry. "Power, symbol and the Catholic mission in Java: The Biography Of Frans van Lith, S. J." *Documentieblad voor de Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Zending en Overzeese Kerken* 1 (1997): 43–59. Print.

Van Lith, Frans. *De Politiek van Nederland ten opzichte van Nederlandsch-Indie*. 's Hertogenbosch, Antwerpen: n.p., 1922. Print.

Van Lith-Stichting. *10-Taoenipoen Van-Lith-Stichting Xaverius-College Moentilan N. I. S. 1929 – 15 Agustus 1939*. Djokjakarta [Yogyakarta]: Drukkerij Canisius, 1939. Print.